



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

thriving with anxiety

Are you an anxious person? Are most of your thoughts worried thoughts like these: *Will I be on time? Will I do a good job? Am I smart enough? Am I too smart? Do people like me? Is there something wrong with me? My family? My dog? (of course it must be cancer). Am I losing my memory? Is my hair falling out? Is so and so mad at me? Did I turn off the stove? Lock the door? Put the cat out? Were there germs on that thing I touched, do I need to wash my hands? My children's hands? Are the people I care about safe? Being careful?*

Exhausting, isn't it, just to read even a small number of the possible things we worry about? True confession: I am an anxious person. It often comes with being a sensitive person. Sensitive people make good therapists—also good writers, artists, and musicians—and of course anxious people can be great at anything they do.

The problem isn't anxiety. Anxiety is just a part of being human. At a deep level, anxiety can alert us to a potential real threat. The problem comes when anxiety begins to take over our lives and run us, rather than being just one small part of our total experience. One way to think about whether or not your anxiety is excessive is to review the amount of anxiety/fear you experience in relationship to the number of bad things that you worry about that actually happen.

If the number of actual bad things that have happened is high or severe, then anxiety is probably a symptom of trauma and the trauma warrants treatment.

If, in fact, you are having difficulty being successful at work, with friends, in life in general, then the solution is to get some help with the skills you need. Anxiety doesn't help solve problems; getting the necessary skills and experience solves problems.

If the number of actual bad things that has happened is small, then think about the amount of your precious life energy and limited time on this earth that you are wasting feeling anxious. You may decide to do something about it.

The first step is to really recognize that anxiety is a problem. One might think this would be obvious and easy, but for some people it is quite difficult. As humans we are all somewhat superstitious and anxiety knows how to make full use of that feeling/thought. Many people fear that if they are not worrying about something that will make it more likely for the actual bad thing to happen. Somehow worrying about

things gives us a false feeling of control and of course most of us want to be in control. Bad things do happen in this life, but anxiety doesn't prevent them. Taking appropriate steps to be reasonably safe without withdrawing from life creates real safety. So recognizing that anxiety is the problem is a major first step.

Anxiety must be seen for what it is: a thought often accompanied by a feeling. The thought is the worried thought; the feeling may be tightness in the pit of our stomach, a pain in our neck or some other physical distress. We have thousands of thoughts a day, they fly by us unless we get stuck on them and feed them with other thoughts/memories to support and validate them.

REDUCING ANXIETY

If you want, try this simple mindfulness exercise: Get into a comfortable position, take a few deep breaths and simply watch your thoughts as if you were watching clouds pass by in the sky. Try not to feed any particular thought by focusing on it or bringing in other thoughts to support it and validate it. Just observe the thought. The first time I tried this I was angry at someone and initially lots of angry thoughts passed by—angry storm clouds. However within a short time they passed and other thoughts passed through and by the end I was remembering good things about the person with whom I had been angry and the anger was gone.

There are lots of ways to get help reducing anxiety: therapy, meditation, guided imagery, self-help books and workbooks, and of course therapy. If you suffer from anxiety, get help, life can be easier and far less stressful.

We cannot, nor would we want to get rid of all anxiety. Some of us will always have more anxious thoughts than others, but we do not have to be ruled by them. In July, I jumped out of a plane in a tandem parachute jump. As I stood at the open door of the plane and looked out at the ground, 15,000 feet below, I had the fleeting thought "What have I done?" But we jumped! It was never anything I had longed to do, it was a spur of the minute decision to go with three people I loved and I knew it was probably the only time in my life this opportunity would occur. So I took it. Don't let anxiety hold you back from living life fully, the way your heart desires. *kkk*

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