

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How to Teach Clients to Self-Soothe

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How to Teach Clients to Self-Soothe

Dr. Siegel: We've talked now about several mechanisms that help to maintain anxiety disorders and several ways that mindfulness practice can help us with those.

One of them is the tendency to try to avoid anxiety and all of the ways in which that tends to lock us into disorders and how we can use mindfulness practice to increase our capacity to be with and bear discomfort, including being with anxious feeling.

We've also talked about the underlying emotions that may be suppressed or repressed, that create signal anxiety and make us anxious with the fear that we're going to somehow encounter or those emotions will be awakened, and then we become anxious about that and how we can use mindfulness practice to connect with those emotions.

We've discussed the role of thinking and how we can use mindfulness practice to have less identification with thoughts, including thoughts of the future that frighten us.

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Now, another dimension of what predisposes folks to anxiety is the degree to which we are able to soothe ourselves.

Folks who find it relatively easy to self-soothe may find themselves being less chronically anxious than folks who have difficulty with self-soothing.

We learn self-soothing largely through early attachment relationships.

When we're distressed as a child and a parent or other caregiver holds us, hugs us, reassures us, and we're able to take that in and use that for calming – to basically evoke Winnicott and a sense of holding environment, then we self-regulate more.

We tend to see the world as a generally safer place – it's a place in which, if we get hurt, there will be resources.

But if we don't have that – and many of our clients and patients have had childhoods in which they didn't get that kind of comforting and soothing when they were in trouble, and

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they didn't have a secure or otherwise organized attachment relationship – then if we get aroused, we get into a lot of trouble

We start to experience the arousal, and we take the fact that we are aroused – the fact that we are feeling the anxiety – as a signal that, indeed, there must be danger and the world is a dangerous place, and we just spiral when that happens.

“Is there a way that mindfulness practices can help us to create basically a sense of secure attachment?”

So, the question becomes: Is there a way that mindfulness practices can help us to create basically a sense of secure attachment?

Indeed, there is.

Broadly, it's in the realm of developing loving-kindness and self-compassion.

Before I get into showing you exactly how this works, let me just mention some of the things that tend to happen when somebody doesn't have this capacity for self-soothing.

Very often they get stuck in self-critical thoughts as soon as they start to get into some kind of wave of anxiety. They start to think that the anxiety is a sign of weakness and they become angry and disappointed in themselves for feeling it.

Or they feel that they are flawed for having the anxiety. Again, if you don't have secure attachment or another organized attachment pattern as a child, it's very easy to think, *there's something fundamentally wrong with me or, I'm unlovable/broken in some way.*

“Without the capacity to self-soothe, we tend to think that anxiety is dangerous.”

Also, without the capacity to self-soothe, we tend to think that anxiety is dangerous. As I just mentioned, if I feel aroused, the world must be dangerous and I could be overwhelmed by my own fear.

We also have the fantasy that, “I need to get this under control in order to be able to get on with my life.”

“Developing self-compassion and loving-kindness are intimately connected with mindfulness.”

So, an antidote to this that's intimately connected with mindfulness practice is developing self-compassion and loving-kindness toward oneself and toward one's experience.

Now, self-compassion has been written and spoken about a great deal lately and it's largely based on the work of Kristin Neff, who developed the first scale for measuring self-compassion.¹

In the clinical arena, it's been amplified a lot by Chris Germer, who's written a lot about working with self-compassion for various and different kinds of disorders.

What Kristin has pointed out is that when things go wrong, for all of us, we tend to get caught in an **unholy trinity** of three things.

Self-criticism: if we've had a failure, a disappointment, a loss of some sort, we think, "What's wrong with me? What did I do to do this?"

Self-isolation: we tend to feel shame about losses so we tend to pull away from other people and lose social support from that.

Self-absorption: we tend to get stuck in thinking about ourselves a great deal: "What an idiot I was. Nobody's going to love me," et cetera, et cetera.

The antidote to that might be self-compassion, which is self-kindness instead of self-criticism. It's saying, "You know, it's OK. So, I didn't do so well this time, but I still love you."

The antidote to self-isolation might be common humanity, which is a sense that we all screw up at times – we all make mistakes – we all win and lose regularly.

And finally, we have mindfulness rather than self-absorption – to simply be aware of the larger world – to be aware of the feelings and thoughts that are happening within us and to be able to tolerate and accept them.

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Chris Germer suggests **five realms** on which we can try to generate self-kindness, common humanity and a sense of mindfulness.²

The five realms involve: **the physical** – to be able to soften the body and be allowing and aware of what's happening in the body; **the mental** – allowing thoughts to come and go, and we've been discussing this already in other contexts; **the emotional** – to befriend feelings and to allow all the different feelings to be there just as they are, as we've also discussed; **the relational** – to find a way to safely connect to other people; and finally, **the spiritual** – finding a way to connect to something larger than ourselves.

Generating self-compassion can be enormously helpful when we're anxious because it serves as such a nice

“Generating self-compassion when we're anxious is such a nice antidote to the self-critical litany.”

antidote to the whole self-critical litany that so often befalls us when we're stuck in a lot of anxious arousal.

