

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How to Find the Limits of Fear and Anxiety

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How to Find the Limits of Fear and Anxiety

Dr. Siegel: Let's say you're working with somebody and you have a good therapeutic alliance and they're in a relatively safe life situation, but they're struggling a lot with anxiety.

They're trying to avoid anxiety and you see they have a very aversive relationship to their anxious experience.

If the person is reasonably stable – other than that difficulty – I want to show you an exercise to do, and I'd like you to try the exercise with me, assuming you're feeling in a reasonably stable place yourself.

This can be a very powerful way to shift the relationship toward anxiety.

We begin this as we would begin most meditative practices, which is to find a comfortable seat, either on a cushion or in a chair, with the spine more or less erect.

I'm going to do this standing up because that's what I have as a filming setup, and I'll speak it as a standing meditation.

Allow the attention to go first to the breath – just notice what it's like to be breathing. I encourage you to try this one yourself. Assuming that you're sitting, feel the legs against the chair – the feet on the floor.

You might imagine a string tied to the top of the head, gently elongating the spine so as to be able to have an alert posture.

We're going to start by just noticing the sensations of the breath – just how the breath feels in the body.

See if it's possible to bring attention to the full cycles of the breath, from the beginning of an inhalation to the end of an exhalation and on to the next.

We're starting by just breathing together.

Next, I want you to sense if you can identify some feeling of anxiety somewhere in the body. It might be subtle, or perhaps it's fairly vivid.

Just feel the anxiety and feel all the sensations associated with it.

Now, if you're not able to locate any anxiety, see if you can generate a thought to bring up some anxiety. It doesn't have to be your worst nightmare – just something to bring up a bit of fear.

I want you to ramp up this feeling of anxiety to a level where you can really feel it. We do this to increase our capacity to be comfortable with anxious feeling.

Let yourself continue to breathe – let the breath provide a kind of holding backdrop as you ramp up the anxiety.

You might be able to ramp it up by simply bringing your attention to the sensations of anxiety in the body. Or perhaps you need to generate other images or memories or fantasies to keep it going.

Just get it up to a level where you can really feel the fear in the body, and breathe with the fear. “Ah, my old friend fear – I know you. You've been my companion since the first day of my life. You've saved me from so many misfortunes. Welcome back.”

Continue to breathe and continue to feel the fear.

Now, if aversion responses to the fear arise – if you start feeling, “Oh, no, I hate this. I want this to stop,” just notice that those are aversion responses. Those responses are the “second arrow” that we talked about earlier.

Just gently and lovingly bring your attention back to the sensations of fear. If the fear begins to fade in some way so that you're not having it strong enough to be able to work with it, come up with another thought or image – do whatever you need to do to ramp it up.

We really want to practice befriending fear – just allowing it to be there and even allowing it to flourish.

Just keep breathing and keep feeling the fear for another little while – “Ah, my friend.”

Notice all the different sensations that are associated with it – the tightness here and there and how the mind works in response to fear – even the aversion responses.

Now that you've given that a try, we're going to let the fear go.

That doesn't mean we're going to drive it out – we're simply going to bring our attention back to the breath and let the anxiety or fear seek its own level.

Just come back to following the breath through its full cycles, feeling the inhalation and the exhalation.

Allow the fear to be there if it wants, or not be there if it doesn't. Breathe a little more.

Then you can open your eyes again.

When I've done this with groups of clinicians, people have a lot of different responses.

Sometimes they go, "Oh, gosh, it was horrible. I was so anxious. It was terrible."

Typically, what happened was the person got stuck in the aversion response. They started thinking, "I want this to stop," and they couldn't get it to stop, and despite my gentle encouragement to just let it be there, they got into a fight with the anxiety and that locked it into being a very unpleasant experience.

More often what happens to people – and this happens particularly if you do it for a long enough period of time – is that at a certain point, it becomes hard to maintain the fear.

The fear starts to trail off a little bit, and a lot of times people have to come up with increasingly dire fantasies in order to maintain it.

Now, I've had the privilege of doing an online course actually through NICABM for several years now in which we do this Stepping into Fear exercise as a practice to do with your clients or patients between lectures.

I've had a multiplier effect of many, many people trying this over the years – maybe even a couple of thousand case studies, if you will, of clinicians trying this with patients.

The interesting thing is – what folks report – is that if the clinician can have the courage to lead the client or the patient through this exercise and not freak out by thinking, "Oh, my God, the client's going to get overwhelmed with fear... – if we can have the courage to not get caught in that kind of fear ourselves, then almost everybody at a certain point has trouble keeping the fear up – trouble keeping the anxiety up.

And this becomes a marvelous discovery for folks who struggle with anxiety.

You can ask them, "Most of the rest of the time, is it a problem staying anxious?" and they'll say, "No. that comes quite rarely, but here it was difficult."

This can become a very, very valuable learning experience..

When you do this in clinical practice, you give yourself a full 20 minutes or so – I know that can sound like a long time, and you want people to have already had some exposure and experience with mindfulness practice.

What I've found is that nobody can keep it up for 20 minutes! If you try to stay for the 20 minutes, keeping our friend Fear around, at a certain point, it tends to dissipate, and that becomes such a valuable lesson.

It really underscores the role of avoidance in the process and helps people to trust that there's actually safety available in simply being with the experience of anxiety.