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Understanding GAD, Panic Disorder, Social Phobia, OCD and PTSD

The Deconstructing Anxiety Model

Presented by

Todd Pressman, Ph.D.

Interesting (But Disturbing) Anxiety Statistics

According to the National Institute of Mental Health:

- Anxiety is the most prevalent psychiatric disorder in the U.S.; 18% have a diagnosed anxiety disorder.

- We are the most anxious nation in the world.

- More than $300 billion are lost every year in medical bills and lost productivity related to stress.

- In a seven year period, our spending on anti-anxiety medications has more than doubled.

Interesting (But Disturbing) Anxiety Statistics

Studies show that people living in Nigeria are approximately 5 times less anxious than Americans, but when they emigrate to the U.S., they become equally anxious.

The average high school student today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the 1950's!

Interesting (But Disturbing) Anxiety Statistics

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Incidence of GAD in the US adult population (in a given year)--between 2 and 3.1% (6.8 million people). Incidence of GAD globally--between 4% and 5.7%..

Women twice as likely to suffer from it as men. Most common age range for GAD to appear is 45-59 years. Numbers decline after age 60.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, only 43.2% of GAD sufferers are receiving treatment.

Interesting (But Disturbing) Anxiety Statistics

Related Anxiety Disorders

Panic Disorder: Incidence in U.S.--2.7% of adults (approximately 6 million people). Women twice as likely to be affected as men

Social Anxiety Disorder: Incidence in U.S.--6.8% of adults (approximately 15 million people), typically starting around age 13. Equally common in men and women.

Specific Phobias: Incidence in U.S.--8.7% of adults (approximately 19 million people). Women twice as likely to be affected as men.

Interesting (But Disturbing) Anxiety Statistics

OCD: Incidence in U.S.--Approximately 1% of adults (2.2 million people). Average age of onset is 19; one-third of this group first experiencing symptoms in childhood.

PTSD: Incidence in U.S.--Approximately 3.5% of adults (7.7 million people). Women are more likely to be affected than men.

(OCD and PTSD were previously classified in the Anxiety Disorders section of the DSM 4, but were given their own category in DSM 5 and DSM 5-TR. For our purposes, however, these two will be included as anxiety disorders because of the model for diagnosing and treating that will be proposed).

Issues in DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Categories

One therapist's opinion

Generally avoid introducing diagnoses into the clinical conversation because:

1) Patient may feel stigmatized.

2) Therapist may be tempted to objectify the patient.

(Exception: when a diagnosis would be comforting to the patient (i.e. if patient would be comforted to know the therapist understands the problem, they are not alone, and established treatment protocols exist that can help.)

Issues in DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Categories

The "False Positive" Problem

Diagnosing someone who doesn't actually qualify for the diagnosis.

With increasing awareness, there is a serious risk of overdiagnosing.

Example: 20% of boys diagnosed with ADHD, nearly ¼ of women between 40-60 are on an anti-depressant.

Issues in DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Categories

Risk vs. Disorder

The right circumstances (with the right risk factors) for developing a disorder don't always lead to the disorder.

Example: Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder. Just because a loved one has died doesn't mean one will certainly develop this disorder.

Issues in DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Categories

Need for Context

Diagnostic categories don't always provide enough context to accurately describe one's experience.

Example: Emergency medical personel who are trained not to respond emotionally but may have a PTSD response nevertheless.

Issues in DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Categories

"Fuzzy boundaries"

Arbitrary divisions of human experience that don't fall neatly into categories.

Example: "Mild" PTSD as distinct from no PTSD. Easy for the clinician to diagnose it if the risk factors are there and client is having symptoms, but hard to distinguish whether the symptoms qualify as a true disorder or a "normal", temporary response to the situation.

Example: Does a person suddenly have a psychiatric disorder on the 6 month date, if that is the criterion for the disorder?

DSM 5-TR Diagnostic Criteria for GAD

GAD*: Excessive anxiety, more days than not, about a number of events or activities, associated with three or more of the following:

Restlessness, feeling keyed up or on edge.

Being easily fatigued.

Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank.

Irritability.

Muscle tension.

Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep).

*Definitions for this and the following diagnoses are abbreviated to focus on our subject. All criteria listed here are for adults. For full diagnostic criteria, see DSM 5-TR).

