



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

thriving with anxiety

Are you an anxious person? Are most of your thoughts worried thoughts, such as: *Will I be on time? Will I do a good job? Am I smart enough? Do people like me? Is there something wrong with me? My family? My dog? Am I losing my memory? Is my hair falling out? Did I turn off the stove? Lock the door? Put the cat out?*

It is exhausting to read just 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—can be great at anything they do.

The problem isn't anxiety. Anxiety is just a part of being human and 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 level is excessive is to review the amount of anxiety/fear you experience in relationship to the number of *actual* bad things that happen.

- If the number of *actual* bad things that have happened to you 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 anxiety might provide the motivation to get the skills you need to be successful.
- If the number of *actual* bad things that has happened is small, then you may be spending far too much of your precious life energy and limited time on this earth worrying. You may decide to get some help decreasing your anxiety level.


The first step is to really recognize that anxiety is a problem. As humans we can be superstitious. 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, rather we need to take appropriate steps to be reasonably safe.

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

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—like angry storm clouds. However within a short time other thoughts passed through and by the end of a few minutes 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—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 be more anxious than others, but we do not have to be controlled by it.

A few years ago as I stood at the open door of an airplane and looked out at the ground, 15,000 feet below, I was terrified and thought "What have I done?" I had taken advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do a tandem parachute jump with three people I loved. We jumped. I have to say it wasn't a peak experience, but to this day I am proud of myself for not letting anxiety prevent me from doing it! It is always good to be able to choose how we live. 

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