
HOW TO HANDLE FEAR, WORRY & ANXIETY

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“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

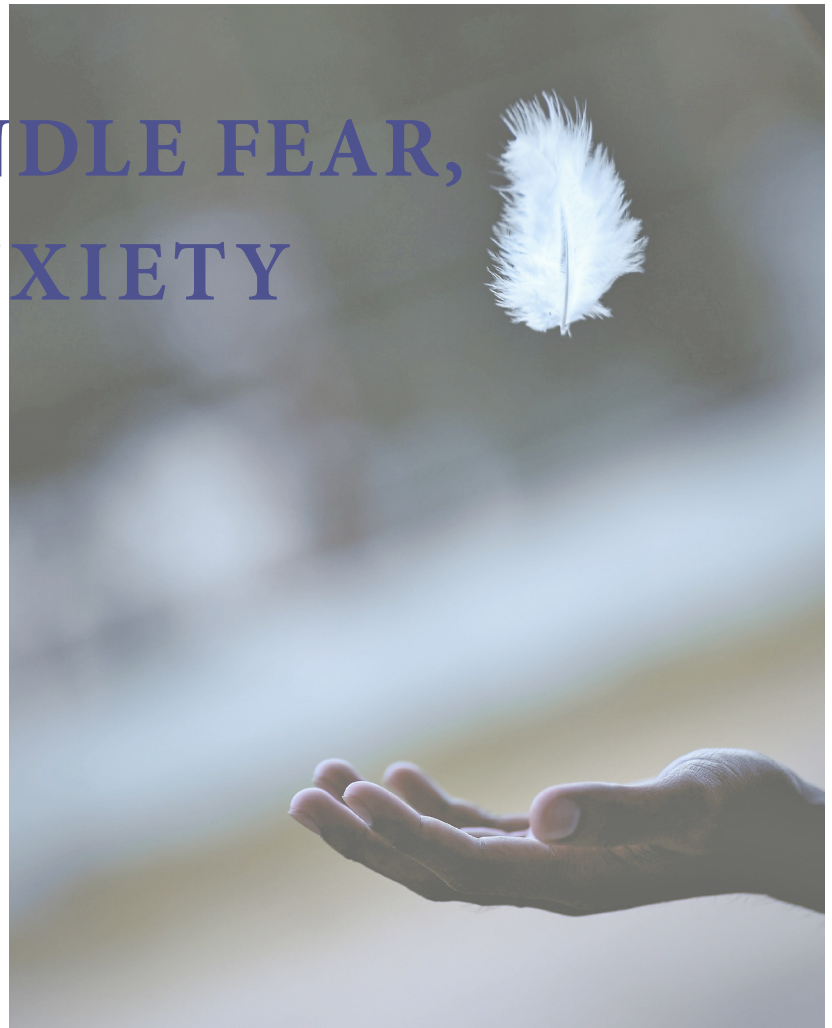


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What do stress, worry, anxiety, and panic attacks have in common? They are all evidence of an overloaded nervous system. Our nervous system helps us prevent physical and mortal injury, and can also support us to relax, rest, heal, and stay “cool, calm, and collected” under pressure.

Unfortunately, in order to manage and adapt to the demands of our lives, we are taxing the threat response system (aka stress) when we should be activating the calming responses. During the stress response chemicals and hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, norepinephrine, and oxytocin are released in order to get our hearts pumping faster, tense our muscles, sharpen a limited or narrow focus, shut down systems that are non-essential during a true crisis (immune, digestion, and reproduction) to conserve energy, and motivate us to find resources and support. While these physiological changes are helpful in a life threatening emergency, our bodies and our minds cannot sustain them without negative side effects. An overly taxed nervous system can lead to both physical and cognitive health problems that we want to avoid.

Adapting to our modern lives often requires us to activate our threat response for both **long-term, chronic stressors** (such as navigating the uncertainty of a pandemic or taking care of both aging relatives and young children at the same time) and **consistent daily hassles** (email, impossible to-do lists, rush-hour traffic, paying bills). While they might be real, and in some cases extreme, the majority of the stressors we are dealing with are mostly psychological or cognitive in nature rather than life-threatening in the moment.

The cognitive and emotional experiences of an overactive nervous system are governed by different parts of the brain, but they can merge in ways that make us even more stressed and reactive during overwhelming situations. One way this happens is when fear gets confused with anxiety. Fear is an emotion related to potential physical danger, while anxiety is the psychological attempt to plan or prepare for potentially difficult outcomes or undesirable futures. This is an occupational hazard for the legal community since our work is often about preventing those for our clients.

*Unfortunately, chronic anxiety signals to the brain that we are under threat.
We can therefore 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 (immediate physical danger) and the parts that activate when we are clutching the steering wheel and being hyper-vigilant 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. We can become more agitated and reactive, our cognitive skills diminish, our memory becomes compromised, we can become overly emotional in our reactions, and our physical health becomes negatively impacted. To avoid these, the next time you find yourself worrying:

1. ***Slow down & go with your second impression:*** First impressions of what we see, hear, and even think are faulty when we are stressed and overwhelmed. Our thoughts and interpretations of sensory input can betray us when we are in fight or flight because the logical brain is not fully engaged at that time. Pause and take time to reflect on what you just heard, read, or saw before you form an opinion about it, or before you react to it.
2. ***Approach the stressor as a problem-solving exercise rather than taking it personally:*** Separate the emotional response from the issue at hand. When stressed, our thoughts can race and turn negative in ways that agitate us further. If that happens, ask yourself what the core problem is that needs to be addressed. Is it really about the person you are projecting onto or making assumptions about? Are you afraid of an outcome over which you have no control? Are you allowing past outcomes to cloud your judgment or anticipation of this outcome? When you separate out the issues that block resolution by triggering your stress response, your logical brain will guide you to an appropriate solution to the real issue.
3. ***Distract yourself with something funny or positive:*** This does take effort because the brain and the nervous system support the tendency to complain, gossip, and perseverate about things that happened in the past when we are stressed.
4. ***Approach the topic from a broader, more integrated perspective:*** Brainstorming with people that you respect broadens the narrowly focused worried brain so that 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 stress response.

The most productive way to work with an overactive nervous system is to ***slow down***. As anxiety and worry increase, so do our thoughts, our heartbeat, and our blood pressure. This arousal response clouds our judgment. When we mindfully slow down our breathing and our thoughts or actions, we relax our nervous system. This in turn improves our mood and we can problem solve effectively with a level of grace and maturity that empowers the people around us rather than spreading the stress around! 🌸

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