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders

GAD is being treated here as a non-specific anxiety, i.e. anxiety that has not "latched on" to a particular object or situation. It lives more as a constant, diffuse anxiety in the background (cf. Horney's "basic anxiety"). The other anxiety disorders come to the foreground in response to specific conditions. Therefore, we may understand them as manifestations of this basic anxiety in specific settings.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders—Panic Disorder

Panic Disorder: Recurrent, unexpected panic attacks, defined as abrupt feelings of intense fear or discomfort, with at least four of the following symptoms: Palpitations, Abnormal sweating, Trembling or shaking, Shortness of breath or feeling smothered, Feelings of choking, Chest pain or discomfort, Nausea or abdominal pain, Dizziness or faintness, Chills or hot flashes, Numbness or tingling sensations, Derealization (feelings of unreality) or depersonalization (feeling detached from his or her self), Fear of losing control or "going crazy", Fear of death.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders—Panic Disorder

The characteristics of a panic attack are similar to GAD symptoms. The distinction is mostly a matter of intensity and concentration (i.e. a panic attack is more intense and concentrated in time, whereas GAD is more in the background, less intense and more enduring over time). Panic, like GAD, can be non-specific, not attached to a particular situation or object.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders—Social Anxiety Disorder

Social Anxiety Disorder: Fear or anxiety specific to social settings, in which a person feels noticed, observed, or scrutinized. Typically the individual will fear that they will display their anxiety and experience social rejection. Social interactions are either avoided, or painfully and reluctantly endured.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders—Social Anxiety Disorder

Definition of Social Anxiety Disorder focuses on the trigger (social situations) but doesn't further describe the symptoms. Symptoms are "fear and anxiety". Therefore, we may assume Social Anxiety Disorder creates similar symptoms to GAD but only in social situations.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders—Specific Phobia

Specific Phobia: A deep and persistent fear of an object or situation, resulting in symptoms of anxiety. Symptoms may also arise from anticipating the presence of the stimulus. An individual displaying symptoms of anxiety may be experiencing increased heart rate (palpitations), dizziness or unsteadiness, nausea, sweating, shaking or trembling, upset stomach, breathlessness.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders: Specific Phobia

The criteria described in this definition of Specific Phobia are more focused on physical symptoms (as if it's more about immediate fear), but the definition says it can create anxiety as well as fear, and that it can be in anticipation of a future exposure (again, anxiety). Therefore, we may say Specific Phobia is analogous to GAD in the context of exposure to the feared object or situation.

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders--OCD

OCD: Obsessions and/or compulsions (rituals) which result in emotional distress.

Obsessions are defined as "Recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images that are intrusive and cause marked anxiety or distress; but are not just excessive worries about real-life problems.

Compulsions are defined as "Repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession; the behaviors or mental acts are directed at preventing or reducing distress or a dreaded event or situation."

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders--OCD

Again, this definition does not describe anxiety symptoms distinct from GAD. Therefore, we may assume that OCD produces similar anxiety symptoms as GAD, but manifests behaviorally as obsessive thoughts and compulsive actions (with thoughts being considered, again, a type of action).

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders--PTSD

PTSD symptoms may include nightmares, flashbacks, sleep disturbance, mood disorders, attention deficit problems, suicidal ideation, avoidance, and hyper-arousal in response to trauma-related stimuli. Hyper-arousal may include an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, hyperventilating, mood swings, fatigue, or insomnia when a memory of the event is triggered, internally or externally. One may experience the trauma directly or indirectly (witnessing another's trauma, hearing about the trauma of someone else, etc.).

Relationship Between GAD and Other Anxiety Disorders--PTSD

This definition is comprehensive, including psychological and physiological symptoms. Once again, these symptoms are very similar to those of GAD, but only in response to an experienced or witnessed trauma. In other words, it is anxiety that may have been considered "generalized" if it were not for the fact that it arises in response to a specific trigger (the traumatic event), and the anxiety is focused on that trigger.

The Anxiety Problem

The meta-analyses show that our best treatments for GAD are only achieving about a 50% success rate, and only about 45% as an average for related anxiety disorders.

What are we missing?!

The Anxiety Problem

According to our model, we must first conduct a thorough deconstruction of the mechanics of anxiety.

This yields the necessary *insight* that suggests the appropriate corrective *action* (applied with the right timing for the client's level of readiness).

When a therapeutic treatment fails to fully and permanently relieve anxiety symptoms, it is because it hasn't achieved a complete enough insight or taken the appropriate corrective action fully.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy: Designed primarily to achieve insight into the cause of the anxiety, which can sometimes be enough for anxiety relief if there is a decision to let go of resistance (this is the action). Otherwise, these approaches can miss the mark if they don't prescribe corrective action. Patients can sometimes avoid necessary action by seeking continual insight.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Cognitive therapies: Purpose is to acknowledge (get insight into) the irrationality of certain thoughts. Resolution can come by disputing such thoughts and replacing with rational ones. However, if someone is highly anxious, it's very difficult to convince them that what they are terrified of isn't "true." Insight alone, in that case, is not enough. When CBT works, it is because it has created sufficient insight—for example, by labeling categories of irrational thinking such as "catastrophizing," "globalization," etc.—that one can mentally step aside from their investment and successfully replace the faulty cognition (this is the action).

