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Don't Fight the Fear!

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Anxiety is the most common psychological problem for which people seek help. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), "An estimated 19.1% of U.S. adults had any anxiety disorder in the past year. An "anxiety disorder" can include panic attacks, social phobia, agoraphobia, obsessive compulsive disorder, etc. Millions more wrestle with more anxiety than they would like to have, with or without a label.

What makes anxiety such a common problem?

People have a natural tendency to fight their anxiety, and that makes it worse. Millions of people, including many capable and successful people, experience anxiety which doesn't seem to respond to their efforts to calm themselves. These people often find that, the harder they try, the worse it gets.

The kinds of solutions that work with "real world" problems usually don't work with anxiety. They often make it worse.

Consider the following imaginary scenario (for which I have adapted and embellished upon an idea originally published in [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#), by Steven Hayes, Kirk Strosahl, and Kelly Wilson.)

A man comes into my office, a man who I know to be someone who does what he says. He has a gun, and he points it at me and says "Dave, I want you to move all the furniture from this office out into the waiting room, or else I'm going to shoot you."

What's the outcome? I move the furniture into the waiting room, and I live.

The same man comes back to my office a second time, with the same gun. He points it at me and says "Dave, I want you to sing the Star Spangled Banner - first verse will be enough - or else I'm going to shoot you."

What's the outcome? You guessed it. I sing the Star Spangled Banner, and all is well (except for those who had to hear me sing it.)

Now he comes back a third time, and he's got an assistant wheeling in a large mechanical apparatus. This time, he says "Dave, I'm going to hook you up to this lie detector. It's state-of-the-art equipment. It's infallible. It can detect any emotion you experience."

He hooks me up to the equipment and points his gun at me, and says "Now, relax. Or else I'm going to shoot you."

What's the outcome? That's right. I'm a goner.

Why is this so? Why can I succeed in moving the furniture, and singing the song, and yet fail so miserably at calming myself?

The reason is simple to state. **The rules that govern the "real world" are different from the rules that govern my internal world - meaning my thoughts, images, and emotions.**

In the real world, the harder I try, the more I get what I want. If I set my sight on a goal and persevere, I will probably get it, so long as I keep working at it.

But in my internal world, the harder I try, and the more I struggle, the more I get what I'm trying to avoid. This is one reason why so many people come to grief in trying to resolve their anxiety. They tell themselves "don't think about it"; they resist it; they try somehow to force themselves to feel better; they get angry at themselves; they feel shame and embarrassment about feeling anxious; they try to keep it a secret from others; and they try to medicate it away with alcohol, nicotine, and other substances. Unfortunately, these all make the anxiety worse.

When I was in high school, I had the misfortune to be chubby and uncoordinated. It made gym class a pretty miserable experience for me. After a while, I expected to do poorly, and I usually did.

One time, playing volleyball, the server on the other team identified me as an easy way to score points, and kept serving the ball in my direction, way over my head. I would

lunge up at the ball, barely manage to tip it with my fingertips, and the ball would sail out of bounds - another point against us.

That made me mad. Each time the ball came over, I'd try even harder. I'd leap up with all my might, and tip the ball out of bounds. Another point against us. My teammates were shouting at me, "Let it go!" I was too upset to comprehend what they were saying. I thought I had to stop that ball, no matter what. At one point, even the gym teacher yelled "Let it go!" That just made me madder. I tried harder, got more tipped balls, made more points for the other side.

It wasn't until several days later, when I was reviewing the volleyball rules for a written exam (that's how I passed gym, the written exams!) that I came to understand why they were yelling "Let it go!" If I had "let it go," the ball would have sailed out of bounds untouched. That would have been a good thing for my team, resulting in us getting the ball.

But, since I kept touching the ball, it meant a point for the other team. Frustrated, angry and embarrassed as I was, I didn't realize I'd be better off "letting it go." And so I made matters much worse by my efforts.

What does this mean for anxiety? Simply that we make life harder by resisting, and struggling against, anxiety. We do better when we accept it - when we allow ourselves to feel the anxiety and work with it, rather than against it. This is what Clare Weekes, refers to as "floating" through anxiety.

How could we work with it? How can we move from resisting to accepting?

The first major step is to become more aware, on a moment to moment basis, of the ways in which you resist and fight your anxiety. If you're like most people, you do this a lot more than you recognize. The biggest part of the job is to become aware of what you have been doing so automatically, without noticing. The best way to become aware is to develop the habit of observation.

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Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-eap.com.
Your feedback is greatly appreciated!



Don't Fight The Fear, Continued

I. Every hour, at the top of the hour during your waking day, take a moment to notice how you're holding your body, especially the muscles of your neck and shoulders. Notice where there is tension and tightness. Then sigh or exhale gently (don't force it!), letting the muscles of your upper body relax as you do this. Focus on simply going through these steps, without evaluating how well or poorly you're doing. Have you got 10 seconds? Do this now, before you read on.

Find a way to do this hourly, during your waking day, for two or three days. You might need something to remind you, some version of "tie a string around your finger", such as

switching jewelry from one hand to the other.

Once you get this habit established, you can add to it by practicing diaphragmatic (deep belly) breathing for a minute or two.

II. Pay attention to how you "talk" to yourself in your own thoughts for two days, and write down as many of the negative phrases and images as you can. Don't just dismiss them. It's important to first become aware of these thoughts, just like a dieter needs to first establish what he/she is actually eating each day.

Carry some 3x5 cards in your purse, briefcase or pocket so they'll be handy for

note taking. Watch particularly for these kind of thoughts:

The Fake Question - It sounds like a question, but you never actually answer it. It's an accusation, not a question! Such as "Why can't I stop this?" or "What's wrong with me?" or "Why can't I be like everybody else?"

The angry criticism - Such as "Dummy! Stupid! Jerk!" or "Wimp! Coward! Baby!"

The scary anticipation - Such as "What if..." (fill in any calamity here)

Continued below

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III. Imagine what it would be like to go through your day while every so often, someone came up behind you to say such things to you. A co-worker, for example, who periodically comes up to inquire "Why are you such a wimp?" or "What if you freeze up during that meeting tomorrow?"

You'd recognize that as a problem right away, right? But think about how much more frequent and persistent your own negative thinking can be. It's a far bigger problem than anything anybody else tells you!

IV. Once you have your list, think about how you talk to someone that you genuinely care about when he or she is anxious and upset. Write down some of those phrases and ideas.

V. Thereafter, when you notice yourself using some of the negative thoughts and images on yourself:

- A. Stop
- B. Relax your body and breathing
- C. Talk to yourself like you would talk to someone you really cared for.

Dr. Carbonell, a licensed psychologist, is the founder and director of the Anxiety Treatment Center. The Center is a small group of clinical psychologists who specialize in the treatment of anxiety problems. The Center has offices in Chicago and several nearby suburbs.

The information contained in this publication is not a substitute for consultation with healthcare professionals. Each individual's health concerns should be evaluated by a qualified professional.

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