

Anxiety

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Anxiety is part and parcel of the human condition. We all exhibit anxiety to a greater or lesser extent, and low levels actually assist us to be 'on the ball' so we can perform well. Problems arise when anxiety becomes unmanageable. Given how many people experience high levels of anxiety, it is not surprising that anxiety is reported to be the most common of all mental health conditions. What may be less obvious is the fact that it may also be behind many unexplained medical conditions.

What exactly is anxiety? Often people confuse anxiety with fear. Fear is an experience in the body that mobilises us to protect our self against an external threat, via the fight, flight or freeze instinct. Anxiety is experienced similarly, but is an internal process which mobilises us to defend ourselves psychologically. Anxiety gauges our internal state and rises with any rising underlying feelings and impulses that 'threaten' our equilibrium. Let us say for example someone is angry at their friend for treating them badly. This feeling may conflict with tender feelings and threaten the status quo. Tension results. This process is internal and is often disowned, put outside of our awareness, and may then be falsely attributed. For example, we may externalise anxiety on to imaginary threats, which unnecessarily limit functioning and enjoyment of life.

Why do we get anxious? At the heart of the matter is how we learn to relate to ourselves in the context of our relationships. Relationships are our life blood, and determine our survival from infancy. Connecting with one another is instinctive, and humans tend to avoid anything that can threaten or symbolise the loss of a significant relationship. These bonds of attachment, for example with our parents, may put us in conflict with our own autonomous needs and set us against those we love. Anxiety can signal the presence of this inner conflict, and conflict is often dealt with by distorting reality. In this example, we may have trouble acknowledging our mixed feelings and blind ourselves to our family's faults, or 'write them off' instead. Both extremes indicate the presence of anxiety which usually occurs at an unconscious level.

It is important to recognise anxiety in all its manifestations. Anxiety is obvious in many individuals, at least to others, because of the level of activation shown in the body, demonstrated say by fidgeting. However often people who do not look anxious are actually more anxious than those who appear so. This is because where an individual cannot tolerate their anxiety, it is channelled away from the big muscle groups (involved in the flight/fight reaction), to the organs (involved in the freeze reaction). Individuals in this camp tend to exhibit a lack of muscle tension and may be more likely to present with bodily complaints and stress-related medical conditions, which are the result of poor anxiety tolerance.

What can be done about anxiety? The first step is to become aware of how it manifests in us. Once we notice our anxiety we can pay attention to how we experience it in our body, and sooth ourselves as we would a fretful child. Sometimes we perpetuate our anxiety by desperately trying to find solutions in our head. These racing or 'circular' thoughts are often confused with, and take us away from, the experience of anxiety in our body, keeping us in a state of tension. Recognising the difference, and attending to our body in the present moment can be helpful. As we do this we may discover for example, unacknowledged tension in our stomach or that we feel light headed. Once we acknowledge this and separate our sensations from any intervening thoughts, it can be reduced through the process of biofeedback.

Often our breathing is shallow and fast when we're anxious, due to the mistaken idea

(thought) that we can't breathe and need oxygen. In fact this process gives us too much of the stuff and this affects our breathing! This can be remedied simply by holding one's breath a bit longer. This example illustrates the lack of trust which is often associated with the anxious individual. If someone is having a panic attack they may have the thought they are going to die and naturally seek outside help. Improvement will come when thoughts about the future are separated from the bodily sensations in the present, and when these are attended to. The organism takes care of its needs when left to do so. Sleep is another area where this process occurs.

Anxious thoughts can be very distressing for affected individuals, who can become highly dependent on others. In an acute state it is often helpful to have someone for support, especially if soothing was lacking in their background. Over time, through imitation, individuals can also learn to provide this for themselves. To fully address anxiety, the underlying triggers should be identified and worked through. Since these factors are not always apparent, psychotherapy may be of assistance.