

Chapter 3. Anxiety and Avoidance

Anxiety is a feeling that is present in a wide variety of distressing psychological syndromes, including phobias, panic attacks, obsessions and compulsions, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social phobias, and generalized anxiety. In this chapter, we will focus on a few of these common forms of anxiety, specifically, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD, produced by worry), panic attacks, social anxiety, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Anxiety and dissociation produced by trauma, such as that found in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) will be thoroughly addressed later in an entire section on trauma and dissociation. Avoidance is a defense against anxiety, which provides short term relief from anxiety, though this reward reinforces the avoidance, often leading to long term escalations of both the avoidance and the anxiety. Anxiety is sometimes misunderstood, and sometimes confused with depression. Anxiety is a feeling whose meaning is similar to fear, tension and nervousness. It is a tense feeling that arises when we fear something negative happening in the near future. The negative event may be external, such as being ridiculed for a lousy presentation in front of coworkers or classmates later today, or internal, such as the danger of a suppressed memory of abuse surfacing, or fear that our anger will get out of control. Anxiety is different from depression, but often coexists alongside depression. Anxiety is a feeling, which can develop into various anxiety syndromes (GAD, PTSD, etc.). As we saw last chapter, depression is a syndrome rather than a feeling, but often involves sadness as a primary feeling. Sadness and depression typically involve a significant loss (e.g., loss of a loved one, rejection by a lover, loss of health or job, etc.), and is often focused on the past, whereas anxiety is focused more on the future. When we are anxious, we are typically focused on threatening events that are about to happen, whereas sadness and depression focus on losses that have already happened. It is quite common, however, for the two to coexist. Proponents of mindfulness will tell us that in this case, we are stuck in our heads, trapped by thoughts about the past and future, while ignoring the liberating gift of the present.

Anxiety and fear live in the same neighborhood, but are not identical. Fear, and its extreme version, panic, are an innate, automatic and adaptive survival responses to immediate danger. They precipitate a fight or flight response, increasing our breathing to oxygenate our blood, which is delivered more selectively to our large muscles, while our pupils dilate to vigilantly assess the threat. We automatically prepare ourselves to either

fight off an attack, or to flee to safety to live another day. Our fight or flight response to fear is instantaneous and involuntary, and helps us engage in immediate self-protection. If your genetic ancestors were too mellow in their reactions to threats, you probably would not be reading this paragraph. Anxiety on the other hand, is a less intense but more chronic state of mind. It involves anticipation of, and worry regarding potential threats in the future, rather than an immediate threat in the present. It involves a state of tension and apprehension, rather than a surge of panic. Anxiety, and the cognitive process of worrying that generates anxiety, can be viewed as a hijacking of our survival response to realistic fear of immediate danger, a misapplication of this response to possible future threats. We may thereby end up in a relentless, self-defeating habit of constantly preparing for a variety of future threats, both real and imagined.

Anxiety has many sources, and the management of anxiety therefore requires us to survey various aspects of our lives. Negative thinking typically contributes to anxiety, and it is therefore important to monitor our thoughts to see if we engage in excessive worry, catastrophic "What if?" thinking, and obsessing. Anxiety also results when we have suppressed unresolved feelings and issues below the surface of consciousness. These issues may be longstanding unresolved traumas, or something as simple as a meeting with the boss tomorrow. In either case, blocking a bothersome issue from our minds produces immediate relief, but also gives rise to anxiety as our minds are anxiously but vaguely aware of a threat below the surface. It is often when we slow down our distracting flurry of behavior, particularly when we lay down to sleep at night, that these subconscious issues surface and perhaps disturb our ability to fall asleep. Accordingly, whether or anxiety is recent or chronic, is useful to ask ourselves what unresolved, bothersome, suppressed issues we may be carrying as baggage. As with other emotions, there are healthy and unhealthy versions of anxiety. The healthy version of anxiety alerts us to potential threats, dangers, and issues, allowing us to plan and to alter our behavior to manage the threat. If I find myself anxious about an upcoming exam, I may want to arrange more time to study. Ignoring anxiety can be perilous, (e.g., a woman ignoring her anxiety entering a dark parking lot, or letting herself be talked into a date with a questionable character). And consistent avoidance behavior designed to suppress immediate anxiety will multiply anxiety in the future. The cure (avoidance) is worse than the disease, because avoidance behaviors (e.g., consistently avoiding social outings in order to reduce social anxiety) reduce immediate anxiety, but maintain and increase future anxiety (in this example, by preventing development of social skills and successes in

