

# How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How to Work with the Roots of Anxiety

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## How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness:

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## How to Work with the Roots of Anxiety

**Dr. Siegel:** We've been talking about how to use mindfulness practices to avoid avoidance – to increase our capacity to bear discomfort, including the discomfort of anxiety.

Now, I'd like to shift a little bit to look at this from what we might think of as more of a psychodynamic perspective.

This has to do with what Freud used to call **signal anxiety**. Much of the time when we're anxious, we're actually not afraid of something out there; we're afraid of something in here.

**“The fight or flight system is designed to respond to threats in the external world.”**

The stress physiologists like to say that the fight or flight system, which is designed to respond to threats in the external world, starts to become activated from the tigers within rather than from the tigers without.

And those tigers within are sometimes thoughts and sometimes they're images, but very often they're emotions.

I find this, myself personally, quite a bit when I'm anxious. If I spend some time to do a bit of mindfulness practice and turn my attention inward to see, *What exactly is going on here?* almost always, mixed in with the anxiety or even under the anxiety there is a sense of sadness, perhaps anger – some other emotion.

My anxiety is activated as a fear response against actually experiencing that emotion more purely. In some ways, sadness can feel perhaps more vulnerable or anger can feel more problematic than simply feeling obsessively anxious much of the time.

Now, there are a number of reasons that we might be afraid of our feelings.

One of them is that we might be afraid that we'd act on them. Many people are afraid to feel their anger, for example, because they're afraid that they'll act angrily, or they're afraid to feel sexual interest because they're afraid that they'll act on that sexual interest and make a mess for themselves or for other people.

**“We might be afraid that we'll act on our feelings.”**

Sometimes we are afraid of affects because we're afraid that we won't be able to bear them, that once we enter into those waters, they'll become so intense that we'll become overwhelmed by them.

Finally, sometimes we're afraid of them because we've learned some rule – we were acculturated in our society or our family of origin to believe that it's wrong to feel that way. For example: “You shouldn't be angry – that's selfish,” or “Men shouldn't feel vulnerable. Men shouldn't cry,” and on and on with these different kinds of messages.

But however we came to not be comfortable feeling an emotion, when the emotion arises, we're likely to have difficulty tolerating it, and we may simply not feel it at all but feel instead a sense of anxiety.

So, how might we use mindfulness to work with this?

One very nice little structure or scaffolding for this is the **RAIN** metaphor, and a number of meditations talk about this. Tara Brach has written about it extensively.<sup>1</sup> Here's what the letters stand for.

**R** stands for **Recognize** what's happening – simply notice that the emotion is there.

**A** stands for **Allow** it to be just as it is. It doesn't mean we have to fix it – we don't have to make adjustments – the idea is to simply bring and allow attention to whatever affect happens to be here at the moment.

**I** stands for **Investigation** – and investigation isn't an analytical investigation of wondering, “Hmm, what caused this? Where did it come from?” but rather it's simply to turn a kind of interested or nuanced attention to the sensation. If it's a wave of sadness, Investigation means feeling exactly how it feels in the body and noticing what associations, what images, what thoughts might surround it.

Finally, **N** stands for **Non-identification** or rest in **Natural awareness** – this involves not taking it so personally, not being such a strong story about “my sadness,” or “my anger,” or “my fear,” but rather simply to notice “the sadness,” “the anger,” “the fear,” “the sexual arousal.” By not identifying with them so much, we're able to be present to these feelings and investigate them more thoroughly.

“**RAIN** can be very helpful when we sense that there's some kind of emotion going on underneath the anxiety and we want to start to look into it.”

This RAIN structure can be very helpful when we sense that there's some kind of emotion going on underneath the anxiety and we want to start to look into it.

Now, some people struggling with anxiety disorders don't even know that they have underlying emotions, or, if they have

them, they think, “What good is that? What good would it be to get angry? What good would it be to be sad?”

So it’s helpful to talk to people about emotions – to mention that they actually have value, they communicate information to ourselves about our beliefs, about what’s important to us, about what’s happening in our world.

Emotions can deepen our experience of life, because life is much more poignantly alive if we allow emotions to flourish.

Finally, emotions connect us to others: emotions are primarily a language of connection and it’s through feeling emotion that we get to feel empathy, that we get to feel compassion, and that we get to feel connection with fellow human beings.

This of course not only makes life richer, but provides support during difficult times.

Here’s a concrete exercise that you can do to help people who are struggling with anxiety and might not be aware of the underlying emotions.

First, we have to train the person, train ourselves as well, to be able to recognize emotions.

What I like to do is to go through the list of the most common ones and ask people to generate a bit of that emotion – to close their eyes and feel exactly how it feels in the body.

So let’s start with sadness. If I close my eyes and I start to connect to sadness, I feel it as a kind of pressure here; I feel it behind my eyes a little bit, a bit in my throat.

For me, as soon as I go to sadness, I go to images of my parents who are still alive but they’re in the final stage of their lives, and they’re 3000 miles away. They’re having a rough time of it, and I visit as much as I can...and I won’t go on in too much depth, but this is what it means for me to investigate and connect with sadness.

