

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How to Help Clients Who Are Stuck in Ruminating Thought Patterns

with Ron Siegel, PsyD

National Institute for the Clinical
Application of Behavioral Medicine





How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness:

Ron Siegel, PsyD

How to Help Clients Who Are Stuck in Ruminating Thought Patterns

Dr. Siegel: While probably all mammals can experience fear – they certainly look as though they experience fear – only human beings are probably capable of experiencing anxiety.

That's because only human beings are capable of thinking of the future in a detailed and analytical way.

If we think of any moment in which we are feeling anxious, we realize that sometimes the anxiety is about an underlying feeling, for example, that we're having difficulty acknowledging.

Very often, the anxiety is associated with a thought, and even if the anxiety is actually generated by difficulty facing an underlying feeling, often there'll be some kind of thought – some kind of disaster – that nonetheless occupies our attention.

“Anxiety is associated with a thought that occupies our attention.”

In other words, we can be sad and having difficulty dealing with sadness but what we consciously experience is just being really worried about the exam tomorrow.

So, one of the other ways that mindfulness practice can help us to work with anxiety disorders is by helping us to disentangle from our thoughts: to recognize that thoughts are indeed just thoughts.

A lot of times when people are very anxious, they get trapped in rumination – and rumination comes from cows chewing their cud – the origin of the word – is the thinking over and over and over about some theme.

Very often, the theme of rumination has to do with negative aspects of interactions with others: “What does that person think of me? How might I have spoken to him or her differently? What does this mean about our relationship?”

“When people are very anxious, they get trapped in rumination.”

Or it is imagining that others are thinking negatively of us: “That person is going to be mad at me if I do this, that or the other thing. Or maybe they are mad at me because I did do this, that or the other thing.”

So, how are we going to manage these thoughts?

Many anxious folks try thought suppression: “I just will try not to think of it.” And indeed, we even have behavioral techniques such as putting a rubber band around your wrist and snapping it every time that you have one of these thoughts that you don’t like, as a form of thought-stopping.

But what we find from the research on this in the laboratory is that thought suppression actually doesn’t work very well.

“Thought suppression actually doesn’t work very well.”

The more we suppress a thought, the more it exists latently and comes up in our associations.

They set up lab studies in which they have people deliberately not thinking about something and then do some kind of free association test, various kinds of projective tests that get at what’s going on underneath.

And indeed, what happens is the more you suppress a thought, the more it actually occupies the mind, even if at a subconscious or unconscious level.

What works much better is allowing thoughts to come and go, and of course, mindfulness practice trains us in how to allow thoughts to come and go.

Now, one aid comes out of the vipassana tradition, which is the early Buddhist tradition of mindfulness practices. The monks found themselves getting tangled up in thought, and they came up with a technique which is very similar to what we do in CBT, which is known as **thought labeling**.

Thought labeling means sitting with an object of awareness. It could be walking meditation and the sensation of the feet, like we talked about.

“Thought labeling means sitting with an object of awareness.”

It could be a breath focus meditation – although we discussed how that can be tough for some folks who are very anxious.

It could be a nature meditation or a listening meditation.

Whatever form we are doing, where we are bringing our attention to some kind of sensory object, it’s likely that thoughts are going to rise in the mind.

So, what to do with them?

The usual instruction is to let them come and go, like clouds passing through the sky.

But an alternative is to do thought labeling, and that means simply picking a few terms or categories that you can attach to each thought so as to commit the thought to come and go, but to be able to see it as an object rather than identifying with its content as reality.

For example, possible categories could be planning, remembering, judging. So you're sitting there with whatever the object of your awareness is, and then suddenly the thought comes in, and you can notice it: *Oh, yes, judging – Ah, planning – Judging again – Judging the fact that I'm planning!*

This goes on and on, but it gives you a way to have a little bit of perspective on the thought.

You can combine this with traditional CBT identification of maladaptive thought patterns and use anxiety-related labeling like, *Ah, that's catastrophizing. That's over-generalizing. Ah, that's personalizing. That's regretting.*

By doing this and practicing being with thought in this way, it's not that we're getting rid of it, but it stops having the same grip on us.

We start to notice the thought as a passing phenomena rather than the thought as a solid reality.