overcoming anxiety, resulting in a full blown social anxiety disorder). As noted earlier, defenses (such as avoidance) yield a short term plus but a long term minus, whereas coping skills (approaching difficult situations and feelings) increase immediate negative feelings (especially anxiety), but if handled well, yield long term benefits, growth, and reduced anxiety. At the other extreme from avoidance, constant preoccupation with potential threats will also manufacture and multiply anxiety. For example, constant worrying can produce a generalized anxiety disorder. The key is to find the healthy middle ground on the dimension that ranges from extreme avoidance to unbridled preoccupation with anxiety and potential threats. We want to listen to anxiety like we would listen to a friend warning us of a potential threat, so we can deal with that threat, rather than ignoring the threat or avoiding life to manage it, or becoming Chicken Little, exaggerating or obsessing about the threat.

Our behavior or lifestyle may also be contributing to our anxiety. For example, we may be in too much of a hurry, trying to fit four chores into a time slot that allows only three. As noted above, this flurry of activity may be unconsciously designed to supplement our suppression of feelings; that is, by distracting ourselves at high speed, we remain focused externally, which helps us ignore the internal material that we have suppressed, even though such hyperactivity creates tension in itself, and prevents relaxation. Our lifestyle may be creating anxiety in other ways as well. We may be staying too long in an abusive relationship or a dissatisfying job. By surveying our thoughts, feelings, behavior, and external circumstances, we can often identify important sources and facets of our anxiety, and thereby identify solutions which pave the road to recovery. Again, anxiety may be our friend, alerting us to potential threats that we should deal with proactively, or it may be a runaway train with a life of its own, torturing us without relief. Like wheat from chaff, we must learn to separate the two.

Our thinking is often capable of producing a great deal of anxiety. Catastrophic thinking (or "awfulizing," as one of my clients called it) is an excellent example. Take a few moments to imagine the worst things that could happen in your life today, whether it be the death of a loved one, a heart attack, automobile crash, or whatever. How are you feeling? Perhaps just a little nervous, because you really don't think any of these catastrophes will really happen. Or perhaps quite anxious, because you frequently engage in such thoughts, and perhaps exaggerate the likelihood of such catastrophes. Sometimes, catastrophic thinking may alert us to something we need to take care of in order to prevent negative consequences. For example, if I find myself thinking of my daughter in an auto crash tonight, it may reflect

