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Deconstructing Anxiety

A New Approach to Understanding
and Treating Anxiety Disorders

Presented by Todd Pressman, Ph.D.

Deconstructing Anxiety and Conquering Fear

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and Treating Anxiety Disorders

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Anxiety in the U.S.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health:

Anxiety is the number one psychiatric disorder in the U.S. today.

More than 18 percent of adults in the U.S. 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 2004, we spent \$2.1 billion on anti-anxiety medications, up from \$900 million in 1997.



How Anxiety Works

A new Model

Basic Premise of the “Deconstructing Anxiety” Model

We don't yet have a really effective and reliable treatment for anxiety that works for most people most of the time (Mindfulness is an important exception).

According to some of the meta-analyses, we are averaging a 46% success rate.

According to the Deconstructing Anxiety model, the missing key to fully resolving anxiety requires **a combination of the right insight and the right action** (applied with the right timing for the client's level of readiness).

Basic Premise of the “Deconstructing Anxiety” Model

Anxiety is inherent in the human condition (Karen Horney). It is, as we will see, at the core of all suffering.

Fear (anxiety – the words are to be used interchangeably) is the prime determiner of our experience whenever we are not wholly joyful, fulfilled, content or at peace.

Equally powerful is the drive for fulfillment and freedom from fear.

This creates a fundamental conflict: we are both afraid to reach for fulfillment, express ourselves, etc., and at the same time will not be satisfied until we do.

Basic Characteristics of Anxiety

Along with being wired for fear (Pittman), we are wired to defend against it (what we will call “the fear-defense dynamic”).

This sets us up for conflict; we are “at war” with reality, resisting the way things are, constantly striving to get things the way we wish them to be. Unfortunately, reality doesn’t often comply with our wishes!

We use various defenses (controls) to try to deal with fear: grasping and aversion (Mindfulness), fight, flight or freeze (Hanson), hypervigilance, manipulating our circumstances, etc.

Basic Characteristics of Anxiety

The anxious person 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, and therefore has not tested out whether it is truly awful or not.

Facing fear 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 happens to us at all.

The Hypnotizing Effect of Fear and the Lie of Fear

Fear is a master hypnotist. It creates a trance that has us fixate on the threat in front of us, never looking beyond it, never seeing “this too shall pass”, blowing it up to huge proportions, (“catastrophizing”, “awfulizing”, etc.).

When we face fear and move through it, we either find a manageable problem or no problem at all. “My life was filled with terrible misfortunes... most of which never happened” (DeMontaigne).

Fear also has us imagine all the things that could go wrong, as if they will happen at once. This is the lie of fear.

There is, in reality, only one problem to deal with at a time and it **never** plays out the way we anticipate.

Our Defenses Exacerbate Anxiety

In exercising our defenses, we reinforce the idea that there is something awful to defend against. Facing fear dispels it for the same reason.

People with an anxiety disorder actually want to fixate on the threat, believing it will help them prepare to deal with it. This heightens the anxiety since they continually rehearse it, living with it even though the feared circumstance has not yet occurred.


Fixating on fear further exacerbates anxiety, as we try to exercise our defenses to protect ourselves, knowing they can never do so well enough to ***guarantee*** the threat will be contained.

The Distortion of Anxiety

Until we face fear, our perception of life and of who we are is distorted; we are invested in seeing things a certain way and therefore cannot see objectively.

We respond to life according to this distorted perception which reifies the fear... we tell ourselves “there must be something threatening that is causing me to respond this way”.

As we deconstruct the true source of anxiety, we gain *insight* into what *actions* need to be taken to correct this distortion.



The Creation Story Revisited

Understanding the birth of fear in the psyche

The Creation Story Revisited: Understanding the Birth of Fear in the Psyche

The great cosmogonies describe an original state of unity or oneness of all things, followed by a breach or separation from that oneness.

Correlated with the unitive state is perfect peace, fulfillment and the experience of having all needs met (you are not separated from any of your needs).

Correlated with the state of separation is the opposite of this which necessarily means fear. If we are not part of a oneness, we are separate from that which we need and become fearful that we will not get it.

The Creation Story Revisited: Understanding the Birth of Fear in the Psyche

Originally, we were part of the oneness, but with the separation we saw ourselves as separate individuals, with separate “pieces” of the one Mind, each housed in separate bodies.

The state of oneness describes the state of things before created reality and is therefore “before” or “outside” of time and space. The separation, then, created space (“here” separated from “there”) and time (“now” separated from “then”).

The Creation Story Revisited: Understanding the Birth of Fear in the Psyche

Fear is the result when we do not have what we want here and now, but find it over there and then. We are separated from what we need and fear that we will not be able to obtain it. Or once obtained, we become fearful that it will be taken away (applies to everything, e.g. love, security, the satisfaction of any need).

Separation, therefore, is the source of all our problems, each of which has fear at its root.

Ultimately, we fear separation from love, from our identity, from meaning, from the chance to express ourselves and the separation from life called death – the five “core fears” we will be discussing in depth.



The Separation “Reproduced” in the Birth Process

We can talk about the separation in the cosmological sense or the separation that occurs at birth.