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Exposure and response prevention: Exposure therapy focuses on taking corrective action by exposing oneself to the feared situation or object. As one does so, healing can come by discovering (gaining insight into) exactly what the fear is made of and habituating to it. That is, it provides insight into the fact that the feared object is not truly threatening.

Problems can occur if the exposures are not directed to the true source of conflict. Therefore, one needs the correct insight *before* designing the exposures. Without this, the therapist can create exposures to the wrong fears or to fears too superficial to effect real healing.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Gestalt Therapy: The abreactive (cathartic) aspect of Gestalt therapy involves discharging pent-up emotions from the body, for example by pounding out one's anger on a pillow or screaming out one's upset. Gestalt therapy doesn't help the client look for insight (believing it runs the risk of promoting intellectualization). However, if the discharge of emotions is complete enough, there will be a spontaneous insight into the fear at the root of the problem (in the form, e.g., of flashbacks, sudden corrective realizations, etc.). If the release is not complete, such insight won't be realized or at least won't be integrated for lasting change.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Existential/Humanistic and Transpersonal psychotherapies: Existential/Humanistic therapies, we may say, work to embrace and accept the human condition (and therefore the reality of fear). Transpersonal psychotherapies focus on that which transcends fear with a higher perspective. In existential psychotherapies, one transforms a feeling of vulnerability into a sense that one is powerful enough to stand up to and accept life on its own terms. In the case of transpersonal psychology, one alters their relationship with fear by identifying with a view of themselves as transcendent over it. In both, fear "dissolves" or gets swallowed up when pitted against these perspectives. But without a conscious insight into the fear that has been usurped, they can devolve into what is sometimes called a "spiritual bypass" (in the case of transpersonal psychology), or an existential despair about our human condition.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Short-term therapy: Usually focuses on resolving a specific problem or challenge. It is typically solution-oriented, emphasizes goal-setting, and gives the therapist a more active role. Because it concentrates on action (goal setting) over insight, the same concerns arise as previously mentioned.

Davenloo's Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy is an interesting exception: he looks for insight into the defenses hiding the anxious conflict, and then uses "pressure", "challenge" and "the head-on collision" (different forms of pushing the client) to help the client let go of their resistance. Of course, letting go of resistance is a form of action, but this approach doesn't specify exactly *how* one is to take that action. The therapist is merely to encourage the patient to let go.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction: Its primary method is to watch all thoughts arise and pass without "attaching" to them. By doing so, one breaks free of the investments that would have us identify with thoughts of fear. Again, this use of the mind constitutes the action component of the process. Combining insight and action, mindfulness can be a highly effective way to discover that fear as a whole is a mental construct, i.e. "not real". This, however, can take a very long time. We can speed up the journey and more readily ensure success by targeting the specific insight that gives rise to the anxiety we are struggling with. It's also possible that one's anxiety can use the process of mindfulness to avoid a more direct action, such as exposure, that would directly show the patient their fear is unfounded.

Comparison of Different Models for Treating Anxiety

Positive Psychology: Positive psychology studies our potentials so that we may reach for fulfillment and transform problems, including anxiety, in the process. It defines five keys to living a life of well-being: positive emotion, engagement with what one is doing, authentic relationships, meaning in life, and a sense of achievement. But insight into the fears that can block access to these potentials, and a prescription for what to do about them, is still required if we are to adequately address the suffering they can cause. Without this, positive psychology becomes more about motivation, which is rarely sufficient to resolve anxiety.

The "Deconstructing Anxiety" Model

There are two basic drives in the human experience: Fear and Fulfillment.

Our first impulse is for fulfillment (self-expression, realization of our high ideals, etc.). Fear immediately warns us about the dangers of pursuing fulfillment.

Fear and fulfillment are inversely proportional: The more fear we harbor, the more it limits our fulfillment and vice-versa.

This creates a fundamental conflict: we are both afraid to reach for fulfillment and at the same time will not be satisfied until we do. It is this conflict that is at the root of every struggle or problem. It is the fundamental source of suffering.

Three Doorways to Resolution

We must resolve this conflict with three "doorways": mind, body and spirit.*. This is another way of saying we need to combine insight and action, and to do so in the context of a more encompassing ("spiritual") perspective of fulfillment.

When successful, resolving anxiety through one of these doorways spontaneously releases it in the other two at the same time. Every psychotherapeutic approach involves one or more of these doorways.

A successful resolution of anxiety must resolve it in all three doorways.

*Spirituality is defined as that which transcends the limits of our usual, empirically-based understanding of who we are and what reality is, in a way that coheres (i.e. is not psychotic or psychologically disorganized) and is fully integrated (i.e. all parts of the understanding relate to each other in a logically consistent way), giving a sense of purpose and meaning to existence.

Fear's Survival Strategies

Fear convinces us it is the wisest strategy for securing fulfillment. It does this by distorting our experience while fooling us into believing its assessment is accurate.* Using various "deceptions and manipulations", it prevents us from considering alternative approaches to fulfillment. These are fear's "survival strategies".

