



Tips for Understanding and Managing Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

- The system that produces anxiety is an essential alarm system built into our bodies to help us prepare for and react to dangerous, threatening or emotionally relevant situations. When working properly, we would have a hard time surviving long and being successful in life without it. Anxiety can be a good thing at manageable levels. However, as it increases in frequency and/or intensity and includes a great deal of anticipatory worry (worry about potential bad things coming in the future) it can cause unnecessary suffering and impairment in life.

What happens when anxiety becomes severe enough to be considered an “anxiety disorder?”

- The same system that is crucial for our survival begins to misfire and produce strong anxiety reactions even when no clear dangerous or threatening situation is occurring. It often means that this system is producing “false alarms” that signal to you that something bad must be occurring or will soon occur. Since we have the ability to think of hypothetical situations and countless possibilities, we can even have this reaction to imagined situations that are impossible or unlikely to occur (e.g. anticipatory worry). As we become aware of this alarm system being activated (e.g. feeling uncomfortable, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, irritability, tension, shortness of breath, racing heart, etc.) we generally interpret it to be a true signal of something bad and then attempt to identify the cause and react to it. This often leads people struggling with anxiety to react more negatively or hostile towards others (fight reaction) or avoid situations or individuals (flight reaction) that are paired with the anxious response. In other words, people wrongly connect the anxiety/uncomfortableness internally to an external cause (e.g. person, situation, etc.). In chronic cases, these responses can lead to conditions like agoraphobia (difficulty leaving the house without severe anxiety or panic attacks) or problems with family, friends, work, or school. There are many different classifications of anxiety disorders all of which have been shown to improve to some degree with therapy and medication, especially cognitive-behavioral therapies.

How can I manage anxiety more effectively?

First step:

- Recognize that in most situations the persistent anxiety you are feeling is likely a false alarm signaling to you that you are in danger, under threat or not safe when you are actually safe and capable of handling the situation.
 - o Understanding what anxiety is meant to do (keep you safe) and that the system that produces anxiety reactions can misfire is a good place to start.
 - o Included within this recognition is that it is possible to feel anxious, stressed, panicky or fearful with no external cause and it is also possible to experience these sensations in a way that is significantly out of proportion to a real external cause. This chronic state of anxiety that results in impairment in daily functioning and quality of life is common in anxiety disorders.

- o The goal then is to not get rid of anxiety but to have conscious checks on the largely involuntary anxiety reaction. You can start by asking yourself these questions when you notice you are anxious:
 - Does the situation call for an anxiety/fear-based reaction (fight or flight)?
 - Is this a false alarm that is better handled in another way?
 - Most situations in modern life are not best handled by fighting or fleeing (e.g. problems at work, home, or school, finances, raising children, conflict with friends, marital issues, etc.) and relying on either of these strategies regularly can quickly make problems in life worse, which can result in increasing anxiety and distress in the long-term.

Second step:

- Once you begin to notice the difference between true alarms (real danger/threats) and false alarms then you can begin to work towards reducing the impacts of the false alarms.
 - o False alarms will continue to result in a strong anxiety reaction even once you recognize them as such unless you change your response to them.
 - Consistent exposure to and approach and engagement with things that produce false alarm anxiety reactions in you will decrease your reaction to those things over time. Why? Because if something is not dangerous and threatening but your mind/brain is telling you it is, the best way to move past it is to expose yourself repeatedly and prove to yourself that the feared situation does not happen. Avoiding those things that produce false alarms will typically maintain the anxiety or make it worse. We don't get over fears and challenges by avoiding them, but rather approaching them head on. This goes for both external and internal fears and challenges.
 - Struggling to recognize and process/feel negative experiences, memories and emotions can result in persistent anxiety or distress due to fears of being overwhelmed if you allow the emotions to resurface and energy it takes to suppress those uncomfortable feelings. Healthy emotional processing includes actively feeling and processing both positive and negative emotions.

Third Step:

- Develop healthy coping strategies to regulate and manage persistent anxiety and worry.
 - o Know that worry does not help you.
 - Many people that describe themselves as “worriers” believe that their worry helps them to be aware of and prepare for things in advance. So if they stopped worrying then they would not be aware of and prepared for problems that may come. In other words, it feels safer to worry as it serves a function to manage anxiety about the unpredictableness of life.
 - This is often a problem with accepting the startling reality that we are not in control of most aspects of life and no matter how hard we try we can never be prepared for all possible outcomes. Trying to fight against this reality leads to chronic anxiety and worry.
 - For those things that we can influence meaningfully in life (within our control), the best response is problem solving or planning rather than

worrying. Worry spins us in circles of endless possibilities and never really leads to peace and resolution. It is almost as if we try to prepare for every (bad) possibility no matter how unlikely they may be while completely ignoring the much higher likelihood that things will turn out okay or at least be manageable.