concerns that I have delayed taking her to get to her worn out tires replaced. It is therefore important to consider the possibility that an anxious feeling or catastrophic thought may be a red flag, alerting our mind to take care of important unfinished business. Many of us, however, engage in catastrophic thinking, or a less severe form of anxious thinking, worrying, as a lifestyle, with little benefit and much anguish. "What if..." is one of the most psychologically dangerous prefixes, and can become the generator in your anxiety manufacturing mental factory. By asking, "What if...?", we can concoct all sorts of catastrophic and heartbreaking scenarios, and generate anxiety, which can be acute and escalate into panic attacks, or be more relentless in the form of generalized anxiety. In such cases, our emotions are often leading our thinking, and we are functioning on distorted "psychologic" rather than the rational logic that we are capable of when our thinking is dominant. When our emotions dominate our thinking, fear dominates logic, and the likelihood of a catastrophic event actually occurring is typically exaggerated a great deal. The actual possibility of the plane crashing during our flight this afternoon may actually be one in a million, but it may feel like one out of fifty. The likelihood that we will make ourselves anxious and panicky if we act as if there is a 2% chance of our plane crashing is probably 100%. It sometimes helps to look at the actual statistical likelihood that a feared event will actually happen. While we know that infrequent events will occasionally befall us, most of these events are unpredictable, and therefore not worth our preoccupation, since dwelling upon unpredictable, unlikely catastrophic events is virtually certain to impair our happiness, mental health, and quality of life. If you want to effectively and quickly manufacture anxiety, focus on the danger of 1) low probability events that 2) you have absolutely no control over. It becomes important to redirect our minds in a more positive or productive direction, focusing on something that we DO control. We are all aware that our lives are scarred by others' deaths, and are eventually terminated by our own death, but there is much living and joy to be had in the meantime, if we don't ruin it by selectively focusing on the endgame and other very negative aspects of life.

Worrying is simply a milder version of catastrophic thinking. It is not a feeling, but rather a type of thinking which produces the feeling of anxiety. Just as excessive expectations produce frustration, and blaming creates anger, worrying is a cognitive process which predictably produces its own feeling, anxiety. Some of us are experts at worrying, spending 20%, 30%, or even 50% of our day worrying about what might happen next. Such thinking is typically unproductive, and guarantees anxiety. When frequent worrying is accompanied by at least half of an additional set of symptoms

(i.e., feeling restless, tense and on edge, excessive muscle tension, irritability, concentration deficits, fatigue and sleep difficulties), professionals speak of "generalized anxiety." So what are the options if you are a worry wort? Planning and problem solving can be productive, and are a good alternative to worrying in situations that are potentially under our control, whereas worrying is typically unproductive, and involves rehashing and obsessing over negative events that may or may not come about. If we want to control our feelings, specifically our anxiety in this case, we need to become capable of controlling our thinking. One method for controlling worry involves utilization of a core resource in 12 step programs, the Serenity Prayer. Even if you can't recall it, you will nonetheless probably recognize it:

“God grant us the serenity
to accept the things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can,
and wisdom to know the difference.”

The simple and straightforward wisdom of this prayer is effective in managing frustration, as we will see in our next chapter, as well as anxiety. First of all, if we have no control over something, why would we waste time and energy trying to control it? You might as well go to the beach at sunset and try to keep the sun from falling below the horizon. Attempting to control the uncontrollable is a recipe for frustration. By accepting the things that we cannot change in life, we reduce our expectations and thereby prevent frustration. This does not mean that we should be consistently passive and give up all attempts to change things around us. By all means, take charge of the things that you do potentially control in order to obtain the outcomes that you desire. But the profitable use of the Serenity Prayer involves wisdom, in addition to acceptance and courage. The wisdom to determine what we can control or change, and what we cannot, is essential. Without it, we frustrate ourselves trying to change the unchangeable, or passively accept aspects of our lives that we could readily change if we were willing to muster the courage and risk taking to do so. At worst, some people get the Serenity Prayer backwards, attempting to control the uncontrollable, while neglecting that which can be controlled. Wisdom guides the path toward either acceptance or courage. Wisdom is relegated to the third part of the Serenity Prayer, but is the starting point for using it. By wisely following this path, we maximize the likelihood that our energy will be devoted to issues where we have potential influence, which will also

maximize the likelihood that we will feel effective and competent in life. And by minimizing our preoccupation with issues beyond our actual control, we minimize feelings of helplessness, which can in turn contribute to anxiety and depression. If you want to feel powerful, it makes sense to focus on things you have control over, while minimizing helplessness and frustration by accepting matters that you have no control over.

