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Overcoming Fear: Walking with Anxiety

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Anxiety is the most common presenting concern for people seeking any form psychological help. An estimated 19.1% of U.S. adults experience an anxiety disorder in a given year. Past year prevalence of any anxiety disorder was higher for females (23.4%) than for males (14.3%). An estimated 31.1% of U.S. adults experience any anxiety disorder at some time in their lives (Harvard Medical School, 2007).

Before you read any further, it is important to know that anxiety is a normal part of human experience. In fact, some amount of anxiety is adaptive and important for optimal functioning. In moderate amounts, it can actually provide motivation and improve concentration. When anxiety reaches the point of causing significant distress or work/educational, social, or personal impairment, it may be classified as an anxiety disorder.

The experience of anxiety can range from persistent or excessive worry that is difficult to control and involves a wide range of everyday concerns (Generalized Anxiety) to acute anxiety that is often experienced as coming out of nowhere and is often triggered by physical sensations (Panic Attack) and can reoccur with ongoing fears of reoccurrence (Panic disorder). Some people experience intense anxiety across a range of public experiences (Social Anxiety), and others are fearful in places where they believe it would be difficult obtain help if they become anxious (Agoraphobia). The experience of anxiety can be highly specific (Phobia) or it can involve obsessive thoughts and behaviors (Obsessive Compulsive disorder). Anxiety can also be related to medical concerns, substance use, or experiences of trauma. People may also have a combination of these experiences and not every experience of anxiety can be easily classified into these categories.

Worry forms a foundation for anxiety (and often depression for that matter). When our rational, normal fear crosses over to worry, it begins to feed our anxiety. Worry can involve a range of persistent thoughts and images that tend to build or grow, often without our complete awareness of what is happening or the negative impact our worry is having on our bodies and minds.

The central problem in overcoming anxiety is largely related to our cultural norms around getting over problems or fighting off negative influences. For example, people frequently talk about fighting off negative thoughts or getting worries out of their head. Unfortunately, this approach only causes more anxiety. The more we try to fight anxiety, the stronger it becomes.

The key to feeling better is to walk with your anxiety. Of course, your ability to walk with your anxiety and feel better will likely be much greater if you seek support from a credentialed therapist. Nevertheless, you can also begin to take steps on your own and with the support of others in your life.

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This may sound counterintuitive, but the **first step** in coping with your anxiety is to accept that it exists and to step back from the fight. This first step is often difficult and requires ongoing attention as you must continually work on this acceptance. During this time you can also begin to practice simply observing your anxiety. Notice what you are thinking and how your body feels. Some people find it helpful to write down their thoughts or worries. Although challenging irrational thoughts can often be helpful, it is best to focus first on observation and acceptance. In the end, if you are able to accept the discomfort of anxiety and allow yourself to step outside of the fight, it is likely that you will experience a reduction in your distress.

The **second step** involves practicing new coping skills based on acceptance. The most helpful and common skills involve breathing and grounding exercises. Skills based on mindfulness or directing your attention to your present thoughts, feelings or other experiences as they arise or occur with a non-judgmental attitude are also tremendously helpful to most people. There are many excellent resources with examples of these skills.

The **third step** to feeling better is to continue to find opportunities to practice the first step. Prior to this step, it is important to feel you have made progress with the first two steps, so that you are better prepared to cope with situations that can increase your distress. You will need to face your anxiety and learn to walk with it by putting yourself in situations where you feel anxious. This also seems counterintuitive, but it will be important for you to practice your new relationship to anxiety.

These three steps can be helpful in reducing your overall anxiety. However, it is essential to understand that the goal is to change your relationship with anxiety, not to fight it off or eliminate it altogether. As described earlier, anxiety is part of the human condition and healthy levels of anxiety can be beneficial. Changing this relationship will take patience, acceptance, and practice, but it is entirely possible to reach a point where anxiety is no longer your enemy.