

A Mindful Approach to Managing Anxiety

Whereas fear is a short-term response to imminent danger, anxiety is apprehension about events that might endanger us in the future. Anxiety intensifies as we invest more energy in trying to avoid something we fear. Anxiety becomes maladaptive when it is in response to a perceived danger that is not real; anxiety becomes a disorder when it interferes with a person's ability to function.

Anxiety is sustained – and sometimes intensified – by negative metacognitions (thinking about mental events). In other, our internal beliefs or thoughts about an anticipated future may create emotional or physiological responses that we experience as anxiety.

A basic assumption of the mindfulness paradigm is that we compound our suffering when we try to avoid it. Therefore, a mindfulness approach encourages a gradual shift in your *relationship* to anxiety from fearful avoidance to tolerance to friendship. We embrace non-avoidance and non-entanglement until the fear subsides.

Mindfulness encourages participant observation without evaluation or judgment (e.g., “good” or “bad”; “right” or “wrong”) of the content of an object, event, thought, or feeling. Mindful awareness simply says “yes” to experience. It is *awareness of*, rather than *thinking about*, mental events.

Mindfulness requires a willingness to tolerate a focus on whatever is occurring the present moment. Mindfulness requires a willingness to re-direct the focus of your attention back to the present moment when you find yourself wandering into anticipation of what will happen in the future.

A mindfulness-based approach to dealing with anxiety involves becoming less identified with your thoughts: simply noticing an event, as it is occurring, with acceptance. The process of being aware, moment to moment, dismantles the fear by distinguishing the raw facts of experience from the frightening conclusions we draw shortly thereafter.

The following insights are useful to redirect the focus of your attention back to the present moment and to guide you towards increased mindfulness when you experience anxiety or panic:

1. Anxiety is a fact of life. It protects us from danger. It is built into the nervous system and is unavoidable.
2. We cannot control precisely when, where, and what we feel or think. Mental events occur in the brain, often before we are conscious of them.
3. Trying to control or avoid our experience is futile; often, this only makes things worse.
4. Sometimes our body triggers a physiological reaction that is grounded in habit. We may not be mindful in evaluating whether we are experiencing a “false alarm.” We thereby risk suffering a terrifying illusion.
5. Panic is never permanent. It has a beginning, middle, and an end.
6. Treatment is the gradual process of redirecting attention toward the fear, exploring it in detail as it arises, and befriending it.
7. Our progress is measured not by how seldom we panic, but by our abilities to respond to and manage our anxiety.
8. Cure entails becoming disillusioned with our fears. We are able to accept anxiety as ordinary mental events occurring in the brain.

There are 3 important principles to remember as you evaluate your progress in the mindful management of anxiety:

1. Progress is measured by how much you accept anxiety, not by how seldom you panic.
2. Experiencing anxiety is not a setback; fighting anxiety is a setback.
3. Progress is measured by how much anxiety you can tolerate allowing into your life, not by how seldom you panic.

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