

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

Why Future Goals Can Ease the Power of Anxiety

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Why Future Goals Can Ease the Power of Anxiety

Dr. Siegel: We began the course discussing how to help motivate clients or patients by looking at how the things that they've done habitually to try to get rid of their anxiety haven't worked very well, and the cost that anxiety disorders have had in their life.

I'd like to end with a little bit of a look toward something optimistic and a look toward the future, which is another part of motivating folks.

This involves looking at values and goal-setting. **ACT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, which is a mindfulness-oriented treatment developed by Steve Hayes, adds this in to the usual aspects of mindfulness that involve awareness of presence experience with acceptance.

This is the behavioral side of it, and if we're not going to go through life avoiding pain, what are we going to do with our life?

Remember those conversations perhaps back in college, maybe even under the influence of a substance or two, in which you asked, "What's the meaning of life?"

People talked about that kind of thing: "What's it all about? Why are we here?"

Precisely that kind of inquiry, while we may think of it as an adolescent vestige of the past, can be very useful in motivating people to turn their attention, instead of toward, "How do I get rid of anxiety?" to "How do I live a full and meaningful life?"

To live a full and meaningful life, it can be helpful to identify what our values and our goals are.

Values are like a beacon in the anxiety storm – they're something that we move toward even as we feel the anxiety, much as the astronaut moved toward his work in the spacecraft even as he felt his anxiety.

Values involve action, not just experience.

This action can be in many different realms. It can be in the realm of a working career, where we have certain goals or things that matter to us.

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It can be in the realm of intimate relationships – aspirations that we have as a parent or as a partner, in the realm of education – things we want to do for learning or personal growth, in the realm of social life and our world with friends, in the realm of health and physical self-care – things we'd like to do to get in shape – to lose or gain weight and to be more fit, more flexible and the like.

Maybe we have goals for our family of origin – things we want to work out with our parents or our siblings while they're still alive.

Maybe we want to do something with our spiritual aspirations – spiritual growth and development.

Or maybe there's something we want to do with our community, in nature, or something that we just want to develop more that's recreational – we want to learn how to ski or how to play badminton – whatever it might be.

“Has anxiety gotten in the way of doing what matters?”

It can be really helpful to talk with people about what matters to them because then we can discuss, *Has anxiety gotten in the way of doing what matters?*

If it has, then once they've had an understanding of what anxiety is and how to be with the feelings associated with it – how to not take thoughts so seriously and how to use equanimity practices if necessary to get their bearings – once they have these tools, they can use them in the service of moving toward what feels meaningful and useful.

Here's an exercise that you can do with pretty much any client or patient that can be quite helpful.

This is an exercise of moving toward what matters rather than trying to move away from what hurts.

Simply do this – we'll go through a few different realms.

In the realm of relationships, I want you to think of an important relationship – some relationship that really matters to you, and you can do this with me right now.

Think of a relationship you value. *How would you like to be in that relationship? What would be optimal? Can you take a moment and reflect on that?*

Perhaps you'd like to be more selfless. Perhaps you'd like to be more assertive. Perhaps you'd like to be more intimate. Perhaps you'd like to spend more time together. Perhaps you'd like to play more. Perhaps you'd like to talk about some topic that hasn't been discussed.

How about in terms of work or study: *What would you like to be doing? What would be fulfilling for you? What's been in the way?*

Or in the realm of self-care: *How would you like to live your life each day? How would you like to be eating? What would you like to be doing about rest and sleeping? How about exercise? How about engagement in nature?*

Finally, in the realm of your community: *What role do you want to play? What would matter?*

So, spend some time with your patient, actually talking about these things and talking about how anxiety perhaps gets/has gotten in the way.

Encourage them to try being like the astronaut – do it anyway!

What we are challenging people to do is to say, "What would you prefer: to manage your anxiety or have a rich and full life?"

A really interesting meditation around this – it's a little heavier duty than the one that I just mentioned now – is a funeral fantasy (not really such a fantasy – that funeral is going to come someday).

For this exercise, what you do is this, and you can do this live with your patient in the session.

You say, "I want you to imagine that you've just died and your family and friends are gathered around. They're in whatever stages of grief and mourning and understanding that they might be, and they're going to talk about you and talk about your life. What would you most like them to want to say? What would you want to most have reflected? What's it all been about? Basically, do you want them to say, *He worked really hard/she worked really hard managing anxiety and trying to calm down?* or would you rather they talk about something else that you moved toward?"

The answer for most of us – and this can be quite poignant – is, "Yes, there are important things that I'd like to move toward," and then we can decide, "OK, let that be my goal."

The take-home point for us is that we can use mindfulness practices to open to and be able to accept all the different feelings that arise, as behaviorally, we move in the direction which is most meaningful to us.