

Anxiety

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Anxiety, in its various forms, is a state of being that goes beyond just feeling tense or worried. It can significantly interfere with your daily life. It can take over and rule you.

“Anxiety disorders” are the most common of all “mental disorders”. The full spectrum ranges from panic, specific phobias, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive, posttraumatic stress, and generalised anxiety.

From the self-help perspective it is important to be realistic about what you can achieve on your own. For example, perhaps you should seriously consider face-to-face consultations with a clinical psychologist for phobias, obsessive-compulsiveness, or posttraumatic stress. But then again, you might be considering self-help because professional help is not an option. It might be out of your reach financially or you simply live in a remote part of the planet.

The biggest obstacle to successful self-help in relation to anxiety of any type is the commonly applied strategy of *avoidance*. That is, when someone experiences anxiety, the most common response is to avoid the object or the situation that brings on the anxiety.

Avoidance seems like the logical thing to do. Allowing yourself to experience anxiety in order to defeat it can seem like a completely crazy idea. Good psychology is often counterintuitive. Psychology is not just common sense; it is a science as much as anything else.

Medication for treating anxiety is often an avoidance strategy. For example, someone who is experiencing anxiety might ask their GP for Valium. The Valium has the short-term effect of relieving the feeling of anxiety. In the end, the Valium strategy is self-defeating for three reasons. Firstly, the cause of the anxiety is not addressed. Second, you end up needing bigger and bigger doses to get the effect. Third, you end up with a drug addiction as a further problem to deal with.

Generalised Anxiety

Generalised anxiety is anxiety that does not have a specific category, such as a phobia, obsessive-compulsiveness, is not solely panic, or cannot necessarily be related to a specific event. So for convenience why don't I just use the term “anxiety” from now on when I mean generalised anxiety?

Anxiety can develop in childhood, in adolescent years, and it can certainly develop at anytime of life. If it goes unnoticed it can lead to depression, or other problems such as alcohol or substance abuse.

Most people do not recognise their anxiety and as a result do not develop useful strategies and skills that would otherwise prevent their suffering. Like depression, anxiety is very treatable. The good news is that it is treatable without drugs.

Like depression, there are differing theories about the cause of anxiety. There is of course the chemical imbalance theory. Some GPs will prescribe antidepressant medication for anxiety. The drug companies tell GPs that their particular antidepressant will cure anxiety. You might hear that the only real difference is in the dose of the drug for treating depression or anxiety. I am not advising against medication *per se*, if you're happy with medication as the answer, then you need read no further.

There is the “worry” theory. This theory says that anxiety is caused by excessive worry. Worry is a focus on potential problems that might or might not happen in the future. This can be the “what ifs” or

the “mights” or “might nots”, over and over in our minds. “Will this happen?”, “Will that happen?”, “What can I do if such and such happens?”, “Will I cope?”, “How will I cope?”.

The “worry theory” has more to offer anxiety sufferers than the chemical imbalance theory. The “worry theory” at least begins to offer something near a practical explanation. Excessive worry certainly can be a cause of anxiety. And certainly, anxiety has its origins in our minds. This does not mean that “it’s all in your mind”. When people say that, “it’s all in your mind” they are usually trying to trivialise your suffering. Anxiety does have its origins in your mind, but this does not mean that your anxiety is not real.

Anxiety is real enough and we need more than a mere “worry theory”.

Here is a question that I ask my clients who say that they experience anxiety. I ask, “Where do you feel it in your body?” The most common answer is “in my head”. I say, “No, where do you **feel it** in your body?” I point to my tummy and chest area, my body. Sometimes my clients look at me with astonishment that I would ask such a question. There is a flash of insight and then the answer is usually, “in my gut”. The discussion then easily turns to feelings of nausea, or butterflies, tightness in the chest, heart flutters, shortness of breath, etc. Then I’m able to say, when you experience anxiety, you are actually experiencing elevated levels of adrenalin.