Thus the Serenity Prayer can be very useful in controlling worry, in addition to reducing feelings of anxiety, frustration and helplessness. When we find ourselves worrying, we simply need to ask ourselves whether we have any control over the issue or event we are worrying about. To the extent that we do have control, it makes sense to plan and engage in behavior that will bring about the desired change, rather than wasting our time worrying. If we do not have any control, it makes sense to turn the issue over to God, or to otherwise accept it and let go of the need to control it, thereby letting go of the worry as well. It usually helps to then redirect our minds toward something more joyful or productive, as a means of further distancing ourselves from the source of our worry, while putting our mind on an issue where we do have potential control and can feel more effective. You have probably noticed that other people are notably resistant to our control. Beyond normal attempts at persuasion, if we attempt to control others excessively, we end up feeling out of control. We are better off directing our efforts toward something we do have control over, our own need for control, and our excessive expectations, or our mental preoccupation with infrequent, unlikely, or unpredictable future events. Trying to control things we have no control over is a recipe for feeling out of control.

Sometimes, a bothersome thought or impulse will keep popping into our minds, despite our best efforts to control it. We may even have an alarm reaction to such unacceptable, “ego-alien” thoughts and impulses. In such situations, it is important to understand that we typically have little or no control over the first thought that enters our mind, but that we do have control over the second, third, tenth, etc. thought in the sequence. That is, we have little control over associational thinking, as one thought can lead to another without our direct control, thereby triggering us to think about something that is either 1) important to us, even if it is beyond our control, or 2) totally unacceptable. However, we do have control over how we react to such a thought. And it is our reaction to anxiety, rather than the initial anxiety, that usually gets us in trouble. Again, the cure, avoidance, is worse than the “disease,” anxiety. The solution to the problem becomes the new and bigger problem. When we consciously notice ourselves thinking about a

certain uncontrollable issue, we can use our capacity for self directed thinking to move our minds in a different direction, such as acceptance, via the Serenity Prayer. And we can do so repeatedly, if necessary. Thus, when our thoughts keep gravitating toward the welfare of a relative who is going through surgery today in an out of state hospital, we might say a prayer for them if we are religiously inclined, or mentally wish them well in another way, or even call another relative to offer support if we think it will be helpful. But then it is time to gently move our mind in another direction, while waiting for the phone call regarding the outcome of surgery. Obsessively worrying about their outcome does neither of us any good. By letting go of worries and expectations over issues that are beyond our control, we can direct our energy toward issues we can control, and thereby replace worry, anxiety, frustration, and helplessness with feelings of serenity and competence.

In our second scenario, obsessions are sometimes birthed by an alarm reaction to a totally unacceptable thought or impulse. The best example I can recall from my clinical practice was a father who was pissed off at his daughter for good reason, and was at the dinner table with her and his wife. As he ate, he noticed the knife next to her plate, and unexpectedly thought of stabbing her. He immediately recoiled, alarmed and guilty, because he loved his daughter dearly, even if she had been a brat that day. But it wasn't the initial thought/impulse to stab her that got him in psychological trouble. It was his reaction to this thought. We all have unacceptable thoughts and impulses, sometimes extreme ones, but hopefully we manage them. If we accept the fact that we all have such thoughts, but don't have to act on them, we can allow it to be just a ridiculous passing thought, enjoy the next bite of our meal, and figure out what to do about our daughter's unacceptable behavior, and our own anger, without undue anxiety. This man was no more capable of stabbing his daughter than he was of flying to the moon. But what if he did?! WHAT IF. There it is again, the "what if?" anxiety generator. The initial hostile fantasy of stabbing was not the problem. The problem was his alarm reaction, and the what if thinking that grossly exaggerated the likelihood of the feared event (stabbing), as if it was actually possible.

