

Understanding your Anxiety Symptoms

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PART 2 – THOUGHTS and BELIEFS

As was stated in Part 1, the more anxious you get, the more anxious you get. The more focus and attention that is given to anxiety, the more intense the anxiety becomes. Anxiety has a tendency to feed on itself, making it grow in severity and duration. Worrying about anxiety increases the frequency of anxiety episodes and can create the foundation for its evil sibling, panic. So here is where the attention turns from the physical to thoughts and beliefs.

From this point on, the discussion will be specific to what may be considered, clinical anxiety, rather than the normal everyday variety. What makes anxiety a clinical issue is when it results in a loss of functioning and increased distress such that normal day-to-day activities become difficult or impossible to perform. This might interfere with work/school, family, or social functioning, and may cause hardships so that simple things become a burdensome task. What is thought about during an episode of anxiety has a lot to do with the beliefs about anxiety.

EMPOWERMENT

To start this section, it is important to lay the foundation of empowerment over anxiety. Having anxiety doesn't have to mean that you get swept up in Mr. Toad's Wild Ride and have to hang on until it's over. There are things you can do to take power away from anxiety and better manage each episode. You can decrease the severity, duration, and even frequency of anxiety episodes by changing your beliefs about anxiety. You may not be able to prevent those *out of the blue* episodes from ever occurring, but you can certainly have an effect on how you experience it.

It is important that you start believing that by changing the way you think about anxiety you can improve your ability to take control of it. Granted, that at the moment it sounds easier said than done, and to be honest, it is. But, it does become much easier over time with consistent practice and reinforcement of new thoughts and beliefs. I like to use driving to illustrate this point.

Try to remember way back in time when you were learning to drive. Specifically, when you were behind the wheel on the road, with traffic, for the first time. YOU were totally in control of the car. Can you remember all of the things you were trying to keep up with? What's my speed, am I staying in the lane, are there cars behind me, on either side of me, am I going too fast, too slow, am I drifting Not to mention the worrisome thoughts about the other cars around you going through your head at the time. Whew! That's a lot to do in a couple of seconds. It's likely that you thought it was difficult and made you wonder how people do this. Now look at you. Most of your driving is done as if you were on autopilot. I'm sure you have had experiences when you drove for a while then all of a sudden came to the realization that you have reached your destination, hardly recalling getting there. Scary isn't it?

Essentially, what happens is that your brain “wires” itself to do repetitive actions more efficiently. Because of this, many of the things you do over and over while driving become “wired” and can be done almost without thought. You might notice the next time you drive how many times you check your mirrors or speedometer. What compelled you to do that? Sometimes you make a conscious choice to look while at other times, it just happens. That’s the wiring. This same action is true whether you’re driving, playing piano, texting, and even bad habits like biting your nails. It’s all easier with consistent practice. The same is true for the recommendations that are provided here for anxiety. Consistently making changes to your thoughts and beliefs will empower you to take control of your anxiety.

EFFECT OF MOOD AND EMOTION

Keeping your emotions in check is a good way to take control of anxiety. The best way to do this is to view anxiety for what it is, not what it could be. Recall from Part 1, that anxiety is a **normal response** to a perceived threat. Notice the emphasis on normal response. That being said, it’s not the anxiety that should be taking center stage, it’s the perceived threat. The body is doing what it was designed to do. It’s now up to you to deal with the thing that made that happen. If nothing made it happen, then consider it a false alarm and allow yourself to stand down. Relax. Move along. Nothing to see here.

False alarm? Yes, sometimes we can have an anxiety episode and not know why it was triggered. Unfortunately, we are not 100% sure what causes us to experience anxiety without an apparent cause. There are many theories, but nothing definitive. It’s generally not beneficial to dwell on the “why” question when anxiety occurs in the absence of any identifiable trigger. If you do, you’ll eventually convince yourself that it is because of a rare, life-threatening, disease and make the anxiety even worse.

