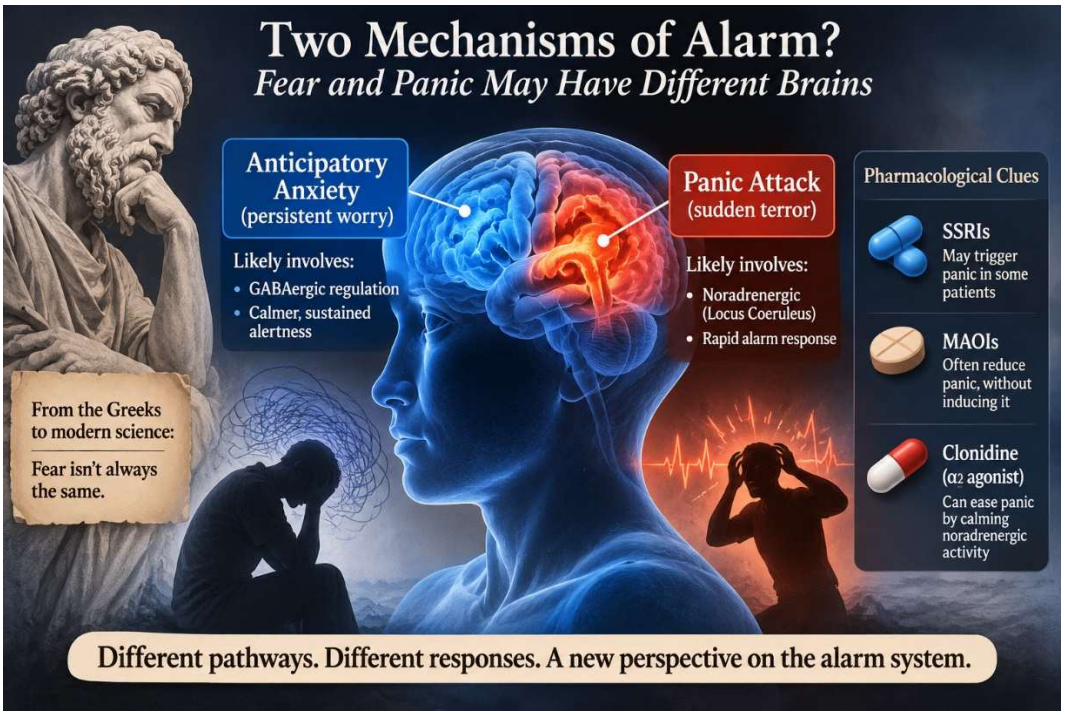
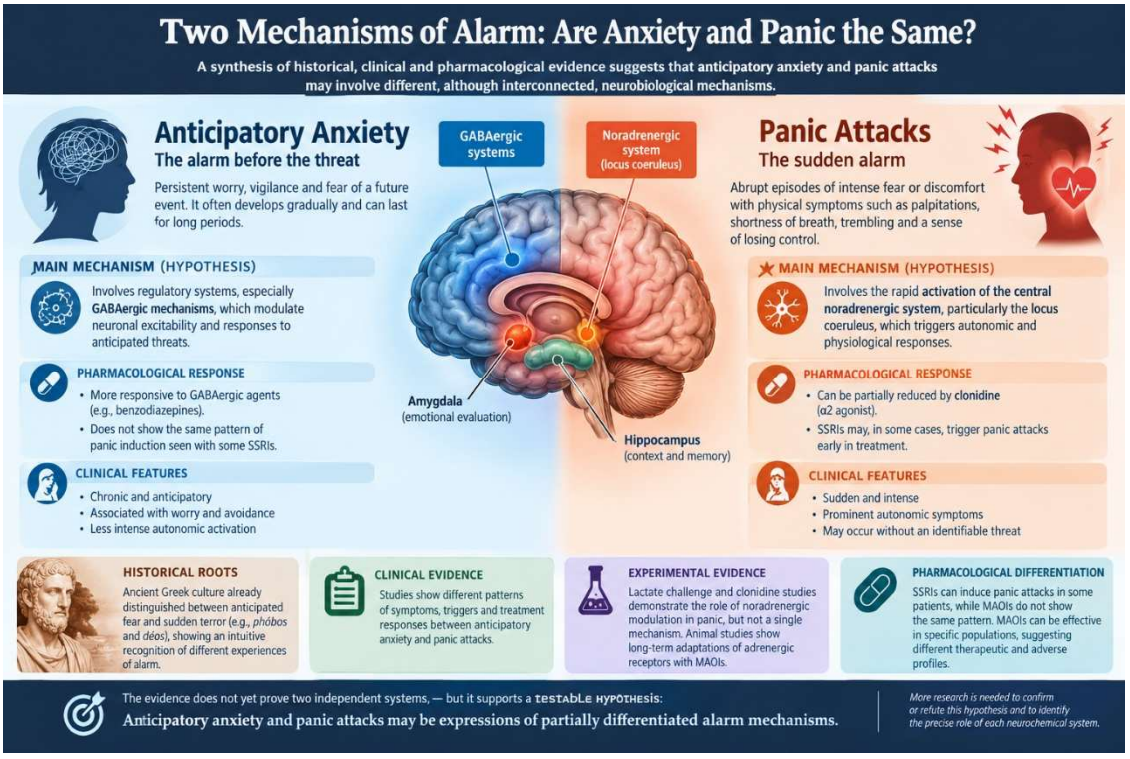
TWO MECHANISMS OF ALARM: A HISTORICAL, CLINICAL, AND PHARMACOLOGICAL HYPOTHESIS OF DIFFERENTIATION





