

***Overcoming
Anxiety and Panic
Part 2***



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In the last newsletter, we reviewed way of reducing anxiety by making physical changes, habit changes and thinking changes. In this one, we will look at affirmations, NLP, self care, social support, hypnosis and more.

Let's start with affirmations.

Affirmations

Inside each of our heads, we all have inner conversations. The amount of talk varies by person but it can be quite extensive. Research suggests that the rate of self talk can be *ten* times faster than normal conversation (Wiley, 2006). That is quite a bit of chatter.

Now imagine that the inner conversation is pressured, harsh and condemning. It is telling the person to “hurry up”, “do it better” and to “stop being so stupid”. All this at around 1500 words per minute. It's enough to make a person anxious just thinking about it!

But there is more to this. The Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb came up with a theory of learning that is summarized by the notion that neurons “that fire together, wire together.” (LeDoux, 1999). If you think of it like highways, the brain is paving “roads” where there is repeat traffic. It is reasonable to theorize that these 1500 word per minute inner conversations are widening those roads or thickening the pavement.

So what can you do? Introduce affirmations into your inner conversations. In particular, counter any negative inner conversations. If your self talk is “hurry

up” try to counter with “I accomplish my goals at a reasonable, steady pace.” If your self talk is “I am unattractive. I must lose 10 lbs,” you might counter with “I am lovable exactly the way I am.” It is worth emphasizing that stopping negative inner conversations will not prevent you from working towards self improvement. It will simply stop the anxiety provoking inner criticism.





So tune in and try to listen to your natural inner conversations. If the dialogue is negative, add positive, calming and reassuring affirmations. Try to do this consistently and you might be very surprised by the results.

Journaling

When worries or regrets are preoccupying your thoughts, go look for a pen. How is writing it down going to help? The book “Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval” says this about the benefits of journaling (or expressive writing):

Somewhat surprisingly, while people are writing or talking about traumas, they often show immediate signs of reduced stress. For example, they demonstrate lower muscle tension in their faces and drops in the perspiration levels on their hands (often used in lie detection to measure the stress of deception). Immediately after writing about emotional topics, people evidence lower blood pressure and heart rate levels. (Pennebaker, 2004, p.8)

Additional benefits cited in the book (pp. 7-8) were :

-  Improved immune function
-  Better lung function among asthmatics
-  less pain among arthritis sufferers
-  Better grades among college students

Distracting your mind

As mentioned in the [October, 2008 newsletter](#), attentional focus can be a major contributor to anxiety. By distracting your mind away from anxiety provoking thoughts or sensations, you can reduce your anxiety. Evidence of this can be found in a 2006 study, which used a combination of meditation and attentional focus (called “Task Concentration Training”) to successfully treat social anxiety (Bogels, Sijbers, Vonken). One technique used was to change a person's focus from themselves (thoughts like “do I look nervous?” or “do I sound stupid?”) to others. By attentively listening and focusing on others, people reduced the anxiety that they felt in social interactions.

Self care

Sometimes, it can be simple needs that can cause anxiety. If you have guilt about taking of yourself in some way, you might experience anxiety when that need comes up. So, for example, if you are afraid of seeing yourself as lazy, you might become anxious when you are tired. If you are worried about your weight, you may become anxious when you are hungry. Within reasonable bounds, you should always seek to care for yourself and meet your own needs. The most compassionate way to care for yourself is to treat yourself the way you would a beloved child. Although it may seem almost too simple, there is great wisdom in the Buddhist phrase, “When you are hungry, eat. When you are tired, sleep.”

There are many needs that we have which should be attended to. At different times we need companionship, solitude, entertainment or laughter. Spend some time “listening” to yourself. Try and figure where you may be getting too much of or too little of a certain need. Seek to adjust your life so as to bring it into balance.

Mindfulness and Compassion

Similar to meditation, this is an attitude and an approach toward ordinary activities. Mindfulness means paying complete attention to whatever you are doing. If you are eating, it means focuses exclusively on the food. What the food tastes like, it's aroma, the texture, how it feels going down. It means that you are thinking of *nothing* else while eating.

Compassion is an especially important attitude when dealing with negative feelings that come up in every human being. So, for example, when you are feeling angry you should welcome that anger and attend to it. Welcoming the anger does not mean acting it out or harming yourself or others. To quote from Thich Nhat Hanh (*italics mine*), it mean this:

[...] with that energy of mindfulness, we can recognize our anger, our fear, our despair. We practice recognizing and embracing.

When a mother working in the kitchen hears the cries of her baby, she puts anything she is holding down and goes to the room of the baby, picks the baby up and holds the baby dearly in her arms. We do exactly the same thing when the seed of anger and fear manifest in us; our fear, our anger is our baby. *Let us not try to suppress and to fight our fear and our anger. Let us recognize its presence; let us embrace it tenderly like a mother embracing her baby.*

When a mother embraces her baby, the energy of tenderness begins to penetrate into the body of the baby. The mother does not know, yet, what is the cause of the suffering of the baby, but the fact that she is holding the baby tenderly can already help. The energy of tenderness and compassion in a mother begins to penetrate into the body of the baby, and the baby gets some relief right away. The baby may stop crying. And if the mother knows how to continue the practice of holding the baby mindfully, tenderly, she will be able to discover the cause of the suffering of the baby.(2002)

Social Support

If you had a stressful event or if something is worrying you, you probably know how helpful a good friend can be. Research bears out this common sense notion. Social support is correlated with better physical and psychological health. One study, which reviewed published studies done since the 1970's, showed that

social support was correlated with better physical and mental health. Non supportive relationships as well as social isolation, however, were associated with negative health effects (Seemen, 1996).

