Anxiety: Friend or Foe? Part 1 – What's It All About?

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The causes and function of anxiety; its treasures and treatments

Jerry Seinfeld shares an insight about talking in front of an audience. He notes that public speaking is the number one fear for the majority of people. Number two is death. Does that sound right to you? Death is number two. That means that most people attending a funeral would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy.

As absurd as that is, I think it accurately reflects just how disconcerting, paralysing, and irrational the feeling of anxiety actually is. When we look at anxiety from a distance it appears rather silly, especially when it is in response to non-life threatening circumstances. But when we're in the actual emotion of anxiety, whatever triggers us can seem like it is life threatening. Why is that?

In this article I'll talk about how anxiety functions in our brains and bodies, and what the function of anxiety is

Anxiety affects the Brain and the Body

When I see younger clients for their first session, I often start by playing a game called Tumbling Tower – also known as Jenga. This game serves two purposes. One, it acts as an ice breaker because most children like to play games. When I join them in play, I create a situation where they have a certain skill-set and can demonstrate some competence. This helps set them at ease. Kind of!

You see, my second objective is for the kids to have a felt sense of the effect anxiety has on their bodies. Have you ever played Jenga? It's absolutely terrific in that it starts off being easy to find loose pieces to remove from the tower, but gradually it gets harder and harder and takes more skill, steady hands, risk-taking, and good judgment. It's quite nerve wracking actually. With each progressive turn you find yourself doing things like holding your breath, tensing up various muscle groups, making funny sounds, gasping, and then breathing a sigh of relief each time you complete a move successfully. Only to have the process repeat itself when it is your turn once again!

When we finish playing this game a few times, I bring out a poster of feeling faces and ask them to identify which feelings came up during the game. Of course, anxiety is pretty easy to identify, and this leads into a discussion about what those feelings feel like in our bodies. Kids often mention that they were holding their breath during the game, creating tension in their muscles – that sort of thing. We also talk about other common feelings and how they affect the body. When kids get an understanding of how feelings affect the body, it removes some of the mystery and fear surrounding strange physiological occurrences. We know that kids feel like jumping when they are really happy, that they stand tall when they feel confident, that their hearts hurt when they are sad, that their hands feel like hitting when they are angry, that they slouch when they are bored, and they have many and various reactions to anxiety.

Some common physiological responses to anxiety are:

- Increased heart rate
- Increased body temperature and sweating
- Increased respiration
- Shaking hands/arms and/or legs
- Constricted throat
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Feeling jittery with a desire to escape
- Feeling nausea or like there are butterflies in their stomach

When I work with kids, that is pretty much all I will cover in the first session. I want them to have an experience where they play a game with me, thus setting up a relationship that is friendly and welcoming. But I also want them to take away a message that to feel anxiety is perfectly normal, and it is to be expected that it, along with all of our feelings, has an effect on our bodies.

In the next session I get to talk a lot, because it is time for me to remove any mystery about anxiety. And that's what I plan to do for you as well.

Anxiety: Psycho-education

I think it is safe to assume, and research bears this out, that if anxiety has survived the millennia of human evolution, then it must have a pretty important function. As inconvenient as it is for my clients to experience anxiety, it has a purpose.

I start by explaining the effects of anxiety on the brain. Briefly stated, when we experience a strong basic emotion like anxiety or anger, an older part of our brain is activated, and the parts of our brain that are able to think rationally is less able to function. We don't need rationale, reason, and complex problem solving when we are under perceived threat, only the benefits of the fight, flight or freeze response governed by our midbrain.

I'm sure many of you have been in this mode of brain before. Sometimes it is totally appropriate and necessary for our survival. In fact, I once asked one of my clients why we have the feeling of anxiety. The answer given was, "To keep us from doing stupid stuff", and I might add, "To keep us safe".

When I talk to kids about anxiety, getting some knowledge of how it affects their brains can be really helpful because there is power and control in being aware of what is happening, and then naming it to tame it.

Once the psycho-educational component of our work is done, then I can talk about how we can desensitize their internal smoke detector (the amygdala's fight, flight or freeze response), and get their mind back in control of their brain. In the meantime, I send them off with some observational homework. I want to know when they experience anxiety, and what their self-talk is before and during the anxious episode.

Here are some examples of what kids might say:

- I was anxious when I was playing soccer outdoors. I saw the wind blowing the trees at the edge of the soccer field, and I saw clouds in the distance. I felt sick to my stomach and started worrying that there would be a storm soon. What if it rains really hard? What if the trees get blown over? What if there is a tornado?
- I had to go to the mall to shop for a new pair of pants. I noticed all the people in the mall and I started to feel like they were all looking at me. Suddenly I was having trouble breathing, and I worried that people might notice that. What if I couldn't breathe and I passed out? What if no one helped me? What if the boy I like saw this happen to me and never talked to me again?
- It was time for bed and dad hadn't come home from work yet. I was lying in bed trying to relax, but I couldn't because I hadn't touched the frame of my pictures 4 times. What if I didn't do it tonight and dad had an accident on his way home? I had to get up and touch the frames and count each time I did it, because if I didn't, dad could have an accident.
- I was in class and the teacher started asking questions to the class, expecting us to put up our hands. I started feeling faint and dizzy. What if the teacher asked me and I didn't know the answer? What if I passed out and fell off my chair?

This should give you some idea of what I hear, along with a lot of variations. You'll notice that anxiety is driven by "what-if" thoughts that are well-rehearsed in most cases – a simple function of the brain producing automatic and associative thoughts.

Types of Anxiety

General anxiety disorder – anxiety is an undercurrent to most life experiences

Social anxiety – fear of being judged

Separation anxiety – child can't be away from parent/attachment figure

Phobias – fears of many and various things – storms, animals, germs

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) – tapping, hand-washing, any repetitive behaviours that provide relief from the obsessive thought.

Panic disorders – sudden onset of physiological symptoms associated with the fight/flight/freeze response.

PTSD – flashbacks of past traumatic events that put the body back into the traumatized state.

Once I have a better understanding of what we are dealing with, then I can start treatment following textbook procedures that come from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

There are four components to the treatment: Relaxation Training, Mindfulness practice, Cognitive Challenging, and Exposure trials.

Part 2 in the series gives an overview of the CBT toolbox.