   *By definition, fear requires a distortion of the truth: We are too afraid to consider the objective truth of things and insist on seeing what makes us feel safe. This is a vital insight for clients to begin accepting that their fear is not a valid way of perceiving.

The Five Deceptions of Fear

1. Fear keeps us from seeing that it is ubiquitous, a constant way of thinking and feeling when we are not wholly fulfilled.
2. Fear keeps us from realizing it is the true source of any problem.
3. Fear keeps us from looking directly at it to see it for what it is.
4. Fear keeps us from facing and moving through it when necessary.
5. Fear keeps us from looking at or facing the correct fear.

The Eight Manipulations of Fear

1. The hypnotizing effect of fear
2. The lie of fear
3. The demand of fear
4. The ruminative quality of fear
5. The impatience of fear
6. The future orientation of fear
7. The time distortion of fear
8. The self-generating quality of fear

The Basic Mechanism of Anxiety

Fear incites us to employ defenses to protect ourselves from that which we fear (what we will call "the fear-defense dynamic").

It is, more precisely, our defenses that create the conflict between fear and fulfillment. They put us at "war" with reality, defending against the way things are, constantly striving to manipulate the environment (or ourselves!) to conform to our wishes.

Unfortunately, reality often has a different agenda and conflict ensues. This, again, is the original cause of suffering.

The Basic Mechanism of Anxiety

Our defenses are designed to help us **avoid** the truth of a situation, as we buy into fear's assessment and try to protect ourselves from it.

By avoiding that which we are afraid of, we never test out whether it is truly a source of fear or not.

The anxious person is always, in some way, a person who has been enabled to avoid a full confrontation with the challenges of life, has not had a "complete experience" (Shinzen Young) of the feared situation.

Defenses Exacerbate Anxiety

All defenses backfire, exacerbating the anxiety they were meant to protect us from. They do this in two ways:

1) In exercising our defenses and avoiding reality, we reinforce the idea that there is something awful to defend against. By protecting ourselves, we tell ourselves "there must be something threatening causing me to respond this way".

2) Defenses require that we fixate on the threat, thereby filling our minds with anticipatory anxiety. Reviewing all possible scenarios of danger, our anxiety is heightened since we can never **guarantee** that our defenses will provide the security we seek.

The Master Key to Resolving Anxiety

If avoiding fear by defending against it creates our problems, then *facing fear* is the inevitable solution. Doing so gives the direct experience that nothing terrible happens – it is at least manageable and survivable. Often we find the whole notion of something threatening was made up as we move through it and nothing terrible results. "My life was filled with terrible misfortunes… most of which never happened" (DeMontaigne).

This is the essence of any exposure therapy. But again, without a thorough deconstruction of the mechanics of anxiety, we will not have the insight into which fear needs to be faced and what specific actions need to be taken.

The Birth of Fear

Each of us is born (unless there is a medical or other problem) relatively whole and complete, an approximation of the intra-uterine state, where we feel fused with the mother in an experience of undifferentiated "bliss" (Rank, Grof). All needs are met and nothing threatens our well-being (i.e. there is no cause for fear).

The Birth of Fear

We then meet fear for the first time (as, for example, when mother leaves the room). Being so thoroughly vulnerable, the impact of this moment is profound, life-changing. Having known only relative peace and fulfillment, our entire being orients toward the threat. The "tabula rasa" of our mind is powerfully imprinted upon, with no contrasting experience to mitigate the effect.

The Core Fear

We land, as a result, on a particular **core fear**—our fundamental interpretation of danger in the world, given by this first exposure to fear.

The core fear becomes the foundation for our basic understanding of life and how to perceive it, as we look through the lens of this interpretation, seeing the signs of it everywhere. The core fear understanding of life becomes the lens through which we learn to view any problem.

The Core Fear

Any problem met later in life has the core fear at its root.

The core fear is always formed in childhood (can be reinforced with additional interpretations during times of trauma later in life). This pivotal interpretation can happen at a single moment or as a gradual development in the midst of more generalized, non-specific threats in the environment.

The Core Fear

The five core fears (universal themes of loss):

1. Abandonment (loss of love)

2. Loss of Identity

3. Loss of Meaning

4. Loss of Purpose

5. Fear of Death

(This is why relationships are so important, a critical component of anxiety disorders and their cure: The fear of not expressing oneself, for example, is about expressing oneself to others; identity is based on who we are in relation to others, purpose is about how we make a difference with others, etc. Each of the anxiety disorders can be directly linked to a faulty perception about relationships).

The Chief Defense

This first contact with fear is intolerable: we begin a frantic search to restore our original innocence.

We land on a **chief defense** as the primary tool to protect ourselves from the core fear. We have discovered our power to make ourselves safe, return to our previous peaceful state, and exercise the control to make things the way we want.

