Anxiety as a Companion

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In the last few years, I’ve heard people remark that their goal in treatment is to control their anxiety, or more so, to not have anxiety at all.

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The pathologizing of anxiety is a trend I abhor.

Anxiety serves a purpose to keep us safe from danger and threat. Panic symptoms are rooted in a flood of sympathetic nervous system activity - all designed to help you fight or take flight from danger. The problem, as I see it, is we live in a world where we are constantly exposed to information, and depending on what that information is and how we interpret it, a lot of that information can be agitating or threatening. There’s the 24 hour news cycle - much of which highlights problems or conflicts, advertisements everywhere you look about what to buy or what to do to be better or do better, social media posts that you can’t avoid comparing yourself and your life to, notifications and information in emails that you need to remember and maybe respond to, and don’t forget the texts pinging throughout the day and night... and that’s to say nothing of the never-ending lists we have for ourselves in our minds, on paper, and on notifications and reminders we put on our technology. There is ALWAYS more to know and do.

The competing system for our sympathetic, fight or flight system is the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the rest and relaxation system. My belief is that we live in a world where we frequently exercise the sympathetic system, and not so much the parasympathetic system. Now, to make my point, let’s use a metaphor. Imagine each system as an arm on my body. The more I exercise each system, the stronger it gets. The sympathetic arm looks like a Popeye arm, while the parasympathetic arm is a shriveled weakling. Because it’s so strong, I might default to one arm without even conscious awareness. I have to exercise the parasympathetic response in order to be able to use it automatically. Breathing is the most common tool for activating your parasympathetic response, and depending on your preferences, yoga, humming, prayer, and slow walks outside might be helpful. I personally love to walk with my dogs in the woods, take baths with epsom salts, burn incense, listen to slow chanting music, and draw.

There is of course, individual variability in what is calming. In the same way we all have different anxiety triggers, we all have different things and activities that are calming. I hate having my head or hair touched, but I have friends for whom a scalp massage is quite soothing and relaxing. One of my favorite activities is walking in the woods. About a year ago, I took a friend with me. When I happened to glance at her about 10 minutes into our walk, she looked panicked. I asked her what was wrong, and she immediately listed all the creepy-crawly bugs and spiders that could potentially land on her, get stuck in her clothes, maybe bite her and thus give her a horrible illness. We all have to experiment to identify what might be calming, and with practice, we can also develop and enhance the calming qualities of an activity. For my almost daily baths, I now have an identified calm playlist on iTunes, favorite epsom salts (Dr Teal’s Relax and Relief or Muscle Recovery Soak), and books I read (poetry and meditations mainly, definitely not the news or anything agitating or stimulating).

So back to what I said at the beginning. Most anyone who has successfully overcome panic will tell you, the more you try to control your panic symptoms, typically the worse you feel. Similarly, when you suffer with OCD and you try to control your thoughts or feelings, anxiety and suffering typically increase instead. **The goal cannot be to control. A much better and more realistic goal is to change how you react and relate to anxiety symptoms.**

The goal of getting rid of anxiety is totally unrealistic. We wouldn’t be human without anxiety. Anxiety serves to alert us of danger, and can be adaptive. We need to fight or take flight when there is a threat. However, anxiety in overdrive is truly miserable. Education teaches us about the physiology of anxiety and it’s adaptiveness. Through good treatment, we can become aware of our triggers, and especially increase our understanding of how our own cognitions and interpretations might make us perceive something as threatening when it may not be. We can learn about belief systems that might be harming us (I can’t tolerate uncertainty, I need to know what is going to happen, I can’t stand mistakes, I have to be certain about safety, everything needs to feel “just right,” to name a few).

We might not ever like the feeling of anxiety. I don’t like it and I specialize in anxiety disorders. However, we can learn to make our peace with anxiety as a companion, wanted in times of true threat and unwanted the rest of the time. We can live the life we want to live whether anxiety is with us or not.