

Day 6 – Dealing with Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's alarm and survival mechanism and is a way of responding to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight – otherwise known as 'fight or flight'. This is our normal biological response to feeling threatened. Anxiety can kick in whether the danger is real, or the danger is in our heads (not reality). Even when we just think we are in danger, that's enough to trigger the system to go, go, go; the 'flight or fight' response is automatic. People who get anxious tend to get into scanning mode - where they're constantly on the lookout for danger, hyper-alert to any of the signals, and make it more likely that the alarm system will be activated.

On Day 1 we talked about how our thoughts have an impact on our feelings (emotions) and behaviours. Negative thoughts that may occur can often relate to our overestimating or exaggerating the actual threat and underestimating our ability to cope:

- I will never be able to cope with this situation
- It is the worst thing that has ever happened
- I will not get my place in University



We also experience physical sensations when anxiety kicks in. Again, this is our bodies way of helping us to energise ready for the 'fight or flight'. The physical sensations we may feel might include:

- **A pounding heartbeat – this helps to take the blood to where it might be needed most – the legs for flight and the arms for fight. The blood is**

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taken from places where it is not needed most for example, finger, skin, toes, which is why you may feel a tingling or numbness sensation.

- Feeling faint / Chest Pains / Feeling unable to breathe – our bloodstream carries oxygen to the arms, legs and lungs to give us more power. The side effects may include feeling faint, chest pains, dizzy and blurred vision.
- Sweating – it helps us cool the muscles in the body by stopping them overheating.
- Nausea (feeling sick) – our digestive system slows down to save energy. The side effects are nausea, butterflies in the stomach and a dry mouth.
- Shaky limbs, or feeling like your legs are turning to jelly – our muscles tense to create power.
- Spots in your eyes – our pupils dilate which lets more light into our eyes so our overall vision improves. The side effects may include sensitivity to light or spots before our eyes.
- Concentration – we become more alert looking for danger and less able to concentrate on other things.

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that:

- You're losing control
- You're going to faint
- You're having a heart attack
- You're going to die



Anxiety attacks can last between 5 and 20 minutes and can come on very quickly.

If you suffer from anxiety attacks your behaviours may include:

- Not going out / Avoiding people, places and things that cause the anxiety
- Being specific about what you do, for example only going out shopping when it's less busy or only going shopping with another person
- Locking yourself away from everyone / Not wanting to talk
- Using safety behaviours such as not speaking to a certain person, using passive aggression, smoking or drinking more than normal, substance abuse, self-talk (constantly talking to yourself in your head), meditation etc.
- Running away from a situation that may cause you anxiety

Safety behaviours can also help to keep your anxiety going. Whilst you depend on them to help you cope, you don't get to find out that without them, the anxiety would reduce and go away on its own.

Whilst avoiding people or situations might help you feel better at that time, it doesn't make your anxiety any better over a longer period. If you're frightened that your anxiety will make you pass out or vomit in the supermarket aisle, you won't find out that won't actually happen, because you don't go. So the belief that it will happen remains, along with the anxiety.

We all feel anxious some times. A certain amount of anxiety helps us to be more alert and focused. For example just prior to an exam, a few exam nerves have a positive effect - motivating us, helping us focus our thoughts on the job in hand, and making us more alert. Too much anxiety, or constantly being anxious, is unhealthy and detrimental to our lives and relationships.

The first step to combatting anxiety is to notice when you are more likely to get anxious or when you do actually get anxious or have a panic attack. Note it down as this will help you find a pattern. This is what we would call the event; the thing that triggered the anxiety. The trigger could be:

- When you hear or see something
- When you are thinking of a situation; something that happened in the past or may happen in the future
- Certain people
- Certain places



What is your trigger?

How can you help yourself?

- Talk to someone you trust
- It is important that you understand how breathing affects our feelings so we have also attached a handout explaining just that. Try to practice the technique next time you feel anxious.
- http://media.wix.com/ugd/fec33e_6507d6333fa5445986a6ae279b1bf94d.pdf
- Go out for a walk, or do something you love (dance, sing, play your Xbox or PlayStation)
- Go to the gym or do some physical exercise
- Try a complementary therapy
- Find a local support group

You can also choose to change your thought process and confront your anxiety so that you can be in control of it. This will have long term benefits overall.

Have you been using the Thought Record Sheet? As with everything it takes practice and if you are unable to think about a more helpful and realistic thought ask someone you trust what they would think.

You can also test yourself further. You can make a plan to gradually do the things you normally avoid. For instance if you normally avoid going out to big social, then start with a smaller events where you feel more comfortable, with few close friends. It will feel uncomfortable at first and you will learn that you can enjoy these events, and that the anxious feeling **does** go away. Keep practicing.

You can use breathing techniques or self-talk (challenging your unhelpful thoughts and repeating more realistic thoughts) to get you through these times.

If you normally depend on 'safety behaviours' to help you cope, then list them in order of importance, then start by dropping or not doing the least important, and gradually work your way up over time.

People with no experience of anxiety can say things like...



But finding the courage isn't that easy to do.

More tips on what to do when you feel anxious

- **STOPP!** Pause, take a breath, don't react automatically
- Ask yourself:
 - o What am I reacting to?
 - o What is it that I think is going to happen here?
 - o What's the worst (and best) that could happen? What's most likely to happen?
 - o Am I getting things out of proportion?
 - o How important is this really? How important will it be in one week, one month or 6 months' time?
 - o Am I overestimating the danger?
 - o Am I underestimating my ability to cope?
 - o Am I mind-reading what others might be thinking?
 - o Do I believe I can predict the future?

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- Is there another way of looking at this? Is this fact or opinion?
- What advice would I give someone else in this situation?
- Am I putting more pressure on myself?
- Just because I feel bad, doesn't mean things really are bad.
- What do I want or need from this person or situation? What do they want or need from me? Is there a compromise?
- What would be the consequences of responding the way I usually do?
- Is there another way of dealing with this? What would be the most helpful and effective action to take? (for me, for the situation, for others)

If you need more help please speak to us.

Today's Tasks:

- When you feel anxiety or a panic attack creeping up practice (I had to get that word in didn't I) the techniques you've learned from today.