The relief this brings is so extraordinary that it makes a powerful imprint upon us: we have learned both that the world can threaten our existence <u>and</u> that we have the ability as an autonomous being to overcome that threat.

The Chief Defense

But we have not truly restored our previous state of innocence because we realize the threat can come back. No longer do we live in a world where we can fully rest as before, oblivious to the potential for danger.

We conclude we must stand guard, ready to use our chief defense should the threat arise again. We vow to be prepared to use this defense at a moment's notice, never to be taken by surprise as we were before.

The chief defense strategy does work to alleviate the fear of the moment, but it comes at too great a cost. The potential threat is always looming, and we are conscripted to be prepared for battle.

The Chief Defense

Examples of chief defenses:

- Perfectionism
- People-pleasing
- Specialness
- Anger
- Depression

How to Make a Personality

Each of us builds our personality on the foundation of this fear-defense dynamic: we are ready to interpret every situation according to what we imagine is threatening about people and life (our core fear), and to protect ourselves from that threat with the chief defense.

A "healthy" personality checks these tendencies against reality, rather than avoiding such exposure. This shows the problem to be either manageable or non-existent. As a result, we learn to adjust to the uncertainty and changing nature of life.

An anxious personality is *hyper*vigilant and *extra* careful about the potential for threat, ever-ready to employ the chief defense, with the faulty notion that this will increase security.

Secondary Defenses

As we go through life, we develop secondary defenses, adaptations of the chief defense to the various circumstances we encounter in life.

These account for the complexity of what it is to be human, the multifaceted ways we interpret and respond to life, according to the blueprints of the core fear and chief defense.

Three phases in the development of personality

1) Even though we cannot remember it, the birth experience may evoke our first sense of a core fear, to which we respond with a limited repertoire of available defenses (again, see Rank and Grof).

2) In early childhood, we encounter the danger in the world and respond with primitive cognitions about what the threat is (our core fear) and how to handle it (our chief defense).

3) In adolescence, we make additional interpretations about the potential threats of the adult world. We make a "vow" to rely on one primary interpretation (core fear) and one primary chief defense. This locks in our personality for a lifetime.

Living in the Present Moment

Vowing to fixate on the core fear locks us into the past, as we fill our minds with what happened previously and project a future based on these same thoughts.

This past-future orientation creates an anxious sense of self, cut off from what we need here and now. We reinforce this idea of self as we use our defenses to get what we want (in the future) and avoid what we have learned to fear (in the past). Absorption in the moment, therefore, enables a 'selfless'' experience, free from fear.

When fully absorbed in the present moment – as mindfulness, for example, teaches – this anxious sense of self dissolves.

The Core Fear and Chief Defense in Different Anxiety Disorders

One's core fear and chief defense determine the type of anxiety disorder one may develop. GAD, for example, would involve a chief defense of general hypervigilance to a more global interpretation of how life can be threatening. Someone with Social Anxiety Disorder would likely have a core fear of abandonment (though not necessarily so) and would choose from a menu of chief defenses having to do with securing approval or safety from disapproval. And someone with Specific Phobia would necessarily have a core fear somehow related to the object or situation of the phobia, and build a chief defense around avoiding exposure to it.

Examples of Classic Defense Mechanisms and Their Relationship to Our Model

The variety of defense mechanisms in the literature represents different strategies for avoiding the truth of a situation and experiencing instead what one wants to (feels safe to) experience. In our model, these may or may not constitute one's chief defense, their lifelong, overarching strategy for handling the threats of life, but may instead signify secondary defenses, adaptations of one's chief defense to particular circumstances.
a) Denial b) Repression c) Regression d) Displacement e) Projection
f) Reaction formation g) Intellectualization h) Rationalization
i) Projective Identification j) Perfectionism

New Strategies for Finding and Resolving Fear

Exercise #1: "Digging for Gold": Finding the Core Fear

Write a problem at the top left of a page. Ask one of these three questions on the right side of the same line:

1. Why is that upsetting to you?

2. What are you afraid will happen next?

3. What are you afraid you will miss or lose?

Answer the question with a new problem, a new fear, one level closer to the core, written on the second line on the left of the page. Ask one of the three questions on the right and continue this process until you reach the core.

Tips:

• It doesn't matter what problem you start with, big or small, since all are manifestations of the core fear.

• Ask whichever of the three questions is most helpful and applicable to the problem written on the left.

• Make sure the answer states a problem, one that you can ask one of the three questions of.

• Watch out for the "repetitive loop" where you have actually just restated the same level of the problem in a different form. The task is to get to one level deeper, one level closer to the core fear.

• One's core fear is one of the five major universal themes of loss mentioned earlier: Abandonment (loss of love); Loss of Identity; Loss of Meaning; Loss of Purpose (the chance to express oneself); Fear of Death (including fear of sickness and pain)

• You'll recognize the core fear when you can't go any further, and you have an "aha" moment… understanding that you have found a secret at the root of things, often accompanied by powerful memories and emotions.