By Percy Naranjo MD MPH

This essay is a first evidence-based draft. It is not a formal scientific review,and a systematic literature search should verify the complete designs and results of the cited studies and clearly distinguish animal experimental findings from human clinical evidence.

INTRODUCTION: Is Every Alarm Response the Same Phenomenon?

Fear, apprehension, anticipatory anxiety, and sudden terror have been part of human experience since long before medicine could describe their neurobiological foundations. However, recognizing that these experiences are related does not require us to conclude that they arise from a single physiological mechanism and differ only in intensity.

This essay advances an alternative hypothesis:

The human organism may possess functionally differentiated alarm mechanisms that can produce clinically related experiences while differing in their triggering conditions, physiological regulation, and pharmacological responses.

The purpose is not to replace one unproven explanation with another. Rather, it is to organize historical, clinical, and experimental observations to determine the extent to which they support the possibility of distinct processes.

Pharmacological differentiation is central to this reasoning. If two clinical manifestations respond differently to interventions acting on distinct neurochemical systems, those differences may provide clues about the mechanisms underlying each manifestation.

HISTORICAL INTUITION: Anticipated Fear and Sudden Terror

Ancient Greek culture recognized different experiences associated with fear. Classical texts employ terms such as *PHÓBOS* and *DÉOS*, which, in certain contexts, distinguish sudden or intense fear from apprehension concerning an anticipated threat. Their meanings overlap, however, depending on the author and historical context.

This historical reference is relevant not because the Greeks understood the neurochemistry of alarm, but because human experience had already led to the recognition of qualitative differences between fearing something expected and experiencing a sudden eruption of terror.

The distinction between anticipated fear and sudden fright therefore has historical and cultural foundations. Its modern interpretation must preserve the difference between the historical recognition of emotional experiences and the contemporary scientific explanation of their physiological mechanisms.

The former does not prove the latter. Nevertheless, it provides a legitimate conceptual starting point for scientific investigation.

CLINICAL OBSERVATION: Anticipatory Anxiety and Panic Attacks

Anticipatory anxiety commonly develops around the expectation of a threat, a future situation, or the possibility that an unpleasant experience will recur. It may persist over extended periods and be associated with vigilance, avoidance, and worry.

A **Panic Attack**, by contrast, may emerge as an abrupt episode of intense fear or discomfort accompanied by palpitations, shortness of breath, trembling, sweating, dizziness, or a sense of losing control. In some cases, the episode occurs without an identifiable immediate threat.

These clinical differences justify investigating persistent anticipation and sudden alarm separately. They do not, by themselves, prove that the two processes involve completely independent circuits. Both may coexist and share underlying mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is also insufficient to assume that one is simply a more intense version of the other.

Clinical observation raises a specific question: Do patients experiencing anticipatory anxiety and those suffering sudden panic attacks exhibit reproducible differences in physiological responses, triggering conditions, and treatment outcomes?

Answering this question requires recording the two manifestations independently rather than using a general reduction in anxiety as a substitute for measuring changes in panic attacks.

A NEUROBIOLOGICAL HYPOTHESIS: Differentiated Regulatory Systems

The working hypothesis proposes investigating at least two functional components of the alarm response.

A. Regulation of anticipatory anxiety. This component would involve examining inhibitory and regulatory mechanisms, including GABAergic systems, in the modulation of neuronal excitability and responses to anticipated threats.

