

How to Short-Circuit Anxiety (and Even Use It to Your Advantage)

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You know that feeling... your heart is beating rapidly, your palms are sweaty or perhaps you can feel those butterflies fluttering away? For some, this can feel like that breakfast sandwich is making its way up, and we've all been there – in the reception area waiting for that big job interview, or before a presentation that's the result of weeks of effort, and which will happen in front of hundreds of people. In such a situation, dopamine levels are high, and we either let our nerves take over and get the best of us, or we use that rush to propel us into action.

Of course, anxiety can happen to us anywhere, and at any time, particularly now that Covid-19 uncertainty seems ever-present. Whether we're in business for ourselves or are worried about whether our job is safe, nervous stress is a new constant and can be debilitating.

If you find that you are experiencing sustained and extreme levels of anxiety, consult a health professional or therapist near you, but for more typical feelings of this type, there are some proactive steps that can reduce their effect.

1. Roadmap and Document your Feelings

If you are in tune with your emotions – and the broader

contours of your life – it's more likely that you'll be able to short-circuit anxiety before it sets in. Neglecting your finances, relationships, diet and health all impact mental resilience. This might sound obvious, yet is all-too-easily forgotten. For example, paying attention to and establishing boundaries around caffeine and alcohol intake, foods consumed, impulsive online shopping and mindless social media scrolling can all reduce stress.

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I find it helpful to do a “feelings check” throughout the day. The process is simple: Set a timer on your phone every few hours, name what you are feeling, and write it down. The more we become aware of what we are experiencing, the more present, connected and grounded we become. These checks are particularly helpful in the wake of a turbulent moment, say after reading an article or receiving a phone call that threw you off. Once you can identify the associated feeling (anger, sadness, fear), you can move on, and will not be taking this sensation with you throughout the day.

2. Meditate, and Apply Breathing Techniques

Meditation has a number of health benefits. It can help with gaining a new perspective in stressful situations, in connecting with yourself and focusing on the present. It can also assist in reducing negative feelings. If meditation is new to you, start with a five- to 10-minute guided version. (Just search Google and there will be abundant free examples.)

Or consider using a breathing technique; one of my favorites is the 4-7-8 method developed by Dr. Andrew Weil, in which respiration is regulated according to specific “in and out” counts – the result what Weil describes as a “natural

tranquilizer for the nervous system.” Breathing deeply and mindfully can help with blood flow and energy level. It can also relax the mind and body and help with focus, so consider starting and ending your days with them and/or when presented with a stressful situation.

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3. Change the Focus... and When to Let Anxiety Work for You

When you start feeling overwhelmed, step away. Grab some water. Make a phone call. Engage in a new activity... in short, change focus.

But interestingly, a fight or flight stress response can actually be useful if used properly. After all, without fear, the human race would not have survived, and fight or flight is what first responders rely on to serve our communities and keep us safe.

It's possible to use fear to find solutions you might not have thought of otherwise. When we're stressed, our bodies release cortisol, which gives us a heightened sense of awareness until the task or the stressful event is over. When you feel like your body or mind is on edge, consider using the opportunity to finish a big task. Maybe it's a big sales presentation or report, but *this* is the time to focus on an item that you might have been putting off. The key in the process, however, is to also give yourself breaks to de-stress.

Put simply, be aware that you can positively reframe what's happening in your mind. Consider a stressful event a challenge, not a threat. An Iraqi war veteran to whom I'm close explained to me how he was able to do this when he was in the service. He said that the moment he decided to look at his year-long deployment as an adventure rather than a burden,

his mindset and experience shifted. He no longer felt frozen with fear and worry. It wasn't that he was no longer scared, but what became more important to him was getting tasks done, just under stressful conditions.

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4. Find the Meaning in Your Actions

Why are you at your job? If you are working for yourself, why did you start the business? Something as simple as earning a consistent paycheck might very well be the ready answer to these questions. Finding broader meaning, however, fuels introspection generally, and the results can be transformative.

Where are you now, and where do you want to go? What actions are you taking daily to get there? For example, if you are currently pivoting a business, what courses are you taking? What books are you reading? What podcasts are you listening to? What steps are you taking to gain more knowledge?

Then ask yourself, "What am I enjoying today? What brings me happiness?" Neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl believed that humans are motivated by something he referred to as a "will to meaning," which basically means that we are constantly seeking meaning or purpose – it's what motivates us and drives us to keep going. This often takes the form of a dialog within ourselves to spur curiosity, boost potential and to evolve and grow.

In Barbara Fredrickson's book *Positivity: Discover the Upward Spiral That Will Change Your Life* (Harmony, 2009), the professor of psychology and neuroscience explains just how profoundly day-to-day emotional experiences affect the course of our lives. In one passage, she explains that, "Flourishing goes beyond happiness, or satisfaction with life. True, people who flourish are happy. But that is not the half of it. Beyond

feeling good, they're also doing good – adding value to the world.”

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When we are able to flip the script and change the narrative about anxiety, we are able to envision and create better paths. We can also use it to create, inspire and motivate both ourselves and those around us. When we are able to take control of anxiety, rather than letting it control us, we start to experience more possibilities, gain confidence and leadership abilities, and receive more of what we truly want.

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