

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How to Help Your Clients Face Difficulties

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Dr. Siegel: Sometimes when I'm conducting workshops for clinicians, I will ask them at a certainly point, "Please close your eyes and think of something that might make you anxious."

I invite you to try this yourself right now. It shouldn't take long. What did you come up with? How many of you came up with "global climate change," for example? Usually, when I ask an audience, very few people raise their hand about that.

Usually we worry about something much closer to home: we either worry about our own health, perhaps our wealth, perhaps what's going to happen to our family or friends or loved ones or those who are otherwise close to us. We tend to worry about a small circle.

Also, I'll often ask people, "Does the thought that you use to generate anxiety a thought of the past, the present or the future?"

What was it for you? Probably it was the future. Every once in a while, people will say, "No; I was thinking about something that happened this morning."

Upon close analysis, we realize that, "No, I was anxious about what's going to happen tonight, for getting incarcerated for what I did this morning – it wasn't actually what I did this morning that had me worried."

We see when we examine anxious thought that it's almost always about ourselves or those close to us, and it's almost always about the future.

It's no wonder, therefore, that we're so anxious, because after all, our prognosis, and the prognosis for our loved ones, is quite poor: everything that's born gets sick, perhaps gets old, but definitely dies.

How are we going to live with this? And how might mindfulness help us with it?

One of my patients once said to me, "When you fight reality, reality usually wins, but only 100 percent of the time."

Most of the time, most of us are fighting reality: we're fighting the fact that things change and we're fighting the fact that we're mortal.

In fact, we fight this in many different ways. Often we try to control everything. We seek perfectionism: “If only I can get this right or that right, then good fortune will come to me and I’ll be happy.”

We notice that good and bad fortune arises and passes really no matter what we do. It’s not that we can’t tilt the odds, but that’s all we can do – tilt the odds.

Mindfulness practice offers us another possibility and this comes from the way in which mindfulness practice derives from Buddhist psychology.

Buddhist psychology suggests that if you look carefully at the workings of the mind, you’re going to notice three things. These are called the three characteristics of existence or the three marks of existence.

The first one – and the phrase in Pali or the vernacular language in which the teachings of the historical Buddha were first written down, is Anicca - and that means that everything is in constant flux.

In fact, there aren’t even things – there are simply changing patterns of energy and constellations of matter, and we see this when we take up mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness practice gives us an ever-changing kaleidoscope. It’s a fluid field: sensation passes to a thought, passes to an image, passes to another sensation, passes into something in the visual field, and/or passes into something in the auditory field.

There is no stillness in consciousness. It is an ever-changing flux of experience.

In fact, this is how physicists and biologists explain or describe the outer world: simply a flux of constantly changing movement.

Even though we try so hard to hold on to particular things and keep them from changing, it’s like grasping Jello – it just keeps slipping through our fingers.

The second observation is what’s known as Duka, and this is what’s been poorly translated as “life is suffering.” A much better translation is “The mind is frequently complaining.”

Some of you may have heard me joke that my favorite translation of this is by the great philosopher sage who’s wonderful in that she’s different: she’s a woman and she’s actually North American – you may know her work – her name was Roseanne Roseannadanna (one of several recurring characters created by Gilda Radner on Saturday Night Live).

Roseanne famously said, “If it’s not one thing, it’s another.”

And we see this – the mind is always restless, wanting things to be different. Sometimes it’s the Goldilocks restlessness: “It’s too cold - I want it to be warm. It’s too warm - I want it to be cold.”

Sometimes it’s – and probably the funniest version of Duka – is what’s sometimes called positive Duka. That’s when we’re having an experience which is just wonderful: we’re with our child or our spouse or a girlfriend or a boyfriend, or we’re at a beautiful spot in nature and things are just sublime.

It’s really a perfect moment, but because we’re smart and we have the capacity for analytical thought, we think, “It’s not going to last” and we become distressed over that.

We start to notice that the mind is constantly distressed, whether good things are happening or bad things are happening: we’re clinging to the good ones, pushing away the bad ones, but always in some state of agitation around this.

Finally – and this is the trickiest aspect of the three marks of existence for most of us to grasp – try as we might in meditation practice, we never find the “little me” in there; we never find the “little homunculus,” the “little Ron.” All I find is the ever-changing flow of experience.

Now, if we could possibly understand these realities – what we glimpse in meditation practice and see them and live lives as though they were true – life would be very different indeed.

If we think about the stuff that we get anxious about, most of it involves change, doesn’t it? It’s the thought that, “I’m going to lose what I currently have,” or “I’ll never get what I want to have.”

Certainly Duka plays a role where there’s a constant dissatisfaction: “I want it to be different. I don’t want to go through aging. I don’t want to lose loved ones. I don’t want any of that to happen.”

Then there’s the constant self-preoccupation: “How am I doing? What are people thinking of me? Right now, how is this video coming out? Are you enjoying it? Do you think it’s useful?”

There are endless, endless report cards that “I’m good. I’m bad. I’m competent. I’m incompetent. I’m loved. I’m not loved.”

This constant “selfing” – this constant self-evaluation causes a tremendous amount of anxiety. It’s virtually impossible to stay on top, and even if you are on top at one point, it’s only a matter of moments before you’re no longer on top.

So, one possibility is to use mindfulness practice to try to get this and to help our clients or patients to get that it’s absolutely impossible to fight reality.

In the Buddhist tradition, they use this one meditation, and I sometimes will introduce this to a client or a patient of mine. You don’t want to do this one lightly because it’s pretty intense and it involves trying to confront reality.

This is the way the Buddha laid it out: he said, “There are five things, and these are the five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, a layperson or an ordained monk or nun.”

These are the five things: “I’m sure to become old; I cannot avoid aging.” That’s a heavy one, and certainly seems to be true. “I’m sure to become ill; I cannot avoid illness.” This is also a tough one, and true.

“I am sure to die; I cannot avoid death.” This is the utterly remarkable one because we go through life really thinking that, “No, this stuff happens to other people, but it’s not going to happen to me,” until something goes wrong. We have a medical threat, or we’re waiting for the biopsy result and, “Oh, my God, what a shock.”

The fourth one, which in many ways is harder than these first three, is: “I must be separated and parted from all that is dear and beloved to me.” This is the fact that, whether through our death or the death of another or the moving apart –everyone and everything that we love is impermanent – life is not going to be here for the whole ride.

Finally, the Buddha suggested, “I am the owner of my actions, heir of my actions. Whatever actions I do, whether good or bad, of these I shall become their heir.” This is the realization that we lay the conditions for what’s going to happen to us in our various daily activities. This last one is not so much working with anxiety, but simply to notice that behavior matters.

If we could ponder these five things and really get it, boy, would we live more easily.

Then, when change happens, when we notice that all things change, when we notice that the mind is always complaining and wanting it to be different, and when we notice all the self-preoccupation, we'd be able to take it a little bit more lightly – to see it as the passing phenomena that it is.

So, introducing these ideas into therapy, while it might sound a little radical, is certainly and simply about helping people to notice reality.

Here's an exercise that you can try with your client or patient:

Ask them to ponder – and you can do this in a session or you can send them home to do this as a writing exercise – “How would my life be different today if I lived today with an awareness that everything changes – so all of my maneuvers to try to optimize my external circumstance are probably not that necessary, and finally, that all of my thoughts about myself: my concerns of self-image, my success and failure, whether I'm loved or not—involves trying to prop up basically an illusion, a narrative about this story starring me...how might my day be different if I weren't believing in all of this or if I were able to see this reality rather than believing in my illusions?”