How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

Why Anxiety Is So Common, and What It's Costing Your Clients

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Dr. Siegel: Welcome to our course on Mindfulness for the Treatment of Anxiety.

In these videos, we're going to examine what gets people trapped in anxiety disorders and how mindfulness practices can help to free them.

I'll share with you insights from my own clinical practice as well as insights from pioneering researchers and clinicians in the field.

Each video will address one aspect of anxiety and look at ways in which mindfulness practices might address that particular component of the problem.

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Anxiety disorders come in so many different forms – everything from OCD to social anxiety and simple phobias and they are maintained by so many different mechanisms, such as escape avoidance learning or signal anxiety – fear of the emotions within.

Even difficulties dealing with existential problems such as the fact that everything changes and loss is inevitable is a form of anxiety.

Because of the complex nature of anxiety, we'll have to address it from a number of different angles and give you tools that will be able to help you to work with a very wide variety of clients or patients.

Finally, since I'm temperamentally anxious myself, it turns out I've been using mindfulness practices for well over 30 years to work with my *own* anxiety as it arises both in daily life events as well as during particularly difficult times, and I'll share with you the techniques that I've found effective as well as the difficulties that I've run into using these techniques.

It turns out that anxiety disorders are incredibly pervasive. Some estimates put it at over 30% of the population suffering from an anxiety disorder at any given time.

"Anxiety disorders are incredibly pervasive.

How did this possibly come to be? Is it an artifact of culture?

I don't think so. I actually think it's due to an evolutionary accident.

An evolutionary accident has to do with survival mechanisms that help us to thrive and help us to be able to perpetuate and pass our DNA on to our offspring, but when put together, tend to be problematic.

Here's what I mean: one survival mechanism which reptiles have and mammals evolved to a greater degree is our fight/freeze/flight response system.

We all know what this is like. If we are in a situation where danger approaches, heart rate increases, respiration increases, body temperature goes up, blood pressure goes up, and other things happen like all the little hairs on our skin - the muscles at the base of those hairs contract to make them stand up on end, and that's to make us look big and ferocious! (You can imagine how many lions we've warded off doing that!)

All of these physiological changes of the fight/freeze/flight response system are designed to help us deal with an emergency, and, indeed, they are very effective in doing so. They've probably saved countless ancestors from lions, tigers, snakes and other perils.

Now, had we only had the fight or flight system, we probably wouldn't have done so well as mammals, because if you can imagine our ancestors out there on the African Savannah four or five million years ago coming face to face with a lion – even with a lot of activity – we wouldn't do so well.

The lion was going to be faster than we were; we couldn't fight the lion despite the adrenaline rush – we'd pretty much be toast.

So, the other mechanism that humans in particular evolved is this capacity for thinking: the capacity to remember past experience, project it into the future, and strategize as to how we're going to survive**.**

That's how, eventually, we came to outwit the lions: we developed hunting tools; we developed group activities in which we could gather together and either speared the lion or figured out a way to avoid the lion's territory...

Both of these mechanisms – our fight or flight system and our capacity for thought – worked wonderfully together in order to allow us to survive.

The problem is that they *didn't* do such a good job of making us happy, because what happens when you put the two of these together is that we can think about all sorts of things that might go wrong.

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And this brings us to the problem with the negativity bias.

This is an observation that cognitive psychologists have made on countless occasions that the mind – as my friend Rich Hanson puts it – is "like Velcro for bad experiences and Teflon for good ones."

Basically, when bad things happen, they imprint and we remember them; when good things happen, they slide right off the pan.

So, you can imagine one of our ancestors, for example, facing an ambiguous situation.

Let's say they were looking at a bush and in that bush there was some kind of a beige shape. The ancestor could have made one of two types of errors – and we can call them *type one errors* and *type two errors,* which roughly corresponds to how these errors show up in research.

A type one error would have been looking at this ambiguous shape and going, "Oh, my God - it's a lion!" when really it was just a beige rock.

A type two error would be looking at this ambiguous situation and saying, "Oh, it's probably a beige rock" when it was really a lion.

Now, our ancestors can make *countless* type one errors and still survive – make one type two error and that's the end of your DNA line.

So, we might imagine that in prehistoric times there were happy hominids hanging around, holding hands, singing Kumbaya, remembering the dynamite sexual experience of a luscious piece of fruit and really enjoying life.

They, however, were not our ancestors because, statistically, they tended to die before they got to reproduce.

Our ancestors were the ones who went through the world looking at ambiguous situations and going, "Oh, my God, it's a lion/Oh, my God, it's a snake," and took aversive, avoidant, or evasive action to avoid those situations.

> "We are left with a mind that remembers bad things and anticipates them happening again."

And that's the kind of mind that we are left with: we are left with a mind that remembers bad things and anticipates them happening again.

We know that every time we have one of these anticipatory thoughts, up comes the wish of anxiety.

Anxiety disorders are not just widespread, but they tend to be chronic.

That means most of us don't just have an anxiety disorder for a little while, but often it's our constant companion throughout our life and this involves tremendous cost not only to us as individuals, but to the society more widely.

It's estimated that, including lost productivity, this costs in just the United States alone about 45 billion dollars a year. Only about 25% of that goes into treatment, medicines and things like that to try to take care of the problem.

Now, estimates of heritability of anxiety are interesting. They say that it's 30 to 40% heritable; that means some of us inherited more of those genes from the ancestors who were even more preoccupied with lions than others did.

So some of us – and we know this from studies of newborns – are just much more animated by and disturbed by novelty and things that might be threatening, while other people enjoy this kind of thing.

There are some people who say, "You know, I just don't feel fully alive unless I'm on a spacewalk tethered by a strand of spaghetti to the spacecraft."

Other people say, "You know, just sitting up in bed is plenty stimulating enough for me."

"Heritability plays a big role in our tendency to have anxiety disorders."

We have genetic differences around this, and heritability plays a big role in our tendency to have anxiety disorders.

But if it's 30 or 40 % heritable, that means 60 to 70% has to do with how we relate to our experience – and that's where mindfulness practice can come in.

Mindfulness practice can radically alter how we're going to relate to our experience.

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Now, how does anxiety wreak such havoc on our lives?

When we're anxious, it tends to narrow our vision.

We tend to focus only on the thing that we find threatening. Many of us get involved in a lot of self-criticism and self-hatred – thinking there's something wrong with us for feeling anxious in this way.

We get involved in a lot of negative judgments – judgments toward ourselves as well as toward the people and things that we fear out there.

Anxiety cuts us off from others. While we may move in for support and comfort, very often we keep others at bay, partly because we don't want them to see our fear and partly because we're afraid of other people.

Anxiety also causes a wealth of psychophysiological or stress-related disorders: everything from chronic back pain to gastrointestinal distress, tinnitus, bruxism, or eczema.

Now, all of these, of course, can have other medical causes, but very often they are either caused or maintained by chronic anxiety conditions.

Anxiety really limits our lives. Most of us get into a pattern of behavioral avoidance where we stop living fully. We stop taking risks and in our attempt to stay safe, we wind up living a narrower and narrower life.

It doesn't always get to the point of agoraphobia, but even if it doesn't it can still be very, very restricting to us.

What we are going to see throughout this course, ironically, is that all of these things we do to try and take care of or reduce the anxiety – the narrowing of vision, the constricting of activity, the playing it safe – actually trap us more and more deeply in the condition. All these things trap us more deeply in our anxiety disorder.