- Identifying real problems and then developing solutions that you can try out in the real world or planning for events/situations that having a high likely of occurring can be extremely helpful and serve to reduce anxiety.
 - Writing out your solutions for problems, making schedules and planning formally can reduce an incredible amount of mental energy that worrying takes up in your mind. Planning, scheduling and dealing with unsolved/avoided problems in your head will increase anxiety and worry. Your brain has a limited capacity so clear out the junk of daily tasks by keeping a schedule or planner so you can focus your mental energy on more important things.
 - Do not do your planning, scheduling, and problem-solving activities at night. This will disrupt your sleep! If these activities are completed earlier in the day then you may see a reduction in worry at night and improved sleep quality.
 - Also, if you feel you must worry, then schedule a “worry time” for 30 minutes early in the day where you can worry freely without restraint. Then once the 30 minutes are up, assess if you feel better or worse and try to save any new worry until your “worry time” the following day. This can help to create improved control of worry.
- o Learn new, effective strategies to manage anxiety
 - There are many different strategies you can use to manage anxiety. Here are some examples:
 - Diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, guided imagery, “box” breathing, radical acceptance, prayer, meditation, repeated exposure to fears, and smashing A.N.T.S (Automatic Negative Thoughts).
 - o Phone Apps for relaxation: Calm, Headspace (app and Netflix series) and many others. Daily practice is essential to get most out of exercises.
 - Other helpful strategies include physical exercise, healthy diet, self-care activities, scheduling micro-breaks for relaxation during the day, complete tasks in a timely manner without procrastination, spending time with supportive friends/family, engaging in faith-based activities, engaging in calming or active hobbies, music, volunteering, etc.
 - It is also important to manage “should” (“I should have done it better, differently or predicted it”) and perfectionistic thinking (living by an imagined standard of perfection).
 - It is common for people with high levels of anxiety to live as if there is an imaginary standard of perfection that must be achieved. But since this is not possible to achieve by any human, this frequently results in chronic feelings of inadequacy or failure as you try to reach the standard and feel like you are not measuring up.

- o This is quite common and often comes from early experiences where love and affection was tied to performance/achievement (rather than effort) and often unreasonably high standards placed on a child.
- It is important to realize that this standard does not exist. It is important to work hard and persist in challenges and high achievement is great. However, people achieve great things through a host of failures followed by intermittent successes. Know that achieving anything great in life will require you to fail many times over. Failure and mistakes are a critical part of the journey that then prepares you for the best things in life. If you expect perfection or something close to it at every step of the process you will never achieve true mastery. Learning from mistakes and failures is an essential skill that is much more useful than striving for perfection. You must first be willing to be a fool in order to become a master. Perfection does not exist in this world so working towards acceptance of this reality can transform your life. It is essential to work towards compassion and grace towards yourself as you try out new things in your attempts to grow.

Conclusion:

Anxiety is a complicated experience because it is essential to our survival and ability to maintain motivation and complete tasks when the system that produces it is operating well. However, when it starts to become overactive and produces frequent “false alarms” it can cause incredible pain and suffering. Overactive anxiety can lead you to being incredibly risk averse (avoidance of important relationships and activities in life) and produce chronic worry, catastrophic thinking (always thinking of bad or worst possible outcomes), fatigue, tension, irritability, agitation, and a critical unforgiving attitude toward yourself or others. Worst of all it can interrupt feelings of peace, joy and contentment in life and keep us from pursuing our most important goals and values. The path to recovery includes understanding anxiety and the responses it pushes you towards (fight or flight) and that this system can misfire, be triggered by real and imagined situations, and can be influenced for better or worse by your responses to it. There are many tools and strategies available to you to help you manage worry, negative/perfectionistic thinking, bodily arousal and other impacts of anxiety. Know that it may not be easy at first and an attitude of compassion towards yourself will set up an internal environment that supports growth and improvement overtime. You can try some of these things out on your own and reach out to us if you are feeling like you need more assistance.