Anxiety is important in human life, both in clinical and non-clinical contexts, yet its causes and nature are yet to be clearly defined. Anti-anxiety drugs systematically alter the innate defensive behaviour of rodents in a way that suggests these drugs reduce the perceived intensity of threat. Translated to humans, these rodent data suggest that anxiety is an evolved reaction to threat and that people who are particularly prone to anxiety are like that because they are particularly sensitive to threat. The results of my research support the defensive explanation for anxiety. First I have found that scores on clinically relevant questionnaire measures of anxiety-proneness are associated with responses to written threat scenarios. Second, a facial expression recognised by naive participants as representing anxiety was preferentially associated with ambiguously threatening scenarios, whereas a facial expression recognised by naive participants as representing fear was preferentially associated with clearly threatening scenarios. Third, scores on clinically relevant questionnaire measures of anxiety-proneness are also associated with the intensity of threat avoidance behaviour, as measured by my human defence paradigm, known as the Joystick Operated Runway Task (JORT). Fourth, the intensity of threat avoidance behaviour as measured by the JORT is also influenced by the anti-anxiety drugs and a candidate genetic risk factor for Panic disorder. Finally, in an attempt to begin exploring the abstract aspects of anxiety, I have found that interpersonal moral-judgment is hardened by lorazepam.

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