

West Side Spirit
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Overcoming Anxiety

Anxiety is an unpleasant sensation, both physically and emotionally, one which we all feel at least on occasion, and for some, far too often. There are many people for whom anxiety is a way of life, a constant companion, to the point of continual discomfort and pain, even incapacitation. The feelings it produces range from a tightness in the chest, jitteriness and a mild sense of being "out of synch," to heart palpitations and physical pain that can actually mimic a heart attack. It can be vague, a signal that something is wrong in our inner world, or a panic that makes us feel we are about to go crazy or even die. At its extreme we can experience a sense of unreality, nightmare and terror.

Freud considered anxiety a "signal" that something was awry in our inner psychic world, giving us a clue that some stress or strain needed attending to. Over time, a deeper understanding, based upon newer ideas about early parent-child relationships and how they affect the emotional growth of the child, has developed to make the problem of anxiety clearer.

When we feel anxious, we can sometimes explain the source. Indeed, anxiety can help us pinpoint what is wrong. This can be beneficial because we can then make changes that will improve our sense of well-being.

More often than not, however, we don't know the reason for our anxiety. Not only can't we "fix" the problem, but often we feel even more anxious because the reason is a mystery. Anxiety then no longer acts as a beneficial spur for improvement, but instead becomes chronic and limiting.

While some people can function well with anxiety, a price is paid when constant tension drains productive energy, and results in psychic pain. Very often anxiety is "free floating" - it doesn't appear to be focused or attached to any specific event or circumstance.

For others, the source of anxiety is clearer, as in the case of "performance anxiety." This occurs when some task must be performed, especially for the approval or disapproval of others. It may be a speech, artistic endeavor, a test, a paper, etc.

Sometimes the fear is so paralyzing that people begin to avoid such situations, becoming afraid of failure to the point where they no longer try to be successful. Or conversely, others may fear success in such situations and the possibility of being more successful than parents or siblings, even spouses or friends.

With anxiety comes the development of phobias: fear of learning home, heights, planes, insects, etc. In the case of more limited phobias, such as fear of snakes, there may be little limitation. In the case of more extensive fears, people have been known to never their leave home! Such phobias often fuel "panic attacks," deeply frightening episodes in which the individual is overcome with such fear that there is a sense of doom, of going crazy or even of dying. The physical symptoms are intense wild beating of the heart, dizziness, sweating and a feeling of the body dissolving and disappearing. The symptoms are so disturbing that people will do almost anything to avoid them, even

giving up normal living. Unfortunately they usually do not know that as unpleasant as the symptoms are, nothing dreadful actually does take place. Panic attacks do pass.

Anxiety can also take the form of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behavior. Lady Macbeth's constant handwashing is a prime example of compulsion. Thoughts and actions intrude and cause out-of-control behavior. If a person resists them, anxiety grows even greater until it is so unbearable, he or she "gives in" to them, only to feel relief initially and later remorse.

Often obsessive-compulsive disorders create not only unproductive lives but also true psychic agony. Addictions are examples of both obsession and compulsion. Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome ranks high on the list of anxiety disorders. Such anxiety is the result of past trauma, and may be either conscious or unconscious. A well-known example is the stress of soldiers who have been to war. Confusion, dysfunction and flashbacks can occur. Another kind of stress is now being recognized – that of having lived in seriously dysfunctional families as children – families in which there is physical violence, even incest, where the family systems have been enclosed and out-of-touch with the outer world, families in which one or more parents have been deeply emotionally disturbed. Often amnesia occurs, and memories do not return until adult life, flooding the individual with emotional pain and great anxiety.

Anxiety is also often associated with depression and other kinds of problems having to do with development of intimacy with others, consistency of sense of self, etc. While some anxiety in new situations and in becoming close to another person is natural, when it is excessive and constant, it almost always indicates that there lurks a deep sense of inadequacy within the self, with serious questions about our abilities to function in the world as whole, competent adults. Somehow we have not gotten sufficient and "good-enough" mothering and fathering to develop independent and competent selves. We remain "stuck" emotionally without the feeling we can handle the inner and outer pressures of life.

We do not have to spend a lifetime shaded to anxiety. We can grow emotionally into our adult bodies and develop adult perspective which make life more negotiable, productive and pleasurable.