We can do the same with anger, with longing – whether it’s longing for love or recognition or respect.

We can do it with shame or disgust – we can do this with any powerful emotion that might be present for a person.

“Emotions can deepen our experience of life, because life is much more poignantly alive if we allow emotions to flourish.”

It helps for folks who tend to be disconnected from these emotions and always anxious and kind of obsessional to go through the basic emotions that people experience, starting with sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and then maybe add in some of the more subtle ones or the combined ones such as longing, sexual arousal and shame – not exactly pure emotions but close to it.

We want to have the person to notice the physical sensations first and to stay with them, but then also to notice the thoughts and any behavioral impulses, like the desire to do this or that, or to get rid of the feeling that may come up in response to it.

“We want the person to notice the physical sensations first and to stay with them, but then also to notice the thoughts and any behavioral impulses.”

Another exercise that you can do with your patients in the session involves a time when they’re reporting a lot of anxiety.

If somebody’s reporting a lot of anxiety, I might suggest to them – and hopefully I’ve taught them a bit of mindfulness practice to begin with – that they close their eyes and see if they can identify another emotion associated with the anxiety, or simply another emotion lurking that perhaps is being covered by the anxiety.

Very often people will be able to identify that, and then you can do what we just did earlier in exploring emotions generally with the actual emotion that they notice coming in underneath the anxiety.

Once you’ve done these sorts of things in the session a number of times so that people have the vocabulary and comfort working with noticing their emotions in the session, then you can suggest a little bit of self-monitoring.

In your resources, there’s a chart – “Mindfulness of Emotions Chart.” The chart has different columns to it. The columns are to monitor the emotions that come up during the week in response to different events.

The first column is the event; the second is the emotions that it brings up – whether it’s happy, sad, angry, worried, frustrated et cetera; the third is the strength of the feeling – mild, moderate, or strong; and finally, “How I dealt with the emotion – what I did behaviorally in response to it.”

We have different categories in this chart, but you can add your own. The ones I chose were: Family, Events in the Family, Social Friends (in the interpersonal world), Events at Work, Events having to do with Health and the Body (since that’s a source of so much anxiety for folks) and then Anything Else that Comes Up.

You can have the person try this over the course of the week and come back and review with you the different emotions that they noticed.

One thing that you can be particularly attentive to as a clinician is this: are any emotions missing?

If a person goes through a whole week and never feels anger or never feels sadness, or never feels worry, chances are those emotions are in there somewhere, but for some reason, they're being suppressed or repressed or denied.

You might spend extra time in the session looking to see what life events might be associated with those emotions and what difficulty the person might be having fully acknowledging them.

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about what we might call muddy emotions.

My friends Sue Orsillo and Liz Roemer who have written extensively about mindfulness and anxiety – they're folks in the Boston area – talk about muddy emotions.

Muddy emotions are feelings that come up that tend to overwhelm us and tend to confuse us.

Here are some of the qualities of muddy emotions.

They tend to be intense. We tend to have difficulty identifying them specifically or giving them a clear label – we just feel distressed or upset.

We often feel confused or overwhelmed in the presence of a muddy emotion.

Muddy emotions are usually pretty familiar – they're like, “Oh, yes – been here before.”

Often we have a strong judgmental or critical reaction to muddy emotions – “Oh, shouldn't be feeling that. I hate that. That's stupid. That's irrelevant.”

Muddy emotions tend to hang around for a long time; they don't metabolize or get processed as easily as pure emotions do.

It feels like muddy emotions have us rather than we're having them! Rather than a muddy emotion “passing through me, I'm kind of possessed by it” – we often feel tangled up in whatever our response is to the muddy emotion.

“Muddy emotions tend to hang around for a long time; they don't metabolize or get processed as easily as pure emotions do.”

Now, what causes muddy emotions?

Often they come as a result of some kind of an incompletely processed trauma. (We're going to talk about post-traumatic anxiety in a little bit.)

Often they involve reactions to our reactions – in other words, they are emotions that are coming up that we're conflicted about and in some way we're unable to acknowledge and accept.

Here's a final mindfulness exercise that you can use to work with this dealing with the underlying emotion, and this is one to work with muddy emotions.

You can do this in the session.

Just simply ask your client or patient to recall their last muddy emotion – once you've described to them what these are, most of us can identify these.

Then simply sit with the muddy emotion and explore it using the RAIN metaphor or structure: to Recognize, to Accept, to Investigate with curiosity – “What is this? What is this made up of?” and then to rest in Natural

“We want to see if the person can identify: ***Are there any clear emotions bundled up inside of the muddy emotion?***”

Awareness – to notice that it's not personal – it's just something arising and passing, like all other phenomena.

By using the RAIN structure, we want to see if the person can identify: *Are there any clear emotions bundled up inside of the muddy emotion?*

By using mindfulness in this way and using this kind of investigative, introspective approach – to the extent to which people can become comfortable with the full range of their emotional experiences – they're going to have fewer targets within to be afraid of and they are probably going to wind up not only living a richer and fuller life, but feeling less anxious in the process.

1. Brach, T. (2019). *Radical compassion: Learning to love yourself and your world with the practice of RAIN*. Penguin Life.