So when dealing with stress, we need to separate the stressor, and our reaction to the stressor. The stressor can be external or internal. An example of an external stressor is another driver cutting you off in heavy traffic. If you want to control your emotions, get your mind off the external stressor (that damned idiot!), and instead focus on how you want to respond to that stressor. You control your own response, not his driving, and therefore, you can either feel frustrated, angry and helpless focusing on him, or get back in

control by focusing on your reaction (e.g., telling yourself that there was no accident or damage, just a brief frustration, and after all, you've at times been a less than stellar driver yourself, and maybe he's in a big hurry for a good reason, or maybe he's a jerk but so are 20% of people anyways, and do I really want to give jerks control over my mind, etc.). Other times, the stressor may be internal, e.g., an unacceptable thought, as in the case of the father above. Again, the key is to focus on your reaction to the stressor, rather than the stressor itself. My Catholic upbringing taught me to feel guilty about my thoughts, not just my behavior. But I have come to the conclusion that the first thought is free, that is, you can't control your associational thinking, and the thoughts that pop into your mind, but you are responsible for, and can learn to control your second and third thoughts. So no need to feel guilty or have a three alarm reaction to stray thoughts. But do notice them, understand where they come from, and choose how to respond to them. Take responsibility for your mental and behavioral reaction to the stressor, and attend to your moral guilt if you respond poorly, but let the first thought be free.

Sometimes we may develop compulsive habits or even rituals as a means of controlling anxiety or obsessive fears. While a minority of those diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) have only obsessions, without compulsions, most have both, and the compulsion is more observable. A compulsion is a repeated, intentional, and sometimes ritualized behavior that is designed to reduce the anxiety associated with an obsessive thought. Thus, obsessions are THOUGHTS, that create the FEELING of anxiety, which is then reduced by the compulsive BEHAVIOR. Unfortunately, the reduction of anxiety is a reward, which then reinforces and increases the habit strength of the compulsive behavior. If this pattern of obsessive thinking, followed by compulsive behavior, resulting in reward and strengthening of the compulsive behavior, is repeated sufficiently, it can become compelling, and feel involuntary and essential. Again, short term plus but long term minus. Examples of compulsive behaviors include checking (e.g., to make sure doors are locked, or stoves are off, more than just once, reflecting self doubt), counting rituals (e.g., by 3's to 333), hand washing (dozens of times a day), requiring symmetry around you, feeling compelled to repeat a sequence (e.g., left sock, right sock, left shoe, right shoe), etc. We all have habits, but compulsions are habits that feel absolutely necessary, seem unbreakable, and have negative consequences that increasingly rule our lives (e.g., hand washing that leaves your hands raw and infected, family conflict because halfway to your camping site you feel compelled to return home to check the stove and make sure the house hasn't

burnt down). It is a matter of degree, but it is often obvious, as habits are helpful, but compulsions tend to rule our lives and impair our satisfaction in life. Compulsions are intended to manage obsessions, which are persistent ideas that repeatedly intrude into our minds, and appear irrational at first, but nonetheless command our attention. They may be thoughts, impulses, or images, for example, the thought of or impulse to harm your daughter when she's acting like a brat, or the visual image of doing so. You may obsess about harming others or yourself (e.g., via jumping off a tall building, though you have no desire to suicide), obsessively doubt whether you did something correctly, obsess about possible contamination by germs, etc. Impulse based obsessions are typically ego-alien, i.e., contrary to your identity and moral sense of yourself, and result in considerable anxiety, guilt, self disgust, etc. Compulsive behaviors often succeed in relieving such feelings. Thus, at least temporarily, hand washing reduces the anxiety associated with feared contamination by germs on the doorknob, 144 (the number of apostles, squared) Our Father's reduces the guilt over an impulse to harm your daughter, and retracing your path driving reassures you that the bump in the road was not the sound of a pedestrian being run over.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is not the same as an obsessive compulsive personality (OCP) style (or OCP disorder if the personality style is severe enough to produce extensive negative consequences). On the street, OCP is erroneously labeled OCD, or more informally as being "anal," but does not involve the obsessions or compulsions characteristic of OCD. Rather, OCP involves personality traits such as being preoccupied with cleanliness and order, being stingy, emotionally and behaviorally overcontrolled or "tight," planning the future to a fault without being able to enjoy the moment, etc. Moreover, these behaviors are typically ego-syntonic, i.e., consistent with one's sense of self, in contrast with the ego alien quality of many obsessions and compulsions. Likewise, the word "compulsive" overlaps with the word "addictive," since behavioral compulsions (e.g., shopping, gambling, sex, eating) have an addictive element – you feel compelled to engage in them, as if they cannot be suppressed, and the behavior typically relieves the tension or other negative feeling of the moment. The most effective treatment for OCD involves "exposure and response prevention." Essentially, you increase your exposure to the anxiety provoking stimulus (e.g., doorknobs) that you usually avoid, while simultaneously preventing or blocking reliance on the compulsive behavior or ritual (e.g., hand washing). Thus, we are approaching rather than avoiding the discomfort, and tolerating it until it dissipates, rather than trying to immediately eliminate it. In so doing, we

