

How to better tolerate Anxiety

2 KEY concepts:

1. Anxiety is maintained by **avoidance**
2. Must be willing to attempt **exposure**

The role of neurology:

Fight, Flight, or Freeze – brains warning system... Danger!

2 waves of fear:

- **The first wave:** We begin to experience symptoms of anxiety. We are in survival mode, a primitive reaction. Happens very quickly before any conscious assessment of danger can take place [e.g. hear a loud sound and react without knowing if it's a pot crashing down or a gunshot]. This initial rush of anxiety cannot be stopped, out of our control.
- **Second wave:** our internal alarm is sounding, a second additional arousal takes place, a second wave of fear. THIS IS THE TIME TO STOP AND ASSESS → *am I in danger?*
 - We are able to determine if danger exists or not. **It is crucial that we label correctly** b/c different labels lead to different reactions.
 - Danger → get to safety!
 - Anxiety → just my anxiety talking, no source of danger present, I am safe.

If we respond to the initial wave of fear with anxious thoughts [e.g. "Oh no I'm in danger!"] the anxiety is maintained, the alarm bell keeps ringing [e.g. lots of catastrophic "What if?" thoughts]. The thoughts become evidence of danger. It becomes a self-reinforcing feedback cycle.

The 2nd wave can be managed and is amenable to intervention. The intervention of choice is exposure.

- Exposure: need to challenge our fears, need to let information in that we are not privy to when we are anxiously avoiding the feared stimulus, we need realistic info about the threat.
- Need to expose oneself to the anxious feelings, we are *trying* on purpose to create a manageable but not overwhelming level of anxiety.
 1. Don't avoid, don't seek reassurance, don't seek safety
 2. Practice new ways of managing anxiety when it arises [see working w thoughts below]
 3. Have to stay with the anxiety for long enough

GOAL is to allow the anxious thoughts and feelings while focusing on the task at hand. Part of the problem though is anxious thoughts are very "sticky." It doesn't work to simply tell yourself to think of something else. The thoughts are hard to resist.

Don't resist. 2 ways of working with anxious thoughts:

1. **Mindfulness** – attitude of acceptance, embracing the anxiety, seeking it out and even being excited about it
 - There is a pre-existing "as if" scenario in place: You're operating "as if" there is something dangerous about to occur! We are working to replace that, not to invent something brand new.
2. Identify, evaluate, respond to anxious thoughts, or put another way, **think about your thinking.**
 - Many thoughts are illogical, don't give in to emotional reasoning, anxiety is a false messenger, telling yourself you are in danger may make you FEEL like you really are but feeling terror or panic doesn't mean you are IN FACT in danger.

Best thing to do when you are anxious? Do nothing. Any attempt to push it away makes it more intense.