

Anxiety

Anxiety stems from the unique outcome of your responses in life and biology. Anxiety is designed to help you work out and address what danger you face. When we latch onto anxious thoughts when a danger is past, or we perceive that the dangerous thing never leaves, circling worry can find danger everywhere.

The brain is vital in anxiety. Your brain has Neurons that “wire” together to allow brain communication. To communicate, Neurotransmitters move across tiny gaps between the neurons. When the neurotransmitters are interrupted or out of balance you have problems. For example, dopamine is a neurotransmitter that gives the signal “I feel good!” When it hits the “thinking part of the brain”, it helps you pay attention. Dopamine also gives you motivation to change and overcome.

“Neurons that fire together, wire together” – so as emotions, thoughts and physical sensations are experienced together, they are recorded in a connected way. *Emotions, thoughts and sensations can be recalled by stimulating just one of the three.* That is why a picture can tap into an old memory and make you feel nauseous, or experiencing pain that is similar to a past accident makes you panic.

As I have alluded to, *the past organizing the present can be a big problem.* It is like seeing through a filter. As a memory is evoked, the *new* thing is seen in the “light” of the *old*. It is easy then to find danger around a safe corner.

Your brain needs help cooling off. The neurotransmitter influx into parts of the brain make a big deal out of nothing—*and it truly feels like a big deal!* The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is your powerhouse that allows you to tell automatically activated parts of the brain to “Stop”. Changing the “filters” we use to see all of life helps to calm anxiety. Just like recovering from an illness takes sleep, food and reduced stress, the brain needs the right balance of care. *You can affect the levels of neurotransmitters by your actions, thoughts, emotional regulation and medication.* You can work with your “filters” by recognizing them and adapting.

The nervous system plays a big part in how you manage these things. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated to help you calm down and restores balance in the body. *Meditation and purposeful relaxation are prime examples of how the parasympathetic nervous system can work for you!* You can harness the parasympathetic nervous system to calm you down. As your brain re-wires and calms, you can step sideways from your normal “filters” and build new adaptive ones.

The sympathetic nervous system gets you ready for action and moves you into the fight, flight or freeze responses. *Stress makes this system work overtime leaving you out of balance and exhausted.* Unrelenting stress can leave you exhausted and anxious.

A couple of other important areas of the brain are the *hippocampus* that codes memories for you and may have too many neurons that respond to stress. The *amygdala*, which operates as your “importance meter”, prefers noticing scary emotions, rather than good, and sets off a stress response. It learns the scary things and tries to keep you safe by finding “triggers” to cue anxiety.

If the amygdala is hyperactive then you are always waiting for the next problem. The *anterior cingulated gyrus (ACG)*, takes information from all these other brain parts and puts them together to present to the PFC. If the ACG is overloaded and depleted of neurotransmitters you will see worry, rumination on negative thoughts and inflexibility in trying new options. The PFC can be used to let the ACG take a break.

Important takeaways

- All of the concerns mentioned above can be addressed
- Building positive brain circuitry helps to balance the brain and offset anxious thoughts, which in-turn helps regulate emotions and stress
- Anxiety is regularly triggered by cues in the environment that fit with what your brain has learnt is scary or dangerous
- You can adjust how you respond to triggers and manage your response, and it will take persistent hard work

How Can Counseling Help Me?

Naming and Separating the Anxiety

You will gain a measure of control over anxiety by saying, “This is my brain doing this. It is not *me*, and I can control it”. You can learn how the brain is implicated in anxiety and the power you possess in your thinking brain – the PFC.

Common Processing Mistakes

As we interact with the world our “filters” cause us to respond in fairly rigid patterns. We all tend to interpret situations in unhelpful or inaccurate ways that can leave us dealing with strong emotions. The triggers and cues our brain finds can be rewritten. One example is “*all-or-nothing thinking*”, where we might be totally bad, or the best thing since sliced bread. Neither of those is likely very true. In counseling we can identify these and work to change them.

The Big Three! Sleep, Eat, Exercise

Research attests to the importance of good *sleep*, *diet* and *exercise*. All three affect the neurochemical balance of the brain, regulating dopamine, cortisol and more. Sleep is very important for encoding new memories, which is where our “filters” are changed and we internalize a new way of seeing things. Diet is linked to our emotional responses and ability to regulate our actions throughout the day. Exercise is a key part of stress reduction and natural dopamine production. Just getting on top of these three can significantly improve your quality of life.

Self Regulation and Anxiety Busting Skills

Using skills, you can manage how you would *like to react* to triggers. You can change the power anxiety has over you. There are many effective strategies that you can use to combat anxiety. However, it is important to learn how to soothe yourself, and prepare to use these skills. Counseling will help you to do that and analyze the anxiety patterns that you struggle with.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

Relationships can be hard, especially when people are seen as dangerous, scary or judging. *We learn how to relate to others from an early age and tend to stick with some patterns that have proved helpful to us. They might not be working effectively now though and be a part of our anxiety.* There are ways to readjust our interpersonal reactions, stand-up for ourselves, consider others, verbalize our needs and be heard. Through these things, your susceptibility to anxiety will decrease. Furthermore, we could all use help to slow down and asses how we manage the difficult relationships and situations we face on a regular basis.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a key that unlocks our ability to attend to most of the things I have already mentioned. Anxiety keeps us ruminating, distracted or too tired to think. We can work on our ability to pay attention to what we want and need. As we do this you are more able to regulate emotions, calm yourself, identify processing errors and make effective relational choices. Practicing mindfulness shapes your brains neuropathways and allows you to live in the present moment—the only moment you can impact and enjoy.

Medication

Sometimes medication is a very helpful adjunct to counseling. It can help stabilize the neurochemistry of our brains to allow us to think more clearly and concentrate.

You may ask, “How do I know if medication would be helpful or appropriate?” Saying “Yes” to some of the following questions is usually a good indicator that medication would be helpful.

1. Are you having panic attacks a few times a week or more?
2. Are you able to push aside ruminating worry when you have something important to concentrate on but find yourself worrying again the minute you have nothing to focus on?
3. Do you feel sick to your stomach with dread much of the time and find it interferes with eating and sleeping?
4. Do you immediately flush, have shaky legs, a quivering voice, and a palpitating heart even at the thought that someone might watch you leave a theater, watch you speak up, or observe you ordering food?
5. Do you feel so terrified of attending a party or being in a busy place you won't go?