The spiritual side is interesting. It doesn't get discussed that much in psychology, mostly I think because we're afraid of treading into the territory of religion and that can be so contentious, but we can

nonetheless talk to our patients about this in a broad sense: “What helps you to identify with something larger than yourself? What helps you to feel like you're part of a bigger picture?”

This could be nature; it could be connections to friends, family and community; it could be connection to a spiritual teacher, or even to a religious figure or image or religious tradition.

When we are stuck in anxiety, one thing that's helped people throughout the ages has been some kind of identification with something larger than ourselves.

Frankly, if we are identified just with ourselves and we consider what our individual prognosis is like – given the inevitability of illness, aging and death and we'll talk more about these sources of anxiety in a little bit – but given our vulnerable prognosis, unless we can identify with something larger than ourselves, of course we're going to be anxious.

Identifying with something larger than ourselves is also a really important route to developing self-compassion, to developing holding, and to developing a sense of emotional regulation.

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There are some specific self-compassion-generating exercises that I find very helpful personally and I've found them very helpful clinically, and that are quite nicely suited to anxiety disorders.

So, one of them – and this was developed by Kristin Neff – is the self-compassion letter.³

Here's how it goes: you simply ask somebody to describe something that makes them feel badly about themselves. In the case of somebody struggling with anxiety, very often that's the fact that, “I'm afraid to do this/I'm afraid to do that/I'm avoidant of certain situations /I feel like a failure/Everybody else is big and strong and I'm weak and little.”

There are many, many variations on this, but all the ways in which people, when they are anxious, wind up feeling badly about themselves for being anxious.

Then you ask them to do this: to think of a loving, accepting, imaginary friend who you've just told about your anxiety, and then write a letter to yourself from your friend's perspective.

You can actually do this in the office by simply having the person do it verbally and then take some notes about what the elements of the letter would be.

It can also be done as a homework assignment, asking people to actually write it out in some detail.

Usually, what the friend will say is, "You're only human. I feel the same way often. We're all in this together."

"Having a sense of common humanity helps people to forgive themselves for whatever they've perceived as their shortcomings."

Or, they'll say something to that effect.

Having a sense of common humanity helps people to forgive themselves for whatever they've perceived as their shortcomings.

It helps them not to get stuck on top of feeling so anxious in the whole litany of self-hatred that comes from the ways in which anxiety can limit our lives.

Now, closely related to generating self-compassion is generating loving-kindness.

There's a loving-kindness practice that you can do for folks who have a lot of trouble with anxiety that can be targeted specifically toward that.

Most of you, if you've had some experience with mindfulness practice, know about loving-kindness meditation. If not, again I suggest you check out mindfulness-solution.com, the website where there's a standard loving-kindness practice that you can do and learn about this practice for yourself.

Basically, the outline of it is this: first, we imagine a naturally loving, kind being.

That can be somebody we know; it can be a religious figure like Moses, Mohammed, Jesus or the like; it can be the Buddha; it can be a person who has been a great person, who is in some way wise or selfless, such as the Dalai Lama who is currently alive, or Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa; it can even be a place in nature or an animal – some entity, or some being which we think of as naturally loving and kind.

We first begin by generating well wishes toward that person. It goes like this, and there are some standard phrases that are often used like, “May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be free from suffering.”

Or, alternatively, “May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.”

This is often done with the hand over the heart – it adds a kind of warmth that helps to generate this feeling.

We do this until you’ve generated some sense of loving-kindness for the other.

Then, imagine, still with the hand over the heart – sometimes with both hands over the heart – the other wishing the same for me: “May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering. May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.”

Once you’re doing this kind of practice for yourself, then you can do it perhaps for a cherished loved one, perhaps for a family or a small group that you’re part of and for a wider community, and finally building out to all sentient beings.

Now, when you’re doing loving-kindness practice for somebody with a lot of anxiety, you can modify it a little bit with some sort of self-hypnotic suggestions.

These are not suggestions to get rid of the anxiety, but rather they are suggestions to be able to hold and have a kind of secure attachment experience in the presence of anxiety.

It includes phrases like this: “May I be at peace with my fear and anxiety. May I let my fear be. May I allow the anxiety to wash over me and pass through me. May I allow all of my feelings to come and go.”

“These are not suggestions to get rid of the anxiety, but rather suggestions to be able to have a secure attachment experience in the presence of anxiety.”

Here’s the twist: we’re using these practices not so much to get calm, but to create a greater and greater sense of holding so that we can allow all of the different experiences to arise and to pass at will.

Now, of course, people may want to use self-compassion or loving-kindness practice to try to make the anxiety go away – because, indeed, we do tend to get calmer when we’re not fighting it.

We want to come back again and again, clinically, to point out that that’s nice when it occurs but that’s not what we’re grasping after.

We’re cultivating this capacity to increase the ability to be with the full range of experience.

1. Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.
2. Germer, C. K., & Neff, K. D. (2013). Self-Compassion in Clinical Practice. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(8), 856–867. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22021>
3. Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.