

Mending your mind

Moving Beyond Anxiety



Were you ever afraid of the dark when you were a child? Were you convinced that a boogey man lived in the darkest corner of your closet, and nobody could convince you otherwise? Did the sight of certain insects, such as spiders or earwigs, make your skin crawl?

We are all blessed with the gift of imagination. When used wisely, our imaginations are the source of our most creative projects. But if misused, our ability to imagine things can become the source of our anxieties, apprehensions and fears.

Anxiety and fear are a part of everyone's lives – they are natural and necessary emotions. They are aroused whenever situations threaten us or place extreme demands on us. When we experience these emotions, our stress response is triggered. It kick-

starts our sympathetic nervous system into action so that adrenaline is released into our blood, our hearts beat more quickly and our major muscle groups get ready-to-go. In situations where a threat is imminent, this "supercharging" helps us take self-protective action quickly and effectively.

For some people, events such as public speaking or completing a report on time can trigger a severe stress response. In such cases, the perceived threat is subjective – there is no actual physical risk. Those of us who suffer from anxiety have an overactive stress response which is triggered by subjective fears. The end result is that we suffer from anticipatory worries, doubts, avoidance and a diminished capacity for enjoying life.

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In severe cases, it is associated with compulsive behaviours, phobias or with the avoidance of situations that trigger concerns about being out of control. Luckily anxiety disorders are amongst the most treatable of all psychological problems. Even though, by temperament, some of us may always have a tendency to be anxious, we can learn effective ways to minimize anxiety's negative and long-term impact.

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The starting point for transforming anxiety-based responses into more functional behaviours is to understand the physical symptoms associated with anxiety are a misguided way in which our bodies attempt to protect us from an unwanted harm – real or imagined. By reaching this understanding, we open the door to identify other protective coping strategies that are more benign and helpful. We may not be able to control the intrusive thoughts and feelings that accompany an anxiety response, but we can develop new ways to respond to them as soon as they enter our awareness. We can choose to implement strategies to soothe ourselves rather than rushing headlong into an anxiety attack.

If you experience anxiety, before choosing to explore counselling or self-help interventions, it is important to ensure this condition doesn't have an organic cause. Anxiety can be associated with thyroid problems, endocrine disorders, hypoglycemia, certain neurological and cardiovascular conditions, and so on. Be sure to have a complete medical exam to eliminate these potential causes. The symptoms of anxiety can be intense and physical, as anyone who has ever had a panic attack can attest to. We need to be sure these symptoms result from emotional issues rather than physical ones. This knowledge lets us explore effective treatment strategies.

More often than not, anxious behaviours are habitual and unconscious responses developed to cope with long-forgotten but nonetheless upsetting events. When faced with an apparently overwhelming situation, such as having to present in front of the class, a child may develop the habit of compulsively over-rehearsing and over-planning the presentation. As an adult, these same behaviours become problematic when, as an employee, there is an expectation to participate in team meetings without an opportunity to “prepare”. Over time, what was once a solution to a problem becomes a problem in its own right.

So what are some of the ways in which we can impact anxiety? What do we need to do to become more peaceful when we encounter situations that trigger us? How do we learn to be less anxious?

Here are some suggestions to help you get started in managing your anxiety. As with any behavioural change, you will need to give yourself time to establish new habits. You will also need to practice new skills regularly so they can become established as second nature. Don't be shy about seeking help.

Healthy thinking is a choice. The first place to start is to separate your current thought habits from your core identity. Give yourself space to change how you think and respond to situations. You are not your thoughts. You can select what you think about. Just as you can change the TV channel if you don't like the show that is playing, you can select whether to attend to your anxious thoughts or to replace them with calming ones.

Although life itself is not controllable, you can exercise choice in how you respond to events. If you believe you are destined to be anxious forever, you will certainly prove yourself correct. However, if you give yourself permission to experiment with new ways of thinking and being, you will identify options that you didn't previously know about - and you may just end up changing your beliefs about yourself in the process!

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Stay grounded in the present. Anxious thoughts are focused on the future. We may think we can control how we will feel or think in the future, but this is an illusion. We can imagine the future but we can't actually know what will happen or how we will react until events unfold.

When we are anxious we travel forward in our minds - making plans about "what ifs", worrying about things that may or may not happen, and trying to control events that haven't occurred.

Our bodies cannot distinguish between what we imagine and reality. This is why we cry at sad movies – we perceive something sad has happened and we feel sorrowful feelings. If we are imagining something bad will happen to us, we feel the anxiety and tension that goes along with that bad experience – in effect, we create the negative experience for ourselves whether or not it actually ever comes to pass. This is why if you spend all night lying awake worrying about getting your work done, you wake up exhausted. You've been "working" all night! No wonder you feel tired.

To counter the tendency to be future-oriented we need to develop ways to stay grounded in present reality. Practicing deep breathing, going for a walk, paying attention to the details of your surroundings, or writing down your thoughts in a journal are common ways to get connected to the present. Using strategies such as these let you short circuit anxiety. Whatever means you choose, the intent is to stay here and now, in the reality of the moment. We make choices about how we will think and act in each present moment, not in the one that just passed or the one that is yet to come. Right here, right this minute is where we have control. The present moment is where we have the ability to choose health and refuse anxiety.

Learn to accept feelings – don't resist or judge them. Feeling emotionally or physically out of control, or experiencing anxiety symptoms (such as a rapid heart beat, breaking out in a sweat, or becoming so self-

conscious that we are unable to speak) is frightening. Sometimes we react to these symptoms by becoming even more anxious. This self-generated, negative reinforcement is counterproductive – we end up creating more of the condition that we are trying to escape.

To break this negative cycle, we need to be able to witness the symptoms of anxiety with neutrality – to identify "rapid heartbeat" or "sweating palms" without telling ourselves that we are headed down a slippery slope that is only going to get worse. If, when I experience "rapid heartbeats", I take several deep breaths and remind myself that I'm OK, that I can slow down and take a moment to centre myself – I will start to calm down. On the other hand, if I interpret "rapid heartbeats" as a potential cardiac arrest, I will increase my anxiety.

It takes effort to reinterpret our perceptions of events. We have to be open to new possibilities. We have to be willing to experiment. We have to value being healthy. We may need help from others to show us what to do. But the rewards of making this change are sweet - we reclaim our self-esteem, we get to participate in our lives in ways that were previously impossible, and we show ourselves that we have the courage and ability to take on big challenges.