Otto Rank and Stanislav Grof theorized about the profound psychological impact of the “birth trauma”.

Grof's Theory

Grof described four stages or Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs) of the birth process that create a template for all our later life experiences.

BPM 1 is the state before labor begins and replicates the original cosmological oneness described earlier – all needs met, an experience of bliss (freedom from fear).

BPM 2 is the state where the uterine walls are closing down upon the fetus and gives an experience of “no exit”, helplessness and the first threat to survival.

BPM 3 has the child moving through the birth canal toward the “light at the end of the tunnel”, constituting a life-and-death struggle and the infant's first experience of employing control as s/he strives to get out of the womb.

In BPM 4 the child is born, victorious over the forces which threatened it. It is a return to the state of safety and oneness (with mother) where all needs are met, but this time with the awareness of potential dangers, as well as newfound sense of control and autonomy.

The Creation Story Revisited: Understanding the Birth of Fear in the Psyche

Bit-by-bit, we individuate from the mother, consolidating the experience of separation and autonomy. “Healthy” development is really a matter of empowering this autonomy and developing a solid discrete, sense of self.

The individuated mind housed in this individuated body can hold “private thoughts”, secrets kept separate from others, which we may use to scheme against them, judge them, manipulate them, etc., as they may do with us.

These are the sources of anxiety we encounter in our relationships with other (and is the primary concern in social anxiety).



Perception

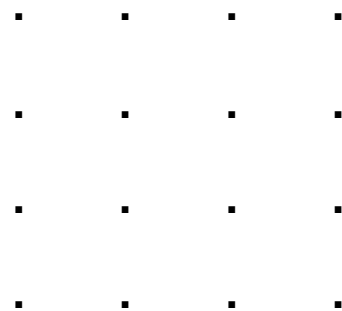
The architect of an anxious reality

Perception: The Architect of an Anxious Reality

If everything was part of a oneness then it is impossible for the separation to be real, since there can be nothing “other” than everything. We therefore must be *perceiving* reality in a distorted way when we perceive separation.

Perception shapes reality (determines particle or wave, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle).

Examples: Kittens raised in a room with no horizontal lines, inverting goggles, series of dots:



Perception: The Architect of an Anxious Reality

We, in fact, ***project*** our perception onto the state of oneness to discriminate and discern separate parts. Like a cookie cutter stamping shapes out of a uniform sheet of dough, we perceive a world of discrete “things”, breaking up the oneness (figure-ground perception, e.g. when buying a car).

Perception: The Architect of an Anxious Reality

What we project is determined by the thoughts (interpretations) we choose. Since our projections create the world we perceive, the thoughts we choose moment by moment have the power to change that world.

This is true of our own physiology (“Buddha’s Brain”—building neural structure) and psychology (biofeedback and the healing potential of visualization – e.g. Pat Norris), as well as with our relationships (imagining someone said something hurtful and then finding they did not).

Perception: The Architect of an Anxious Reality

Rehearsing thoughts of fear projects a world where we seem separated from our good, while release from fear shows a world that reflects the unitive state, evoking a feeling of being joined with others.

The anxiety problem: we choose thoughts of fear, project (perceive) the world accordingly, and then react to that world as if it is real, forgetting that we are responsible for what we see. Reacting to it as if it is real is powerfully reinforcing – we interpret our response as evidence that there is something real that requires our defense.

Perception: The Architect of an Anxious Reality

This pattern has us living inside the fearful picture in our mind so that we can stay vigilant, prepared to use our defense at a moment's notice, imagining we see the signs of threat everywhere.

This is why avoidance of fear reinforces it. And it is why facing fear and discovering that it cannot fulfill on its threat – i.e. that it was a perceptual distortion – is healing.



Laying out The "Deconstructing Anxiety" Model

Laying out The "Deconstructing Anxiety" Model

Each of us is born in relative innocence and wholeness, an approximation of oneness, where we feel fused with the mother (or if you follow Rank and Grof, where we are in an undifferentiated state of bliss in utero). All needs are met and nothing threatens our well-being (no fear).

We then meet fear for the first time (either through the life-and-death struggle that is the birth experience, or from some ordinary contact with the reality of separation in this world, as mother, for example, leaves the room).

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 (or in utero). 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.



Three phases in the development of the core fear

- 1) Our first exposure to fear is in utero—cf. Grof, Rank
- 2) In early childhood, we develop primitive cognitions about how the world works (according to its dangers)
- 3) In adolescence—we confront the existential realities of adult life and solidify our interpretation of how it can be threatening.

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 (the chance to express oneself)
5. Fear of Death

(This is why relationships are so important, and 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.).

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 (cf. BPM 4).

The relief this brings is so extraordinary that it makes a powerful imprint upon our psyche: we have learned both that the world can threaten our existence and 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 of 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

Anxiety is actually **created** by the chief defense: In order to be ready with our defense, we become vigilant for signs of threat. By holding our attention on danger in this way, we fill our minds with anxious thoughts.

Further, we realize that our defenses may not be adequate to the task. So we ramp up our efforts even more, which begins a vicious cycle.