Not having anything obvious to attribute to that lingering feeling that something is going to happen and the restlessness might make you a bit fearful and worry. The longer this goes on the more worried you are likely to become. In fact, you may go through a range of emotions and mood changes. All of which can affect your anxiety experience and make the difference between having a long, debilitating episode and a short, inconvenient episode. Emotions such as fear, worry, dread, irritability and anger can all act to put anxiety in control. Exactly what we want to avoid.

Returning to what anxiety is and is not, changing the way you look at anxiety can make a big difference in determining who is in control. It’s already been stated that anxiety is a normal response. What else is it? It’s also uncomfortable. Okay, what else. Ummm, annoying? Good. Can you think of anything else? Distracting? Sure. Experiencing anxiety can be a lot of things unpleasant, but the bottom line is that it is not something to be feared. You could use the same descriptions of uncomfortable, annoying, and distracting to lots of normal body functions such as hiccoughs, sneezing fits, itching, or muscular twitches just to name a few. All things we may experience from time to time but don’t fear. Add anxiety to that list and give it the same degree of concern. **Anxiety is an uncomfortable and annoying body sensation, and nothing to be feared.**

THINKING THE WORST

As discussed in Part 1, when we feel the physical symptoms of anxiety, they are not a concern when there is an identifiable reason for them. We expect to feel that way when our safety is obviously threatened. However, when anxiety strikes and there is nothing to point to, there is a tendency to turn inward and think, “*Something must be wrong with me.*” For a lot of people, the thoughts of what it could be always seem to be something terrible or catastrophic. It couldn’t possibly be anything mundane or simple. We won’t settle for anything less than awful or devastating. In my experience, it seems that people tend to go with their worst fear.

Perhaps the most common thought that comes to mind when having a severe anxiety episode is, “*I’m having a heart attack!*” It is very easy to understand why that comes to mind as anxiety has many of the same symptoms experienced during a heart attack. This makes a great deal of sense since a heart attack will trigger the body’s fight or flight response so it’s reasonable to reach that conclusion. There are generally other symptoms associated with a heart attack aside from those commonly experienced with anxiety, but it is always a good idea to be looked at when you are not sure. ***When in doubt, get checked out.*** In many cases, it’s just anxiety and nothing more.

The difference between being able to identify the cause for the anxiety and not, is that there is comfort with knowing what you are dealing with and can do things to take action. Not knowing leaves you with only speculation, or simply put, guesses, and it becomes a case of certainty versus uncertainty, with uncertainty being the birthplace of anxiety. Thoughts now turn to all the terrible things it could be and are added to the list of concerns, all of which feed the anxiety.

So if what you’re experiencing feels like the last time you had anxiety, and the time before that, and the one before that, and so on, most likely, it’s just anxiety. However if you are experiencing something new or it just doesn’t feel like your typical anxiety episode, ***when in doubt, get checked out.***

Remove the uncertainty. Don’t allow your thoughts to take you places without reason because each time you do, you put yourself in that state of uncertainty and sustain the anxiety.

PEERING INTO THE FUTURE

There is nothing more prone to fostering a sense of uncertainty than looking into the future. I will assume that you do not hold the ability to foretell the future, but you probably try. People often proclaim themselves as being chronic planners and gain a sense of control by anticipating future events and develop plans to deal with them. The truth is, not many people are actually successful at it. Why? Try this exercise:

1. Start a timer for 1 minute
2. Write down as many things that you can come up with that COULD happen. Write only things that COULD happen, not *WILL* happen.
3. Stop after 1 minute
4. You should have several written down because there are an infinite number to choose from. Pick any one of them and answer these questions:
 - a. How likely is this to happen?