prevent the reward (anxiety reduction) that unwittingly strengthens the compulsive behavior, and ultimately, we liberate ourselves from being slaves to the compulsive behavior. While a detailed description of OCD and its treatment is beyond our scope, Steketee and White's "Once Is Not Enough" provides a well written account of the nature and treatment of OCD. Note that once again, the treatment of OCD involves approach rather than avoidance, in this case, approaching the stimulus that precipitates anxiety (e.g., the doorknob). Likewise, treatment of phobias (e.g., fear of snakes, heights, enclosed places, etc.) usually involves systematic desensitization, which requires gradually approaching the feared object or situation (in imagination and in person) that is usually avoided. Avoidance is once again a double-edged sword. It reduces anxiety in the moment, but increases it in the future, whereas approach does just the opposite. But you have to commit yourself to tolerating short term anxiety in order to reduce or eliminate the long term anxiety.

Our discussion of avoidance brings us once again to the advantages of mindfulness. Refer back to our chapter on positive psychology for a more detailed discussion of mindfulness, which is also discussed in the chapter on depression management. For the purposes of this discussion, there are two important components of mindfulness, being in the present, and non-judgmentally noticing and accepting our internal mental states. While depression often focuses us on losses in the past, anxiety involves a focus upon threats in the future. By focusing on the past or the future, we divorce ourselves from the present, and temporarily lose our ability to enjoy the present. Yes, we need to plan in order to create the future we want, and we need to address any threats that face us, and the healthy form of anxiety alerts us to such issues. But anxiety can also become excessive and problematic, and frequent worry regarding future threats can monopolize our consciousness, creating unnecessary anxiety, while stealing our ability to savor the moment. *The Mindful Way through Anxiety*, by Orsillo and Roemer, provides a detailed approach to the management of anxiety via mindfulness. In addition to being in the moment, mindfulness teaches us to approach, notice, and accept our anxious thoughts and feelings, viewing them non-judgmentally, rather than reacting with alarm and then avoidance. Rather than being totally immersed in our anxiety, or going to the opposite extreme of wholesale avoidance, we learn to take just one step back from it, and observe our anxious thoughts, feelings, and sensations, with an attitude of acceptance, without trying to control them. In the process, you turn toward mental events that you would typically avoid, approaching them with curiosity and a bit of detachment, coupled with compassion toward yourself

rather than harsh criticism. We are not identical with or defined by our anxiety and the thoughts that produce it. Rather, anxiety producing thoughts enter our mind, and either do or do not represent an actual threat. If they do reflect such a threat, we can attend to that threat and deal with it if we have the power to do so, or accept it if we have no such control. If the threat is exaggerated or nonexistent, we can learn to let go of it. Either way, we do not have to hook ourselves up like a trailer to the anxiety truck, or engage in mental or physical avoidance or flight in order to avoid it. Rather, we can take one step back, and notice such thoughts floating through our mind, like leaves floating downstream or clouds passing by, noticing them without hitching a ride.