This is why **all defenses backfire**, creating the problem they were designed to protect us from. If not checked against reality, its dimensions grow out of proportion to create an anxiety disorder.

The Building of 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 is one which checks these tendencies against reality, rather than avoiding such exposure. Checking them against reality always 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, developing trust that we can deal with it effectively (or at least tolerate it without too much distress).

An anxious personality is one where we have chosen a defense that requires us to be *hypervigilant* and *extra* careful about the potential for threat, ever-ready to employ our chief defense, with the idea that this will keep us from being taken by surprise and give us control.



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 secondary defenses account for the complexity of what it is to be human, the multifaceted ways we interpret and respond to life, according to the particular architecture of our personality, built from the blueprints of the core fear and chief defense.



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 the sense of a separated self, cut off from what we need here and now. We reinforce this idea of a separated 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 – the sense of a separate, anxious self (cut off from others and cut off from what it needs) dissolves.

Living in the Present Moment

Losing the fear-based thinking of past and future also creates an expanded state of awareness; we lose the constricted awareness imposed by the blinders of our defenses. We come to know a much vaster definition of who we are as well as a much vaster definition of the possibilities that reality holds (see, e.g., Grof, Kornfield, Young, etc).

The exercises we will be using for letting go of fear can spontaneously create this absorption in the moment and this expanded state of awareness.

Therefore, resolving anxiety becomes a path for the realization of our higher potentials.



New Strategies for Finding and Releasing 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.

Digging for Gold: Finding the Core Fear

The three questions:

- 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?

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.).

Can perform a life review from the perspective of how the core fear and chief defense drove your decisions and shaped your course.

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 and discover that 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.

A Complete Resolution of Anxiety

When fully worked through, this leads to a complete resolution of fear ***because it resolves it at its source.*** 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 do. In each instance, we discover it cannot fulfill on its threat.

Whenever a therapeutic intervention, no matter what the school of thought or approach, doesn't completely and permanently resolve anxiety, it is because the chief defense and core fear have not been fully worked through in this way.



Review of Theoretical Foundations

- Oneness versus Separation
- Perception as the Architect of Reality
- The Core Fear and Chief Defense
- The Building of a Personality
- Resolving Anxiety Requires "Doing the Opposite" of the Chief Defense

Exercise #3: Performing a Life Review

It can be not only enlightening but helpful to see how the core fear and chief defense have directed your course in life.

Create a flow chart connected your first memory (or supposition) of the core fear and chief defense to the next major life decision you made. Look for choicepoints and understand how the course you took 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.

A Subtle 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.

A Subtle 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. This is equivalent to letting go our identification with the separate self and joining with the oneness. It’s crucial, therefore, to remember that separation creates fear – even though it gives an illusion of control to get our needs met – and oneness is where our needs are really met.

The Five Component Thoughts of Control

Underneath all chief defenses is what we may call the core defense: Control.

Deconstructing the nature of control, we find it is composed of five component thoughts:

- There's something wrong
- I have to fix what's wrong
- It's up to me alone to fix what's wrong
- I have to have a different experience than the one I'm having now
- I have to ensure a certain outcome

Exercise #7: Letting Go of Control

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 it”

“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 can’t realize that there’s nothing wrong”

“There’s nothing I have to fix if I can’t realize there’s nothing I have to fix”

“It’s okay if I can’t realize I don’t have to fix the problem by myself”

“It’s okay if I still am caught in thinking I have to have a different experience”

“It’s okay if I still am caught in thinking I have to ensure a certain outcome”.



Vision Questing

Finding a Mighty Purpose

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: Finding a Mighty Purpose

Once we have some facility in resolving anxiety, we want to develop a “mighty purpose”. This gives a vision for the future, something that is so compelling, 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 or even illusory 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.

Since true fulfillment is always met in relation to others (i.e. the core fears are about losing something we need with respect to other people), the vision will want to include 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.



Vision Questing

Vision questing is about resolving all the core fears: fulfillment in love, identity, meaning, purpose and even a peaceful acceptance of death that allows us to live fully in the present moment, no longer preoccupied with fear of the future.

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 (again if not used as a defense to reinforce the fear of not succeeding), because it concretizes the action part of moving through fear and can bypass many defenses that would keep us from taking action. This can be done with “the Reverse Maze”, a process of putting one’s Vision on a timeline and creating goals from the future back to the present. If one misses a deadline or gets derailed in some other way, the Reverse Maze can inform you about what needs to happen to get back on track, rather than allowing fear and defensiveness to take over.

It can also be helpful to make verbal commitments of these goals to others. Doing so can reinforce our sense of high purpose when we know others are aware of what we are up to and looking to us as a model for how to live their own Vision of fulfillment.

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 all fear so that we may find a quiet fulfillment in any circumstance. Moving through the core fear completely also leads to an expanded awareness of who we are beyond the usual definitions of reality, consciousness and the human experience, all of which have been constrained by fear and defense. Fear imposes limits upon (our perception of) reality and thereby defines the nature of the human condition and its suffering. Release from fear opens up limitless possibilities for fulfillment and the realization of our potential.



Dr. Pressman would welcome your comments and questions.
For more information about his other lectures, trainings, seminars and
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