• (Note: Credit is given to David Burns for the phrasing of the question "Why is that upsetting to you?". However, please note this process is

Digging for Gold: Finding the Core Fear

The three questions:
1) Why is that upsetting to you?
2) What are your afraid will happen next?
3) What are you afraid you will miss or lose?

Problem: Question:

Answer (new problem):   Question:

Answer (new problem):   Question:

Answer (new problem):   Question:

Answer (new problem):   Question:

Answer (new problem):   Question:

Core fear:

Exercise #2: "Who are you really?": Uncovering the Chief Defense

Three approaches to revealing the chief defense:

1. Look at your response to the original core fear.

2. Look at your response to fears today (still organized around the response we had to the original fear – "the past lives on in the present").

3. Ask others how they would describe your personality—how you respond to threats, challenges, etc.

Analyzing Secondary Defenses

Look at other sorts of responses you have to problems, upsets or challenges today and trace their motivation to the chief defense. (Can look at how you handle problems listed in the "Digging for gold" exercise, how you respond to threats to money, health, approval, success, etc.).

The Key to Resolving Anxiety

The key to resolving anxiety is to "do the opposite" of what the chief defense would have us do.

This means either:

1. Moving in the opposite direction of how the defense would have us move – i.e. facing the fear and moving into it;

2. Standing still and refusing to respond to the fear at all;

3. Doing something completely unrelated to the fear, telling ourselves thereby that it has no power to force us to respond or even hold our attention.

Doing the Opposite

By "doing the opposite", we remove the defensive barrier to the fear, exposing ourselves to it, and discovering it doesn't have the power to carry out its threat. Either we find a manageable problem with readily available solutions, or realize the problem doesn't exist at all – that it was built on a leftover belief from earlier times, the result of distorted perceptions and confused learnings.

How to Resolve Anxiety

According to the Deconstructing Anxiety theory, when fully worked through in all three doorways, **we can expect a successful resolution of anxiety.** Having resolved it at its source, there would be nothing left to work through. We've bypassed the chief defense, the fundamental barrier to the core fear, thereby exposing the core fear and allowing ourselves to make contact with it. The core fear is brought out of the realm of fantasy and we gain a direct experience of what it actually can and cannot do.

Whenever a therapeutic intervention, no matter what the school of thought or approach, fails to resolve anxiety, it is because the chief defense and core fear have not been fully worked though in this way.

Exercise #3: Performing a Life Review

Create a flow chart connecting your first memory (or supposition) of the core fear and chief defense to the next major life decision you made. Understand how this decision was, in fact, the result of the core fear and chief defense—your best understanding of how to avoid danger and reach for fulfillment. Then see how that decision inevitably led to the next major life decision, again, in the attempt to avoid danger and recapture fulfillment along the lines of your core fear and chief defense. Continue to the present day.

The Big Three: Powerful New Strategies for "Doing the Opposite" and Resolving Anxiety

- The Alchemist": Asking "What happens next?"
- "The Witness": Enhanced Vipassana (Mindfulness) technique
- "The Warrior's Stance": Active "not doing"

Exercise #4: "The Alchemist": Asking "What Happens Next?"

With eyes closed, have the client picture the scene of some fear or problem and visualize it on a movie screen. As they watch the movie unfold, *without directing it in any way*, keep asking "What happens next?". Be sure they do not change the script and try to resolve the fear: this is a movie of what actually happens when their fear unfolds. Wait until the movie arrives at the scene of their core fear (Tip: Be careful of a tendency to invent a solution to or escape from the problem – this is a movie of their fear unfolding. Even visualizing their death can sometimes be used as an escape – unless that is their fear, in which case, ask them "what happens next?" as they go through that experience).

Exercise #4: "The Alchemist": Asking "What Happens Next?"

Once they are in the scene of their core fear, have them just sit there, no matter how long it takes, until there is a ***spontaneous*** shift. It's crucial that you or they don't force this shift but that it come spontaneously. Just keep asking them, as they sit in the scene of their core fear, "what happens next?", even if nothing is changing. You can guide them through this by having them imagine that they will be sitting in this scene with nothing changing for longer and longer time periods, allowing them to settle in to each period before moving on to the next.

Exercise #5: "The Witness": Enhanced Vipassana (Mindfulness) Technique

Have the client choose some problem that is troubling them, and with eyes closed, notice the **physical sensation** that accompanies the emotion of this situation. Going slowly, have them draw a mental outline around the sensation. Seeing the shape of this sensation clearly in their mind's eye, have them next describe to themselves the weight of it, then the texture of it, the color of it and, finally, the movement of it. The point is to become mindful of the defensive habit of pushing the against the sensation, and "do the opposite": entering into the sensation, removing the projected meaning that would label it "bad", visualizing the energy of the sensation as sparkling light, etc.