B. Activation of sudden alarm. This component would involve examining the contribution of the central noradrenergic system, particularly locus coeruleus neurons, to the rapid activation of autonomic and physiological responses.

The **locus coeruleus** participates in regulating vigilance, attention, and responses to stress. Its noradrenergic projections can influence multiple neural circuits, making its contribution to episodes of intense alarm a plausible subject of investigation.

Within this model, sensory signals and representations of threat may contribute to the activation of alarm systems. The amygdala participates in emotional evaluation and the amplification of

fear responses, while the hippocampus contributes contextual information and links present circumstances with previous experiences.

This description is a working research framework, not a rigid anatomical division. Alarm circuits interact, and current evidence does not justify attributing all anxiety exclusively to GABA or all panic exclusively to noradrenaline.

The scientific question is whether sufficiently consistent functional differences exist to identify clinical subprocesses with distinct predominant mechanisms.

EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE: Lactate Challenge and Clonidine

An important experimental observation comes from studies using **sodium lactate** to provoke panic attacks in susceptible patients. This phenomenon demonstrates that, under certain experimental conditions, an episode can be triggered without requiring a preceding period of prolonged, consciously experienced anxiety.

However, lactate challenge does not identify a single neurochemical mechanism. Its value lies in allowing investigators to study episodic responses under controlled conditions and compare responses among patients.

In a study published in **1992, Coplan and colleagues** examined ten patients with panic disorder who had experienced attacks during a lactate infusion. After clonidine was administered before a repeat challenge, four of the ten patients no longer experienced a lactate-induced panic attack. In the remaining patients, the response was not completely blocked. Clonidine also attenuated symptoms and prolonged the time before an attack occurred.

The authors concluded that reducing central noradrenergic activity partially attenuated lactate-induced panic but did not fully account for the mechanisms involved.

This result is important for two reasons. First, it provides experimental evidence that noradrenergic modulation can alter the panic response. Second, it shows that such modulation is not sufficient to block every experimentally induced attack.

Another clinical study, published by **Hoehn-Saric and colleagues in 1981**, compared clonidine with placebo in 23 patients: nine with generalized anxiety and fourteen with panic disorder. Clonidine reduced anxiety attacks and certain psychic symptoms among patients who tolerated the medication, although 17% experienced worsening.

The results were heterogeneous and do not establish that all observed effects were attributable exclusively to presynaptic receptor activity.

Taken together, these studies support a role for the noradrenergic system in certain alarm responses. They do not establish that it is the sole mechanism or that clonidine is universally effective in panic disorder.

ADRENERGIC RECEPTORS and Long-Term Pharmacological Adaptation

Drug action is not limited to its immediate effect on a neurotransmitter. Sustained exposure can produce adaptations in receptor density, receptor sensitivity, neurotransmitter release, and intracellular signaling pathways.

This distinction is particularly important when interpreting the effects of monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs).

An experimental study published in 1982 examined the effects of chronic **phenelzine and clorgyline** administration in rat brains. The investigators reported reductions in the density of certain adrenergic receptors, including beta receptors and, with clorgyline, alpha-1 and alpha-2 receptors in various brain regions.

These findings indicate that prolonged exposure to certain MAOIs can be associated with adaptations in noradrenergic systems.

Other experimental work from the same period described changes in alpha-2 autoreceptor function and noradrenaline-release mechanisms following chronic clorgyline administration in animals. These findings support the existence of presynaptic and postsynaptic adaptations, although not all changes necessarily occur simultaneously or translate directly into human clinical responses.

Three phenomena must be distinguished: a reduction in receptor number, a decrease in functional receptor sensitivity, and changes in the responses of neuronal circuits. They are related but not interchangeable processes.

Consequently, the hypothesis that the clinical effects of MAOIs depend partly on receptor adaptation has experimental support. What remains to be established is which adaptations are necessary for clinical improvement and whether they help differentiate anticipatory anxiety from panic attacks.

PHARMACOLOGICAL OBSERVATION: SSRIs and MAOIs

Drug responses provide an additional way to investigate differences between clinical manifestations. The question should not simply be whether a medication reduces anxiety in general. Investigators must determine which symptoms change, when those changes occur, and whether panic attacks follow a different course from anticipatory anxiety.

SSRIs and the Onset of Panic Attacks

Published clinical reports document panic attacks emerging shortly after treatment with certain selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) is initiated.

In 2000, **Catalano and colleagues** described two patients who developed panic attacks soon after starting sertraline. Reports have also described panic attacks associated with fluoxetine and sertraline.

