



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

How to Handle Fear, Worry, & Anxiety

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” ~ Nelson Mandela

What do stress, worry, anxiety, and even panic attacks have in common? They are all evidence of an overloaded nervous system. Our nervous systems, in part, help us face potential danger. The system, however, was designed to guide us through immediate, life threatening danger. It still does; the response your nervous system has to a life threatening emergency could save your life. Chemicals and hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, norepinephrine, and oxytocin are released in order to get our hearts pumping faster, tense our muscles, sharpen our focus, shut down non-essential systems in the moment (immune, digestion, and reproduction) to conserve energy, and motivate us to find resources and support.

The problem is that this system is being activated for long-term, chronic stressors (like a case that’s going to trial, the care of our elderly parents or our children, daily exposure to inflammatory news or media, or a stressful election) or consistent daily hassles (grocery list, rush-hour traffic, paying bills). The stressors we are dealing with are mostly psychological or cognitive in nature as we try to “figure out” how to manage and prioritize all of the tasks we have in a day and all of the unexpected glitches that happen along the way.

What was meant to be a solution to a short term problem is now being used to handle long term issues like a perpetually full email inbox. This taxes our reserves of energy and, at the same time, makes us addicted to the stress spiral. We become so used to being stressed that we can’t calm down. When we have been chronically stressed for weeks, months or even years, we often do not know what to do with ourselves if there isn’t some “fire to put out.” Drama (ours or someone else’s) becomes appealing when the body has so much adrenaline and cortisol to burn off that the brain looks around to find something to become upset about.

The cognitive and emotional results of an overactive nervous system include responses governed by different parts of the brain. Fear is the emotional response to an emergency, or life threatening event. Anxiety, which is different than fear, is not a response to actual danger but rather a response to something that hasn’t happened and might never happen. Anxiety is worrying about uncertainty. When people say they are afraid about something, or fear something, they are usually speaking about anxiety because fear is an emotion related to a physical danger rather than psychologically responding to what could

happen and projecting bad outcomes. Ironically, however, chronic anxiety signals “threat” to brain, meaning that we can worry ourselves into a fearful state that mirrors actual danger.

For example, there is a difference in the parts of the brain that activate when our car slips on ice and we are moments away from a car accident (immediate physical danger) and the parts that activate when we are clutching the steering wheel and being hypervigilant while we drive because we are worried that we might slip on the ice (imagining or worry about potential danger). Over time, our body responds the same to both immediate danger and the psychological worry about danger, while the parts of the brain responsible for thinking and memory shrink and the parts of the brain responsible for our “fight or flight” response grow. These changes in the chemistry of the body and the brain results in:

1. **Altering our personality:** making us more agitated, angry, belligerent, judgmental, hateful, and less compassionate and understanding.
2. **Reducing our cognitive skills:** diminishing our ability to think critically, logically, and to problem solve.
3. **Negatively impacting our memory:** both through memory loss and the creation of “altered” memories (memories tainted by anxiety because we see through a lens of panic, causing what we remember to seem worse than it was).
4. **Altering our decision making:** we become influenced more by emotional response than to actual facts.
5. **Physical and mental health implications:** the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems aren’t necessities in an emergency, so stress slows their functions down, leading to long-term illnesses; chronic stress also leads to depression and other mental health repercussions.

On the contrary, however, worry, stress, and anxiety damage the pre-frontal cortex (decision making part of the brain), making us less capable of handling a crisis in a logical, mature way. The more we mentally “freak out” with worry and stress, the less able we are to think clearly or rationally. People whose nervous systems have been on “hyper-drive” for a long time develop the compulsion to worry about situations or other people because their bodies are used to being on high alert for danger, and they have a hard time prioritizing what is important. When we are in that sort of mindset, we might take on too many projects, focus on irrelevant details or get overly invested in other people’s issues or problems, make mountains out of molehills, etc. Research also points to changes in the brain, such as the shrinking of the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, when we are under constant states of fear and anxiety even though we aren’t in actual immediate danger. For attorneys, this tendency is an occupational hazard because we are often hired to look for potential pitfalls,

question motives, search for agendas, solve other people's problems, and try to predict the "worst case scenario."

The next time you find yourself worrying, remember not to believe everything you think, or everything you hear or see. Our thoughts can betray us when we are stressed because our logical brains are not firing at "full capacity." In addition, we are bombarded by media and news that research shows increases our levels of anxiety and fear, negatively impacting our thoughts and our brain chemistry. Another suggestion is to reframe your efforts as a problem solving exercise when you are stressed. Rather than allowing "doom and gloom" thoughts to spin through your mind, ask yourself what the real problem is that you are addressing. Is it really about the person you are projecting or attributing negative thoughts to? Are you afraid of an outcome over which you have no control? Are you metaphorically "living in the past" and allowing past outcomes to cloud your judgment or anticipation of this outcome? Most likely, the real problem has nothing to do with the storyline; when we worry, the real issue is almost always simpler than we make it out to be. Due to the way our brains work, the "real issue" is usually that we feel uncertain and lack a sense of direction about the situation. When that is the case, the solution is usually recognize or identify the resources we have to problem solve the situation so that the uncertainty or feeling a "lack of control" can subside.

Changing a mind that has been chronically stressed with worry into a calm, peaceful mind might take dedication and discipline, but it isn't difficult. One way is to direct your thoughts and distract yourself on something funny or positive when you find yourself worrying. This does take discipline because the brain and the nervous system are supporting the tendency to complain, gossip, engage in "monkey mind," rehash something from the past, etc. when we are stressed. When you feel better, however, you can decide if what you were thinking about is really worth the brain damage (literally) or if you need to approach the topic in your mind from a broader, more integrated perspective. Brainstorming with people that you respect broadens the narrowly focused worried brain and you can access parts of your mind that were previously closed. In addition, working with others to solve a problem activates the social nervous system, which is an antidote to the part of the nervous system responsible for the fight-or-flight response.

Whether you reframe your worrying as problem solving, distract yourself long enough to determine how useful the worrying actually is, or you engage others in your attempt to solve the puzzle in your mind, remember to slow down. As anxiety and worry increases, so do our thoughts, our heartbeat, our blood pressure, etc. This arousal response clouds our judgment. When we mindfully slow down our thoughts, actions, and breathing, we signal to the nervous system that we are not in a life threatening emergency. As the

nervous system relaxes, our mood improves, and we can see through a clearer and more rational lens. In addition, because we are strongly physically and emotionally impacted by those around us, when your nervous system relaxes, the people around you will feel safer and it encourages them to calm down as well. The next time you feel anxious or fearful, slow down, take a “step back,” and breathe; you might be surprised at how easily you can calm yourself and handle the situation with a level of grace and maturity that you can be proud of, and that empowers the people around you.

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