

Anxiety: Definition and Strategies

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Definition and background

Anxiety is a feeling unlike any other signals of distress. Hunger or a bruise or other pain has a source we can do something about. Anxiety is a feeling something like...*dread or horror or loathing*, but it can't be managed like other pain.

Anxiety has primitive roots. Mother nature built it into us as a survival tool. We first feel it at about six months when mother leaves us for a long time or when a stranger holds us. In both cases, we do not understand that mother will be back or the stranger will not hurt us. We react to the event as though it might kill us. It triggers an awful feeling and violent, unthinking wriggles and screams. This is our built in fight, freeze, or flight impulse. Even when we grow up, any event that makes us feel unimportant, and meaningless will probably stir up that awful feeling, and though we learn to control our wriggles and screams, the primitive impulse to fight, freeze, or flight is there within us.

Because anxiety is such an awful feeling, as children we learn to look ahead and avoid events that might increase our anxiety. We want to defend against making a mistake, or any other action that might make us look stupid and unimportant. This often makes us dislike trying to figure out things we are not sure about. (see Thinking/Learning steps)

When something we are thinking increases anxiety, we stop thinking about it if we can.

When anxiety strikes, we feel unsafe. We want to escape from that awful feeling and we may disguise the anxiety as anger, or impatience, or cynicism, or we may withdraw from the person who is making us anxious.

Anxiety creates a toxic field.

When anxiety strikes, we are likely to stop making connections.

When anxiety strikes, we lose our emotional intelligence.

Purpose

- To learn strategies to reduce anxiety e.g. asking one's self questions, "Am I really in danger?" "Am I really meaningless or unimportant?"
- To learn to be tolerant of the normal anxiety that comes with making new connections, with trying out new ideas.

Process

1. Be Alert

Be aware every time the tension rises inside.

2. Tolerate the Anxiety

Use it as a signal there is a connecting/learning/inventing/improvising opportunity (illustrate with discontinuous pass-along story, and "tree-like-a tractor)

3. Practice your Strategies for Coping/self-soothing

Self-Focus—Use the self-awareness wheel to make sense of perceptions, emotions, thoughts and wishes to develop a plan of action.

Freeze-Frame—time out, heart focus, loving thought, then plan of action

Thought Field Therapy—use Callahan anxiety reducing techniques.

Go into a *Play* mode—develop a mutual signal that makes the field safe for speculative risking

Guided imagery—take yourself on an excursion.

Deep breathing

Talk about the problem with an empathic listener

Invent other self-soothing practices