Exercise #5: "The Witness": Enhanced Vipassana (Mindfulness) Technique

Then, have them settle in ("perhaps for a long time") to being with the sensation, allowing it to float there quietly. Remind them repeatedly "It doesn't have to go away; it's okay for it to float there quietly". Have them visualize a hand gripping the sensation, causing the "squeeze" effect, and slowly loosening its grip. Also have them visualize the space around the sensation opening up more and more.

Finally, the walls, floor and ceiling drop away completely and they are free to place their attention anywhere they wish in the "cosmos within", the place where all their experiences are stored. The sensation floats quietly as one acceptable object of attention, but they are not required to place their attention there. Let them enjoy their newfound freedom to choose where they shine the spotlight of their awareness.

Exercise #6: "The Warrior's Stance": Active "not doing"

Anxiety compels us to act so as to avoid a feared consequence. Here, we "do the opposite" by taking a stand against this compulsion and resist moving at all.

Find some behavior the client engages in to avoid fear, e.g. making sure they complete a task on time. It's best if this can be performed in session but if not practical, set them up to do it on their own. As they perform the task, ask them to freeze in the middle of the action, leaving things incomplete. Tell them the voices of fear will start getting louder and more threatening but, with great determination, they are not to move. Remind them that these are distortions that can not hurt them and they want to set themselves free "no matter what". Remind them, too, that the fear will pass and they should persist.

Exercise #6: "The Warrior's Stance": Active "not doing"

Of course, it should not be a fear that is overwhelming for them but appropriately challenging. Eventually, the fear will die down. Have them continue to stand still *until they no longer have to complete the task*, realizing there is nothing terrible that will happen if they do not. At that point, they are in a position to determine whether finishing the task is, in fact, something that serves their higher purposes or not. If it is, it will be done with free choice, not compelled by fear.

It can be important as well to work with the client's compulsive thoughts, having them "do the opposite" by refusing to engage with these thoughts. For example, if they worry they will forget to do something should they fail to keep it in the front of their mind, have them practice distracting themselves and resist engagement with that thought.

Expect, again, a profound release of energy and excitement from the client as they discover the potential this exercise holds.

The Final Defense: Resisting Resistance

All chief defenses are different expressions of what we may call "the core defense", the effort to control reality so that we may set things up as we wish. The drive to exert control is behind everything we do when we are not fully settled in the moment. In each of the "big three" exercises, we have practiced the opposite of this, to come to an acceptance of things as they are, and then make appropriate change from there.

As we catch on to the idea of "doing the opposite" and facing fear, we can unwittingly fall into a subtle trap of **trying too hard to face fear.** This amounts to trying too hard to let go of control, or trying too hard to not try too hard – "resisting resistance". Like any defense, this, of course, backfires and creates more anxiety.

The Final Defense: Resisting Resistance

To "do the opposite" of resisting our resistance is to accept our resistance (defensiveness). We relax into being with it rather than trying to get out of it. Like a Chinese finger puzzle, this spontaneously releases us from it and resolves the anxiety. (Important: we must make sure our clients are not "accepting" the resistance *in order to get free of it).*

In the process of learning to "do the opposite", we will inevitably encounter this defense of trying too hard. It is the final layer of resistance to be let go of, the final fear to face. It requires that we let go all control and accept things as they are. The idea of acceptance is often touted but with our understanding of the core fear and chief defense, we have a clear prescription for doing so.

Deconstructing the Component Thoughts of Control

1. "Something is wrong."
2. "I must fix what is wrong."
3. "It's up to me alone to fix what is wrong."
4. "I must have a different experience than the one I'm having now."
5. "I must ensure a certain outcome."

Exercise #7: Letting Go of Resistance

Whenever you find yourself trying to control a situation (i.e. anytime you are working compulsively toward a goal, feeling anxious, pressured, or unsettled in any way), write down as specifically as possible what you are concerned might go wrong. Then, being sure to keep these thoughts clearly in mind, respond with thoughts such as:

- "Nothing is wrong."
- "There's nothing I have to fix."
- "It's not up to me alone to fix what I think is wrong."
- "I don't have to have a different experience than the one I'm having now."
- "I don't have to ensure a certain outcome."

Exercise #8: Letting Go the Resistance to Resistance

Repeat the exercise above, this time writing about the subtler layer of control where you catch yourself secretly trying to ensure a positive outcome to the exercise (and therefore anxious if you should not succeed). Respond with such thoughts as:

- "There's nothing wrong if I cannot realize there's nothing wrong."
- "There's nothing I have to fix about the fact that I cannot realize there's nothing I have to fix."
- "It's okay if I can't realize it's not up to me alone to fix what's wrong."
- "It's okay if I can't realize I don't have to have a different experience."
- "It's okay if I can't realize I don't have to ensure a certain outcome."