- b. When will this happen? Time, day, night, weekend, weekday
- c. Where will it happen? At home, work, grocery store, bank, neighbor's house
- d. Who is there? You, anyone but you, friends, strangers, family
- e. Will you need money? How much? Are Credit/Debit Cards acceptable? How much cash will be in your wallet?
- f. And finally, how do you know?**

Hopefully, I've made my point. These are all, essentially, unanswerable questions. How can you possibly make a plan for something that may or may not happen at some unknown time and undetermined place involving who knows who? You can't. But you will make yourself believe you can and in the process, you will continue to create more questions, all of which have no answers. You will ultimately come to the realization that you cannot control the future and become overwhelmed by the uncertainty. Queue the worry and anxiety.

Too many people, particularly planners, engage in what I call "What-if" thinking. What if I get a flat? I'll put on the spare. Sounds simple when you leave out the details. What if the flat happens on a busy roadway with little or no shoulder? What if it's dark? What if the spare is also flat? What if I'm alone? What if ... and on and on and on. You can quickly "*what-if*" yourself into that proverbial rabbit-hole.

Ever notice that you rarely have a positive what-if? For instance, no one ever goes, "*What if I win the Publisher's Clearinghouse and get \$5000 a week for life?*" Yeah, no one thinks that. Only the bad stuff. Looking into the future is necessary sometimes as you do have to make plans and be able to anticipate things. The important difference here is that you should do your planning and anticipation of things that are KNOWN, not imaginary.

The more time you spend in an uncertain future, the more anxious you make yourself as you begin to worry about the unpleasant possibilities that lie in wait in the future. In fact, the more you worry about these imaginary events, the more you come to expect them to occur. Every time you get in the car, "*Is this the day I get the flat?*" So your usually boring trip to the grocery store now becomes a worrisome drive as you wait for your tire to blow.

Something else to consider is that even though you may realize that the events you are worrying about are purely imaginary, the worry and anxiety associated with those events can become a part of your real life. In essence, worrying about nothing because the event only exists in your imagination.

It is much more beneficial to stay focused on the here and now. Pay attention to what is going on around you in the moment. By doing so, you will find that you are more likely to be in a position to prevent those dreaded *what-ifs* from happening. Let the future come to you as you focus on the present where you have some degree of control and the ability to make rational decisions. There is enough stress and anxiety in your real life without having to add imaginary problems.

BELIEFS

I want to end this with a few more comments about beliefs. What we believe is based on what we have experienced ourselves, what we are told by others, what we are taught, what we observe,

and what we perceive and deduce about something. With anxiety, it is common to believe that there is nothing you can do about it because you tried various things with little or no success. Fair enough, but beliefs can be changed.

May I suggest that you start the process of changing your beliefs by accepting that maybe there ARE things that can be done to better cope with and manage anxiety. Take the information that was presented here along with the recommendations you are given and use them to modify your belief system such that you can feel empowered to do something to lessen the effect of anxiety and take control of it. You CAN do it and it all starts with the belief in yourself and consistent application of thought and action over time.

Keep your expectations realistic. Change does not happen instantaneously. It is a process that takes time to fully realize so don't be too quick to dismiss recommended behaviors because they didn't work right away. It is quite typical of people to be somewhat skeptical initially as they hold on to their belief that nothing can be done. This belief is a barrier that needs to be taken down before the real change can start to take hold.

Yes, it takes time and effort but it can last a lifetime. It needs no prescription and has no adverse side effects. I believe that you can take control of your anxiety. You should too.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

- Acknowledge the anxiety but don't dwell on it
- Accept that anxiety can happen for no apparent reason
- Recognize that it is a normal physical (fight or flight) response
- View it simply as an uncomfortable and annoying body sensation
- Relax and focus on normalizing your breathing
- Avoid strong emotions such as fear, intense worry, anger
- Engage in some physical activity if feeling restless, jittery, or shaking
- Focus attention on what you were doing and not on the anxiety
- Avoid "what-if" thinking and stay oriented to the here and now
- Be consistent in your actions and beliefs over time for best results