Mindfulness is yet another tool for your toolkit. We do not have to argue whether going toward, away from, or against bothersome thoughts and feelings is the best approach. Different tools are required for different jobs, and a “one-size-fits-all” approach restricts our flexibility in dealing with different situations and different feelings. Nearly a century ago, Karen Horney distinguished between three ways of dealing with people. We can go toward people, away from people, or against people. Likewise, with feelings, we can go toward, away from, or against emotions and their cognitive predecessors. We can go toward emotions via mindfulness, and by recognizing that there is both a healthy and a toxic version of every distressing feeling. We can go toward the healthy version of feelings, accepting positive feedback from our minds in order to adjust our attitudes and feelings (e.g., attending to healthy anxiety that alerts us to valid threats), while going against malignant cancerous growths of these negative feelings and their antecedent thoughts (e.g., counteracting panic, out-of-control worrying, etc.). At times we can also move away from negative feelings, by distracting ourselves, although we should be alert to prevent excessive reliance on such avoidance techniques. Distraction and suppression of feelings are valuable tools, although in most cases it is better to go toward the feedback of healthy feelings, and mindfully approach without being consumed by more toxic negative feelings, or attack the foundations of such toxic feelings by counteracting negative and distorted thinking and other self-defeating mental processes. The trick is to develop various skills, and through experience, to learn when to apply approach, avoidance, and attack strategies in different situations. In some ways, mindfulness is a combination of approaching and avoiding, in that we go toward our feelings, noticing them, and experiencing them, while taking one step back, detaching from them by only one degree, as we learn from what we see but also watch them float through and beyond our consciousness, rather than being caught in the

twin sins of being totally consumed and preoccupied by (excessive approach), or rigidly suppressing them (excessive avoidance).

Managing anxiety also requires us to pay attention to the physical dimension of our lives. To begin with, physical exercise has repeatedly been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety as well as depression. Aerobic exercise is perhaps most beneficial in washing away tension, but other types of physical exercise are often quite useful as well. Secondly, various relaxation exercises are often quite useful, such as slow deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, etc. My preferred version of slow deep breathing designed to reduce tension involves coupling the breathing with scenic visual imagery. The initial focus of this exercise is on the breathing itself, laying down or sitting back in a quiet, comfortable setting, breathing through the nose if possible, and both deepening and slowing each breath as much as possible. That is, gradually deepen each breath, filling your lungs as much as possible, without reaching the extremes of feeling pain when your lungs are too full, or the need to gulp in air when they are too empty. Instead, gently inhale, until your lungs are comfortably full, then gently exhale until they are comfortably empty, gradually slowing down your breathing with each breath. As you slow your breathing, you might use meditation techniques such as observing the air slowly swirling around and entering your nostrils, while you exercise control over the pace of your inhaling and exhaling. As your breathing gradually becomes steady, slow, and deep, you might direct your attention to your thoughts, while making sure that you maintain a sufficient portion of your attention on your breathing to ensure that it remains steady, slow, and deep. As you maintain this breathing pattern, you might want to allow your thoughts to drift toward your connection with the environment around you, as you provide carbon dioxide for the plants around you, and they in turn provide the oxygen that you need. In some ways, there is a wonderful complementarity to the world, and allowing ourselves to notice it aids our serenity. While maintaining our breathing, we can perhaps allow ourselves to recall or imagine our most scenic spot on earth, and the best season of the year for enjoying it. Imagine yourself in that setting, and allow yourself to enjoy your visit through all five senses. Your visual image will come easiest, but pursue it in vivid detail. Perhaps you imagine yourself on the black sand beaches of Hawaii; if so, notice the palm trees dotting the shoreline, the contrast between the black sand and the white surf, the cruise liner on the horizon, the surfer a few hundred yards up the beach, etc. Whatever your scene, develop the visual detail, and enjoy the scene through each of your other senses in as much detail as possible. Turn to your sense of smell next. This focus on