Adrenalin: Now isn’t that interesting?

If you are able to accept that the “feeling” of anxiety is primarily in elevated levels of adrenalin in your body, then this raises the very important question for “how the hell did that happen?”

In relation to anxiety the answer is simple. The answer is mental activity. Mental activity triggers the autonomic response of flight or fight. This is the mind-body connection. This is the process of thoughts causing a physical response.

Try this out, **“Oh my God I’m going to die!”** Do it for real. See if you can create the familiar feeling of anxiety. Or at least see if you are able to notice the change in your body from stirring yourself up with such a thought. Don’t take it too far so as to cause yourself damage.

So clearly we are not talking about **any** mental activity causing flight or fight, thus causing adrenalin release. We are talking about a certain kind of mental activity. This certain kind of mental activity I refer to as “head-chatter”. Worry is a subset or type of head-chatter.

Head-chatter goes beyond worry. Our uncontrolled head-chatter is often on mundane topics such as paying the bills, dealing with difficult people at work, or trying to decide what to buy or where to send the kids to school. Some times head-chatter is about events that quite likely won’t even happen such as illness, accidents, or any other event that might affect our safety or wellbeing, or that of our families or others we care about. Head-chatter can be self-blaming. Head-chatter can be dark reflections on yourself or the world or other people. Head-chatter can be revengeful, resentful, blaming others or denial of one’s own blame. Head-chatter can be complaining to yourself about the incompetence of others, or about how other’s never appreciate your brilliance or goodness. Head-chatter can be cynical rambling of your mind that ranges over many topics.

Head-chatter can be awfulising or catastrophising. Awfulising is a wilful focus on the undesirable qualities of a situation, thing, or person, with an indifference to any positive qualities. Catastrophising is a wilful focus on what might go wrong with an indifference to the actual probability of it actually happening.

One thing is clear, and that is that head-chatter is not the same as thinking. Head-chatter goes around and around without end and gets nowhere. Thinking is sequential with a beginning, middle, and an

end. Thinking has a conclusion. Head-chatter is sneaky and seductive. From a Mindfulness perspective, head-chatter takes you out of the present moment.

The story so far: The feeling of anxiety comes from the presence of elevated levels of adrenalin in our body. Elevated levels of adrenalin come from out-of-control head-chatter. So what makes the head-chatter?

There is one reason for the existence of head-chatter. The reason is that there is a stressor somewhere on your mental landscape that represents an unresolved emergency of one kind or another. There are two types of stressors. One type is external as in any actual challenge, demand, threat, danger, loss, change. The other type is internal that is a perceptual distortion of some kind so that you react as if there is a real or actual challenge, demand, threat, danger, loss, change.

Five Things to do

Here are five things to do about anxiety from a self-help point of view.

- Ψ Read the article *Stress: What it is How it Works*. Find the article under the Self-Help link in the menu above. It is essential to know what stress is and how it works if you are to have the absence of anxiety and the presence of wellbeing and happiness in your life.
- Ψ Learn to manage your head-chatter. Read the article *Mindfulness Skills*. Find the article under the Self-Help link in the menu above. Recognise the difference between thinking and head-chatter. Thinking is good for you. Head-chatter is not at all necessary and actually holds you back from achieving wellbeing and happiness.
- Ψ Recognise the difference between stressor and stress. Act upon your stressors. Recognise the difference between external stressors and internal stressors. External stressors require that you adapt in some way. Internal stressors require that you adjust your expectations in some way.
- Ψ Beware of your temptation to use escape, avoidance and suppression for external stressors.
- Ψ Beware of your temptation to use blame and denial for your internal stressors.

WARNING

For very serious psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, specific phobias, addiction, conduct disorder, or personality disorders, I strongly recommend that you seek out a local psychologist to tackle those problems in face-to-face consultations. For serious psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or bi-polar or schizophrenia you will need to consult with a psychiatrist face-to-face about suitable medication.