

Anxiety: friend or foe?

Volume 2 Issue 1 - 2015

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Opinion

Lately I've been noticing a theme in which many people suffering from anxiety do not really want to let it go. You may ask why anyone would want to continue dealing with the litany of distressing thoughts and panic-like sensations in their bodies for a moment longer than necessary. Well the truth is that sometimes worry convinces people that it is helpful. To understand why anxiety is so challenging to let go, it may be useful to explore possible causes of its existence.

Anxiety often develops based on distress. For example, experiencing a car accident or a break-in likely will cause someone to fear recurrence. Someone who was in an abusive relationship might worry about being attacked again. This is our way of being emotionally prepared to handle what we might not have been previously. Anxiety can also be passed down from generations. Having an anxious parent predisposes you to develop this issue. Additionally, we all have a "negativity bias" as a means of protection and survival. When our brains were being formed back in the beginnings of human evolution, they developed in such a way as to be cued into possible risks. We needed to be prepared and possibly hyper vigilant about any dangers in our way. Our current biology still works this way, although we are unlikely to find a tiger waiting to pounce on us or any of the other dangers from primitive times. Of course, we still deal with dangerous situations frequently (some more than others). Yet it is likely that our ways of worrying won't prevent bad things from happening.

Anxiety is a completely natural response to suffering (especially due to our brain chemistry), and it can seem very useful. Anxiety may cause us to think we're prepared to handle stressful situations. We may feel more at-ease by constant alertness. In some case, being on guard is necessary for survival. For example, a woman in a violent relationship may need to be alert to any signs of potential violence from her partner. Anxiety may help people to avoid other emotions. To be anxious takes an extremely high amount of energy. Without expending that energy and attention on fears, other feelings may arise. So for some people, anxiety helps with emotional survival when dealing with other feelings would be more challenging or unsafe. Worry can become part of our identities and imagining ourselves without it can be uncomfortable and confusing. It may help guide our decisions and expectations, and many other aspects of life.

Yet generally, worry does not help in the long-term and in most situations it is unnecessary. I don't have to tell you that worry is unpleasant and makes life more challenging. That being said, it is a difficult and gradual process to reduce anxiety. Beating yourself up

about your worry is never helpful! Most people have worried about something at some point in their lives. And as I said earlier, in certain situations being on-guard may have been necessary. So my first suggestion is to honor yourself for figuring out how to get through the tough situations you've had to deal with in the past. Notice any benefits to your worry and thank it for the ways in which it has been useful.

Next, imagine what your life would be like without your anxiety. That may be a completely scary thought, and if so, you are not alone. It might not be the time to let it go. If you are not sure about your readiness to let it go, try thinking about the ways in which anxiety is bringing you down. Imagine how you might feel if anxiety were replaced with taking precautions to keep yourself safe. Taking precautions in case of dangers like car accidents and break-ins can be very useful. Being aware of possible signs of unhealthy relationships can help you to make better decisions for yourself. But constantly worrying about these types of issues can cause you to make poor choices like avoiding situations all-together. Anxiety can severely limit one's life, whereas reflecting and taking precautions will likely get more useful results. Chances are that even if you decide you're ready to work on letting go of anxiety, it may try to fight for its presence in all sorts of ways. Therefore, finding a therapist and/or other supportive people, and engaging in anxiety-reducing techniques makes the challenge more possible. There are many ways to reduce anxiety, but first you need to be willing to say goodbye to an old frenemy

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding

None.