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Practical Counseling for your busy life

Anxiety: why it seems to consume you

Anxiety can be used to describe any feeling of worry or dread, usually about events that might potentially happen. It is a future-oriented mood state that is accompanied by apprehension, worry and heightened activity of the sympathetic nervous system. In other words, anxiety can be debilitating and exhausting.

In many people, anxiety interferes with their ability to function and they find themselves spending time and energy avoiding the things they are anxious about. This avoidance creates a vicious cycle. You avoid the things that make you anxious in an effort to feel less anxious. But this avoidance always makes anxiety worse.

Humans have been roaming the planet for thousands of years and over that time have developed a highly evolved danger alert system. Back in the prehistoric times, humans had to be constantly on the alert for life-threatening dangers: poisonous snakes, man-eating tigers, other marauding humans. Nowadays, most people in the United States do not live in a state of constant threat. We live in homes with locks, drive around in cars and rarely, if ever, engage with big scary wildlife. This a good thing, but because our brain is designed to be on the lookout all the time, in modern society, it needs something to do. This is why people today have such strong anxiety responses to perceived threats in the environment.

Humans also have the ability to do something no other animals can do: think about thinking. Although this can be helpful in that it allows us to gain insight into our thoughts and behavior, thinking about thinking, or meta-thinking can function to make anxiety worse.

How do I get rid of my anxiety?

You cannot "get rid" of anxiety. Anxiety in and of itself is not the problem. Anxiety will never go away completely, well not unless you are dead. Anxious feelings become a problem when we are people do things to banish anxiety from happening. They find themselves living in avoidance of the anxiety, which as you can imagine, ends up being a pretty limited life. You can learn how to work with your anxiety, to get it working for you instead of limiting how you live your life.

First thing is learning to accept that anxiety exists. When people have anxiety, they go through great lengths to avoid it or change it or medicate it, all of these approaches might work for a few minutes or hours, but always function to make the anxiety bigger. In counseling, I work with clients first to teach them techniques on how to accept their anxiety as the first step in making it smaller.

Secondly learning how to tolerate feeling anxious is a big step in making your anxiety smaller. This seems counterintuitive, but in order to expand your comfort zone, you have to learn to tolerate some discomfort. Leaning into the anxiety is the goal.

Once you start practicing techniques that begin to loosen the stranglehold anxiety has had on you, you may find yourself thinking, "now what?" When you've grown accustomed to avoiding people, places and things in order to avoid anxiety, it can feel disorienting and unfamiliar when you break those patterns of avoidance.

So what do I do now?

Now it's time to explore what you really want to do. It is time to take back your life! Together we can look at the things you value. Very often people lose sight of their values when they spend all of their time and energy trying to manage their anxiety. What would your life look like if anxiety did not rule you?