

Conquering Anxiety

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Anxiety is merely fear — the feeling that one’s safety or wellbeing is threatened. Some people have developed a tendency to be easily triggered into anxiety and may stay anxious for longer time periods.

People who have learned to be constantly fearful are called hyper-vigilant. They tend to see fearful situations where none exist or escalate a small fear into a bigger or longer-lasting fear.

Physiological (Body) Responses to the Fear/Alarm Reaction

The human body goes through many natural, physical responses in the body when it senses a threat, which can include all or some of these:

- Onset of the “fight-or-flight” mechanism of the brain
- Hyper-vigilance and tension
- Excitation of muscles, trembling, increased motor ability or hyperactivity (fidgeting)
- Increased heart rate
- Sweating
- Hyperventilation (faster, shallower breathing)
- Feeling faint, dizzy
- Dry mouth
- High voice from tightness in throat
- Sharper, overly focused eyesight
- Queasiness
- Slowed digestion, decreased interest in food
- Decreased verbal ability, stammering, stuttering
- Increased blood-clotting ability
- Pale skin
- Decreased interest in sex
- Raising of hair on the back of the neck
- Decreased mental ability, indecision, dissociation or “freezing”

For people who have a higher baseline of anxiety, a certain type of frightening incident can lead to a series of problems:

1. They are more alert to the possibility of danger or threat, constantly looking (“hyper-vigilance”)
2. As a result, they find it difficult to relax.
3. If they can’t relax, they may have a distorted sense of reality and may perceive threats where there are none or exaggerate a threat. (“That person glared at me. They must hate me. I will never find any friends. I will be alone forever.”)
4. The human body was not meant to stay in this hyper-vigilant mode for more than a few minutes. It is physically, emotionally and mentally exhausting to stay in this mode for hours or even years at a time, as many people do.
5. Being constantly on alert can push these people even closer to escalating these physiological responses.

GAINING COGNITIVE OR MINDFUL CONTROL OF ANXIETY

Much of the time, anxiety is the result of two types of mistaken thinking:

1. Faulty perceptions of the facts
2. Misunderstanding of the meaning of the facts

Fact: "My heart is beating faster than usual now."

Faulty perception of the fact: "My heart is racing; it feels like it may burst!"

Misunderstanding of the meaning of the fact: "If my heart rate doesn't slow down soon, I will surely die of a heart attack!"

Other misperceptions include believing that problems will continue, or that one isn't able to find help, or is unable to help oneself: "This situation is always going to be the same." "No one understands me or has been in this situation." "There must be something wrong with me." "I have 'depression' (or 'anxiety' or 'PTSD') and so I am sick and will always be sick and I have no ability to stop these feelings."

SOLUTIONS

Regaining serenity and clear thinking are essential steps for emotional self-control. Our cognitive brains are completely capable of putting the brakes on our emotional brains.

1. Change the "inner talk" you say to yourself. You CAN change and control your thoughts and perceptions. You can choose what topics you focus on, the positive or negative spin you put on it, and whether you over-focus on these topics over time.

2. Live "in the moment." If you find yourself thinking about bad things that might happen in the future or things that happened in the past, bring yourself back to fully experiencing "right now." Look around, take a few deep breaths with your abdomen, be grateful for positive things right here (the sunny day, a warm home, your spouse's loving presence.)

3. Don't fear the fear. Many people begin to be afraid of losing control of their anxiety or emotions, often in a public place. They fear they will be embarrassed by their actions or body's reactions, such as sweaty face or shaky hands. They may try to regulate their anxiety by avoiding public places or social situations. They fear being vulnerable, exposed or humiliated. Often the best solution for this is actually to admit your fears to someone and be open and vulnerable with your thoughts and concerns. Sharing this experience can reduce the fear and even eliminate the problem. This is because most of us feel safer when we have someone to help us with our fears.

4. Stop judging and criticizing yourself. You don't need an external threat to trigger the fear response. You can actually trigger the alarm response through an endless stream of self-blame and self-shaming messages. Labeling yourself as damaged, worthless or "crazy" merely triggers more of the fear response. Develop self-acceptance and self-compassion as a way to reduce anxiety.

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