Beyond Resolving Anxiety: The Pursuit of Fulfillment

Vision Questing: Finding a Mighty Purpose

"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making me happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and, as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live.

I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch I've got to hold up for a moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

- George Bernard Shaw

Vision Questing

Now that we have established our path to resolving anxiety, we may pursue our fulfillment. Freedom from fear opens up the doorway of the spirit as we have defined it.

Vision questing is about resolving each of the core fears and replacing them with fulfillment: fulfillment in love, identity, meaning, purpose and a sense of completion about the end of life.

Vision Questing: Finding a Mighty Purpose

A "mighty purpose" gives a vision for the future, something that is so potent in its promise of fulfillment that it overwhelms our fear. It draws attention away from the fear and onto the reward, showing the fear to be insignificant in its power to hold us back. As a result, we no longer energize fear by putting our attention on its defense, and the fear "dries up".

Exercise #9: Designing One's Picture of Fulfillment

Write down the picture of your "mighty purpose", your vision, something that is deeply meaningful and inspiring to you. Use the following tips:

- Consider your talents, interests and life lessons learned that have uniquely groomed you to make a contribution.

- Consider what other people would say about your value and gifts, how you already contribute with your life and make a difference.

- Write lots of detail so you can see it clearly. This moves the Vision from abstraction to "reality".

- Make sure you describe a concrete picture rather than a vague ideal (e.g. not "I want to help people" but "I am doing A, B and C to help people").

- Don't worry about practicality at this point; fantasize as freely and widely as possible.

- Work through any fears and defenses that may arise. Make sure these same fears and defenses are not "watering down" the vision to make it more "acceptable", less threatening.

Exercise #10: Making Commitments to Action

Setting goals on a timeline can be helpful (if not used as a defense to reinforce the fear of not succeeding), because it concretizes the action component of moving through fear. It bypasses many of the defenses that would keep us from taking that action. If one misses a deadline or gets derailed in some other way, the timeline can inform you about what needs to happen to get back on track, rather than allowing fear and defensiveness to take over.

Making Commitments to Others—
The Gandhi Approach

Making verbal commitments to others about our goals reinforces our purpose. When others are aware of what have committed to, they look to us as a model for how to live their own vision for fulfillment.

What fears come up when you think about making commitments to others and not being able to renege? Work through these fears with any of our exercises, remembering that the alternative is to stay "safe" from such commitment, but never to find your fulfillment, purpose, meaning, identity, love.

How to make decisions

Whenever we have a decision to make, our task is to be perfectly willing to choose among the options involved and perfectly willing not to choose any of them as well. This frees us from any hidden investment, based on fear, in making one decision over another. When we are completely willing to take any course of action (including no action at all), we block the possibility that fear will distort our awareness and are free to see which decision best serves.

Living In the Moment

When we release fear we naturally fall into the present moment. We no longer fear the future and have no thought of protecting it with our defenses. We also relinquish anxious attachments from the past, free to pursue what was good in them in the present.

Living in the moment does not mean we don't make plans for the future. Rather, that we do so without the attachment (from fear) to the goal. Completely willing to move in one direction or another and completely willing not to move at all, we simply notice the truth of the moment and follow its lead.

The End of the Separate Self

Resolving the fear of being alone as well as the fear of being with others, we are free to pursue connection. Relationships are central to fulfillment and will almost certainly have a place in our vision.

Furthermore, the vision will likely include some way of making a contribution to others. If it is only self-serving, then it is still motivated by defensiveness, an impulse to gain control and secure the reality *we* want. This reinforces the separate self and therefore promotes fear.

Creating a "Field of Enlightenment"

Seeing someone else or others accomplish the goal we set for ourselves is a powerful tool for overcoming our own resistance (e.g. the 4 minute mile). Recognizing the doubts, inhibitions, etc., that would tell us our goal is unreachable, we may join with others working on the same goal of freedom from anxiety and fulfillment of vision to greatly increase the speed and success with which we achieve it.

Concluding Remarks

"Doing the opposite" of the chief defense and moving through the core fear **completely** means accepting all things as they are. This has the potential, as certain masters have demonstrated, for resolving fear so thoroughly that we may find a quiet fulfillment in any circumstance. Moving through the core fear completely also leads to an expanded understanding beyond the usual assumptions of who we are and what is possible in the human experience, all of which have been constrained by fear and defense. Fear imposes limits upon our experience of reality and thereby defines the nature of the human condition and its suffering. Release from fear opens up greater possibilities for fulfillment and the realization of our potential.

Deconstructing Anxiety

I would welcome your comments and questions. For more information about other lectures, trainings, seminars and workshops, or to inquire about books and CDs, contact me at:

Email: todd@toddpressman.com
Website: www.toddpressman.com

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