

Dealing With Anxiety

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By Michael Lewin

"A postulant who has come to the end of his rope and wants to leave, but who has been dissuaded (not by me), stands in the novitiate library leafing through a book called: Relax and Live. Sooner or later it comes to that."

Thomas Merton

We all suffer from anxiety at times. Even if we join the monastic life it will no doubt follow us there. In fact I do not think there is a way of eliminating it completely, simply because it is a product of life, a reality we all have to face. No matter how well we try to live, how well we try to stick to a simple living agenda that theoretically minimizes 'upsets, ' life will always throw up issues and problems that seem to set us back in our tracks. And when this happens we tend to react negatively and understandably get distraught and anxious because life is upsetting our game plan. Unfortunately when we enter this territory it affects not only our mental wellbeing but also our physical wellbeing as well. Tension arousal may very well kick in but often we are unable to do anything about it because at a lower, possibly unconscious/semi-conscious level we are still clinging to feelings of ' injustice,' and ' outrage ' that prevent us from moving away from it. Our anxiety – with its preoccupation with imaginative projections – pushes us into a future which isn't here yet, which hasn't been worked out yet, and bypasses the present moment which is all there really is!

Anxiety is largely a product of feeling we are losing control

but in truth we are not in control and we do need to recognize this! As John Lennon once remarked: "Life is what happens to you whilst you're making other plans." Our lives contain many surprises and many disappointments all of which are unknown to us in this deep mystery we call life.

Anxiety is a potentially damaging force that we must recognize and combat if we are to go forward in life. In its extreme form it can literally devastate our lives so we must acknowledge its power and adopt coping strategies to deal with it. But what exactly are these coping strategies?

One, we need to undertake a full mental appraisal / inventory to try and find out exactly what we are feeling worried about? How long has it been going on? What is it that prevents us from letting go and relaxing? These may seem simple questions but how often do we evade or ignore them? How often do we continue in self-destruct, self-sabotaging behaviour that gets us nowhere? Monitoring our feelings, trying to understand them rationally is the first part of our journey to recovery. Start writing up a journal to keep track of your progress this will reinforce your commitment.

Two, we need to evaluate its importance. Anxiety is a facet of existence that we cannot deny. In fact, in its early stages, it could be seen as an important warning signal, there to protect us – a marker to alert us to possible imminent danger. So, rigorous appraisal is the order of the day.

Three, every morning you wake up the first thought must be: I have an arrangement, an agreement, a pact with myself to be in the world in a new way – relaxed, mindful and calm. Just spend a few minutes preoccupied with this thought, reflect on it deeply then act on it, create periods during the day to relax both physically and mentally. At regular periods take deep breathes and stay mindfully with them, experience the calm and relaxation they bring – deep regular full healing breaths, letting go of any negative thoughts and feelings and relaxing

peacefully in the moment. If need be place markers down to remind you to come back to this space – diary notes, prompt cards, cell phone alerts, whatever works for you. Look upon them as calls to relax, invitations to unwind. By slowing everything down to an unhurried pace a new self will eventually emerge. Regularly reinforced, this practice will help you to cultivate a good habit that will replace a bad habit.

Four, commit to a regular meditation practice. Just focus in on the breath and stay with its rhythms. When distracting thoughts surface, as they inevitably do, just acknowledge them and let them go. Soon a quiet, calming space will emerge and with practice you can enlarge this, deepen it for your wellbeing. Attending a meditation class could be of value here because you will be exposed to a group situation where you can share your various experiences.

Five, lie down in a quiet private space and engage with slow methodical body scans, listening and apologize to the hurt parts that have suffered in time of stress. Take twenty minutes or so to complete the process. Then when you ‘ re-enter ‘ your normal mode of operation slow everything down, avoid at all cost the quick paced activity that can plunge you back into over-burdened mode.

Six, I have always found that listening to suitable relaxing music can be very beneficial in the calming process. During the day and in the evening I regularly enjoy the pleasures it can bring. Sometimes something quite mysterious and quite magical happens and I open up to another world, I’m transported to another space that only music can take me to.

Seven, physical activities such as walking and cycling have been of enormous benefit to me. There has been many occasions, especially when walking in the countryside when I have shifted myself out of almost ‘ doom ‘ laden, negative thoughts and

found a deeper perspective, a finer balance that welcomed me back to peace and calm. Additionally, there have been occasions when some form of insight have arisen and I was able to see some kind of ' solution' to my worrying problem.

Eight, in the evening undertake a final assessment to see how successful you were in your new practice, your new life. Often it's the last thing we want to engage with because busy activity – mental or physical – always seems to take precedence but actually it should be the other way around, mindfulness practice first then our daily ' busyness ' which might actually be improved with a calming mindfulness perspective in place.

CONCLUSION

In our quest to get better we must do everything we can to improve and alleviate our condition. This might seem obvious and yet how many of us can fool ourselves here by pulling back, however slightly, from completing our healing work? We do need to recognize self-defeating, self-sabotaging instincts within us which we harbour and address them fully if we are to make a complete recovery.

Anxiety comes in all different shapes and sizes but two distinctions could be made to give us deeper understanding around this issue. One, we could view anxiety attacks as regular or irregular. Two, as chronic or non-chronic. Then we can fix our feelings approximately on these scales. If we are affected on a regular basis, and on the chronic end of the scale, then we do need to seek professional help or talk it over, in the first instance, in confidence with caring friends or family. If the anxiety felt is irregular and on the non-chronic end of the scale then welcome to life, with all its inevitable trials and tribulations – the adventure we all participate in.

Quick Negative Reactions (QNR). Our thoughts and responses (especially the negative type) are ridiculously fast, they click in rapidly, often below the radar screen of consciousness, without us even noticing yet we often accept them as 'facts' and regularly, in automatic fashion, act on them. As usual awareness is the answer – being able to slow things down, evaluate and discriminate thus putting us in a good position to make the right choices.

Anxiety is really just a projection, an imagined outcome not necessarily a real one!

All this energy discharge for something that may never happen, never materialize does seem an enormous waste especially when we allow it to dominate our thinking. Why can't we just be quiet, still, at peace with ourselves – not overly concerned about busy activity? Letting things be, not over-reacting, over-doing, aware of not pressing the start button of over-busy activity that can get us into trouble.

Anxiety, stress and worry, we must constantly remind ourselves, are non-essential items in our lives. They are just distortion of reality, fear based modes of operating in the world that get us nowhere, trying to convince us that some form of 'anxiousness,' even 'neuroticism' should be our normal modus operandi when it isn't.

These days I always try not to allow anxiety to bite into me, I make a strong resolve, a full commitment to try and stay in the present and summon up the strength, that we all have, to say Que Sera Sera, a stoic response that will bring the very best out of us.

"To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one's self.... And to venture in the highest is precisely to be conscious of one's self."

Soren Kierkegaard

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