

Managing Anxiety 1

“I don’t think I want to live if I have to go on feeling like this”. I hear this comment all too often from anxiety sufferers. They say it matter-of-factly or dramatically, but they all feel the same way; if anxiety symptoms are going to rule their lives, then their lives don’t seem worth living.

What is it about anxiety that is so horrific that otherwise high-functioning people are frantic to escape it? The sensation of doom or dread or panic felt by sufferers are often overwhelming. The extraordinary thing is that these are the very same sensations, in fact, if the worst really were happening. In fact, for some people, the fear of something happening is often harder to bear than the thing itself.

Too often, though, these literally dreadful, sickening sensations drive clients to the instant relief of medication – and what good GP would not offer medication if it offered some relief.

But what some clients don’t know is that when they start taking meds is the unacknowledged cost of relying solely on pills: they will never learn some basic methods that can control or eliminate their anxiety without tablets. They never develop the tools for managing anxiety that, in all likelihood will turn up again whenever they feel undue stress or go through significant life changes. The better alternative is to learn the appropriate psychological anxiety reducing techniques.

Now reducing anxiety symptoms does not eliminate the cause of the problems. One needs to use counseling or a wise confidant to sort these things out. However, certain techniques can offer relief very speedily.

Anxiety-management techniques fall into three types:

1. Those that deal with the physical arousal that constitutes terror or panic.
2. Those that deal with tension and stress.
3. Those that deal with the mental anguish of rumination and never-ending negative thoughts.

If you have mastery of some of these techniques you can find real and genuine relief.

Over the next few weeks I will be introducing a few of these techniques. These techniques deal with the three areas identified above – distressing physical sensations; stress and dread; and the distress of constant worry and rumination.

What evolutionary psychology shows us is that we are, by nature, anxious creatures. Every single person is programmed for survival and one of the essential emotions tools to ensure survival is actually anxiety. Anxiety is the physical cue for any animal to take action to protect itself. Creatures that do not experience such anxiety do not survive. It is therefore an essential part of life.

It becomes problematic, however, when we begin to feel anxiety in situations where there are none or when the anxiety we experience is entirely disproportional to the

situation or life-circumstance we find ourselves in. I often refer to this as the “starling effect” – that is that we often live our lives like frightened birds terrified of some imminent attack or outcome that never occurs. I watch the starlings in my back garden with their heads darting up and down from the grass in a state of constant alert for some predator that rarely arrives and when I harmlessly wave my hand from the window they rise up in a swoosh of collective panic.

For many people their life is like that, living in a constant state of anxiety. Anxiety can become so pervasive in someone’s life that they never recognize it as such. It just seems that this is the way that life is. Very often this learning can begin in childhood or adolescence. When stress, worry, and bodily tension become a familiar friend.

If you grew up in a family where there was always some upsetting scene you might realize that anxiety and worry were a constant. Or you may have been in a relatively stable home but some private and personal worry about yourself never got resolved and still agitates you from a darkened corner in your mind.

Just notice, even as you read this, that there is a vague almost undetectable anxiety pulsating through your body. Much of this is the anticipation of an uncertain life and future. Anxiety and excitement are actually close companions. But notice also if your anxiety brings a tension or dread that is distressing. A little anxiety impels us to act. Too much anxiety prevents us from acting.

In the next few weeks I will be examining how we can manage this unpleasant anxiety. Stay tuned...