

Managing Anxiety, Managing Avoidance

By Ernest Schmidt, LCSW

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health concerns that individuals face. Almost everyone can identify a time in their lives when they have been bothered by anxiety, whether it be public speaking anxiety, panic attacks, social nervousness, or just plain old worry. For some, this is a small annoyance, but for many it is a life altering and extremely uncomfortable experience. By better understanding this emotion and following a few guidelines you can learn to successfully manage anxiety.

Common Symptoms

Common symptoms that are associated with anxiety are: rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, fear of losing control, the feeling of butterflies in one's stomach, obsessive thoughts or worries, restlessness, irritability, and avoidance of things, people, or places that are associated with the anxiety. This last symptom, termed avoidance, is often the most destructive of all and generally the least recognized by the individuals that suffer from anxiety. Some turn down quality job offers that include an element of public speaking, where as others consistently pass up social engagements. People with anxiety often find their daily activities and their enjoyment in life becoming more and more restricted.

There are several ways to overcome anxiety, but unless avoidance is addressed, it is difficult to make significant and long lasting progress. The following three steps work very well for those who are struggling with anxiety.

Understanding and Awareness

It is difficult to change something that is not fully acknowledged. To achieve this goal, it is helpful to create a list of all the things that have been avoided due to worry or anxiety. Although this can be somewhat painful and challenging, it is also extremely motivating. This tangible list also allows you to focus on specific areas for improvement. Without this understanding and awareness, the process of trying to manage anxiety is often aimless and uninspired.

Changing the way you think

Although changing your thoughts may sound daunting, it can be relatively easy with the right guidance. A great technique is to mentally observe your thoughts when you are feeling anxious and then record them on paper. For example, someone who is overwhelmed with change in his or her life may have the thought "I can't handle this" or "I am going to have a nervous

breakdown”. Rather than getting caught up in the worry itself, you can use your rational mind to respond to your faulty thoughts. For instance, if you really try to define “nervous breakdown”, you will realize it’s a false term. You are likely experiencing intense anxiety, but neither your nervous system nor your brain actually breaks. Although these mental misstatements may seem harmless, they profoundly affect one’s level of anxiety. By acknowledging and challenging these exaggerations, anxiety lessens. As with learning any new skill, changing the way you think takes time and practice, but in the end it is well worth it.

Facing Anxiety

Although it may sound counterintuitive, turning and facing anxiety is the final step in ultimately managing this emotion. By shifting one’s relationship with anxiety and actually seeking it out, you can forever change how it affects you. Due to the very nature of anxiety, it either causes us to exaggerate what it is we are trying to avoid, or it makes us feel we are unable to cope with the feared situation. I often compare anxiety to the “monster in the closet” or to the harmless “man behind the curtain” in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Certainly, facing anxiety is much easier said than done, but when the first two steps are followed this final step can be accomplished without much difficulty.

Managing anxiety is no easy task, but ignoring the damage and emotional pain it causes is a poor alternative. By following the three steps above, significant progress can be made in the battle with anxiety. Those who become skilled at managing their avoidance are ultimately rewarded with lasting freedom from this difficult emotion.