Ideally, you want to engage in relationships where you can safely express your feelings and needs. When reaching out for support then, seek out people who can listen with empathy and are careful not to criticize.

NLP

Short for the mouthful, “neurolinguistic programing,” NLP is a favorite technique among personal coaches (e.g., Anthony Robbins) for fostering personal growth and change. The technique that I think is most helpful for anxiety and panic is call *anchoring* (for more on NLP, see the [recommended reading](#)). This is where you associate one or more thoughts or behaviors with a positive emotional state (O' Connor, Seymour, 1990, p. 54). To make the concept more concrete, let me give an example. If you are open to it, try using this example to see if it changes your emotional state.

Imagine yourself surrounded by your most trustworthy friends and the dearest members of your family. The people you choose could be living or they may have passed. Imagine that they are all looking upon you with great affection and love. Now, make the place that you are in be your favorite place. It might be a place in nature, the beach, a place from your childhood or the home you live in now. Imagine that the fragrance of this place is your favorite smell. Notice how good it feels to breathe in this fragrant air. Next, imagine that you are in the most comfortable position. You might might sitting on your favorite chair, standing in soft grass or sand, or laying on a comfortable couch. If you have an animal or animals that bring you joy, bring them into this picture too.

Take a few moments to really immerse yourself in this peaceful and beautiful scene. When you are fully there, do these three things; join you hands together, think of a color and a symbol. Now, associate in your mind that peaceful and beautiful scene with your clasped hands, your color and symbol.

By making this association, you have created an anchor. You can re-create the feelings you had in your ideal scene by using this anchor. This can be a very important tool in helping bring you into to a state of calm.

Hypnotherapy and hypnosis

With so many negative perceptions about hypnotherapy and hypnosis, it is a challenge to present information about it without some explanation. It is not supernatural nor it is not a magical form of mind control. Neither is it meant for sudden or dramatic cures of psychological or physical ailments, although that is possible. There are unethical uses of hypnosis, just like the practice of any other profession.

That said, hypnosis can be very helpful for anxiety. From the Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic:

Patients with mild anxiety often benefit from direct suggestions that they transfer the relaxation achieved in the hypnotic session into their waking lives. If not, they may be taught the "clenched fist" technique: Whenever they experience anxiety, they activate the therapist's suggestion to allow their tension to flow into a tightly clenched hand and then to empty it out as the hand is relaxed (Stanton, 1988). Patients with more severe anxiety may need brief daily periods of self-hypnosis in which they use calming imagery, such as a pleasant memory, a warm Jacuzzi bath, or waves rolling up on a lovely beach. (Smith, 1990)

Many current anxieties can be traced back to earlier traumas and hypnotherapy can be very effective in treating trauma. From that same Bulletin:

With a heightened sense of self-control rather than the passive helplessness that accompanies most trauma, the patient becomes able to tolerate the memories, to experience ideas and affects that may have been dissociated at the time, and to accept suggestions and interpretations regarding how the event was experienced and how it may have affected the patient's subsequent life. (Smith, 1990)

Conclusion

In the first part of this three part newsletter on anxiety and panic, I have sought to show the roots of these conditions and how they are maintained. In the second and third parts, I have sought to show how you can overcome them. As you can see, there are many techniques to manage and overcome anxiety and panic. You can do many of them independently or work with the aid of a counselor. But one thing is certain, they will only work for you if you apply them.

In closing, I would state that we all have power to make changes in our lives. Even if you are constrained by difficult circumstance, you always have the power to choose your attitude toward your circumstance. It is never hopeless. You are never hopeless.

If your boat remains tied to the docks by past traumas, you can work through those traumas, so that you might venture out and begin the journey that you were meant for. You can watch your life go by as a member of the audience or you can become the lead actor in your own life. It is up to you.

The future is an assumption, a hope and a wish. But is is never guaranteed. Knowing that, how long do you want to wait before attempting change? To quote Goethe:



Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin, boldness has genius, power and magic in it.

Begin it now.

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Recommended reading

NLP

[NLP: The New Technology of Achievement](#)

Comprehensive introduction to NLP

Breathing

[The Breathing Box: 4 Weeks To Healthy Breathing](#)

Written by Gay Hendrichs, a teacher and author on diaphragmatic breathing.

Meditation

[The Three Minute Meditator: Reduce Stress. Control Fear. Diminish Anger. In Almost No Time at All. Anywhere. Anytime.](#)

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An excellent introduction to meditation, with many techniques and ideas on how to start meditating.

[Wherever you go there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life.](#)

An highly readable book on meditation, with many inspiring stories woven in.

More information

If you would like more information, you can contact Michael Etts, LMSW, NBCCH

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About Mike

Mike Etts is a therapist who specializes in working with the after effects of trauma including anxiety, depression and insomnia.

Services

Anyone who has ever had to deal with weeds knows that it does no good to keep cutting off the tops. You have to get to the *root*. It's the same concept when you are dealing with psychological problems.

If you are ready to begin removing the legacy of trauma, if you are ready to start making anxiety, depression and insomnia a part of your past, then make a call and schedule a free consultation.

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