These observations establish that the onset of panic symptoms during treatment is possible in some patients. They are clinically and neuro pharmacologically relevant because a medication that modifies serotonergic transmission may, under certain circumstances, precede an exacerbation of alarm symptoms.

Such episodes warrant investigation of the temporal relationship, patient characteristics, dosage, and other contributing factors.

However, case reports cannot establish the frequency of this effect or demonstrate that all SSRIs provoke panic. Nor do they establish that the serotonergic system has no role in panic attacks. That conclusion would require a broader evaluation of experimental and clinical evidence.

The relevant question for the present hypothesis is not whether serotonin is either present or absent from the process. It is whether serotonergic modulation produces a response pattern different from that observed when noradrenergic mechanisms are targeted.

MAOIS AND ANTIPANIC RESPONSES

Clinical literature includes studies in which phenelzine was used to treat patients experiencing panic attacks. In 1987, **Buigues and Vallejo** evaluated 35 patients with panic disorder or agoraphobia with panic attacks over six months. They reported that attacks were suppressed during treatment in patients with panic disorder and in a high proportion of those with agoraphobia.

This was a clinical study whose findings must be interpreted in light of its design and sample characteristics.

In a double-blind comparison published in **1988, Kayser and colleagues** studied phenelzine and amitriptyline in depressed outpatients. Patients reporting episodes of terror or panic showed a relatively favorable response to phenelzine on several anxiety measures. Because the principal study population consisted of patients with depression, the findings do not constitute definitive evidence of specific efficacy in every panic disorder population.

In the literature reviewed for this essay, we have not identified comparable clinical evidence establishing that MAOIs, as a class, induce panic attacks in the same manner documented in certain reports involving SSRIs.

Nevertheless, the absence of comparable reports does not prove that such an effect is impossible. A claim of that magnitude would require a systematic review of clinical studies and safety data, together with a precise definition of what constitutes a drug-induced panic attack.

The comparison supports investigating whether different pharmacological interventions produce distinct therapeutic and adverse-response profiles. It does not justify turning that observed difference into an absolute separation between neurochemical systems.

PHARMACOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION as a Research Method

The hypothesis of two alarm mechanisms becomes more useful if it generates testable predictions.

A study designed to examine it should distinguish anticipatory anxiety from panic attacks before treatment begins. For each phenomenon, investigators should separately record frequency, intensity, duration, triggering conditions, subjective symptoms, autonomic manifestations, and temporal course.

The immediate effects of a medication must also be distinguished from changes emerging after prolonged administration. Clonidine offers a way to investigate alpha-2 adrenergic modulation; MAOIs permit the study of monoamine degradation inhibition and the adaptations that develop over time; and SSRIs permit the evaluation of responses to altered serotonergic transmission.

Comparisons should include both favorable and adverse responses. A drug that reduces one symptom while aggravating another may provide particularly useful information if both outcomes are measured independently.

However, pharmacological response alone cannot identify a causal mechanism unequivocally. Medications act on complex neural networks and can produce indirect effects.

The hypothesis would gain support if the two clinical manifestations showed reproducible physiological profiles and different pharmacological response patterns. It would be weakened if the differences disappeared after relevant variables were controlled or if results proved inconsistent across studies.

This approach makes the hypothesis testable and open to revision.

CONCLUSION

Historical culture, clinical observation, and pharmacological studies together support a legitimate scientific question: Are anticipatory anxiety and panic attacks expressions of partially differentiated alarm mechanisms?

Ancient Greek thought provides a cultural antecedent for distinguishing anticipated fear from sudden terror, without attributing modern neurochemical knowledge to ancient writers. Clinical observation distinguishes anticipatory experiences from abrupt episodes. Lactate-challenge and clonidine studies show that noradrenergic modulation can alter certain panic attacks. Animal studies of MAOIs demonstrate adaptations in adrenergic receptors, while clinical reports involving SSRIs document the onset of panic attacks in some patients, and studies of phenelzine describe favorable therapeutic responses in selected populations.

These findings do not yet prove the existence of two independent systems or permit the exclusion of serotonergic participation. They do, however, provide a foundation for investigating whether distinct predominant mechanisms exist and whether identifying them requires separate measurement of anticipatory anxiety, episodic panic, and their pharmacological responses.

The central proposal is therefore a hypothesis of functional differentiation: **we should not assume that all manifestations of alarm are equivalent before investigating whether their mechanisms, physiological responses, and pharmacological responses differ.**

The validity of this hypothesis will depend on its ability to explain the available evidence, incorporate contradictory findings, and generate predictions that can be confirmed or refuted.

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