your nose will keep you in close contact with your breathing pattern as well, as you remember to breathe slowly and deeply in a relaxed and steady manner. If you are in Hawaii, notice the salty Pacific air, and perhaps the smell of coconut in your suntan oil. Perhaps you notice some flowering bushes at the edge of beach behind you and you walk over to take in their pleasant scent. Wherever your scene may be, luxuriate in the pleasant fragrances around you. Similarly, proceed to your sense of hearing, and then to your sense of touch and taste. Imagining the sounds in your personal paradise (e.g., the pounding of the surf) is usually fairly easy, but again, tend to the details (e.g., the bird chirping on the palm tree behind you. When you get to your sense of touch, attend to what you are standing in (e.g., the wet sand between your toes at the edge of the surf) or sitting in (e.g., a bed of pine needles in a forest), and the warmth of the sun tempered by the cooling effect of a mild breeze on your skin. As for taste, perhaps a cool, clear stream is nearby to quench your thirst, or perhaps you brought a cooler of cool drinks (preferably nonalcoholic given the purpose of this exercise). Keep returning to your breathing, maintaining a slow, deep, relaxing pace as you gradually enjoy yourself through all five senses in your personal paradise, nurturing yourself and luxuriating as you would in a bubble bath or thermal pool. If you find yourself becoming sleepy during this exercise, tell yourself that you can be relaxed and alert at the same time. When you are ready to return from your relaxing scenic vacation to resume your daily activities, pause for just another minute, until you can bring the feeling of relaxation and self nurturance back here with you. This exercise usually takes only 10 to 15 minutes, while cutting your anxiety level in half or so.

Meditation exercises can also be very relaxing. Many variations of meditation have been developed. One such option is described in one of the best short books on spirituality that I have encountered, *The Way Beyond*, by William Mikulas. Other relaxation exercises are more physical. In addition to the abundant benefits of actual physical exercise, there is progressive muscle relaxation, initially presented by Jacobson. This technique is more active and physical than breathing and meditation exercises, and involves tensing then relaxing different muscle groups, and focusing on the sensations that accompany letting go of the manufactured muscle tension, progressively moving from one muscle group to the next. Some people prefer this more active form of relaxation to meditation and other breathing practices. I strongly encourage you to try both, as well as physical exercise, to discover what works for you.

The management of anxiety also requires us to attend to our lifestyle, our environment, and our internal emotional landscape. Are there any habits

or behaviors in our lifestyle that unnecessarily increase our anxiety? Caffeine can increase our tension and anxiety, and even if this impact is only minor, eliminating a variety of minor contributors to anxiety can have a major impact. Imagine a scale of anxiety ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 represents a fully relaxed state in the absence of any anxiety, while 10 reflects an extreme panic attack. 1 and 2 indicate mild anxiety, 3 and 4 reflect moderate anxiety, and 5 and 6 represent pronounced anxiety short of panic. At level 6 anxiety, we are white knuckling, on the edge of panic, trying to prevent a panic attack, while at level 7 we have lost this control and the panic is beginning to wash over us, in contrast to level 10 where we are racing to the emergency room, fearful that we are having a heart attack. Why not do everything you can in order to reduce your anxiety by a point or two, thereby giving yourself more of a cushion between your current level of anxiety and the threshold of panic between level 6 and 7? Eliminating or reducing caffeine may reduce your anxiety by a point. Do we need to slow down the pace of our lifestyle, so we are less rushed? Perhaps it would help to practice mindfulness, taking the time to notice the wonders of the world around us with childlike awe more frequently, noticing our sensations and enjoying the moment, rather than relentlessly pursuing a next goal, oblivious to the truth in the old saying, "Life is what happens while you're planning other things." Are you allowing yourself to remain in an unsatisfactory relationship or job that produces anxiety, perhaps awaiting the courage to face the unknown, and the different anxiety that comes with change? Does your reluctance to trigger this change lead you to suppress your feelings regarding this relationship or job. While it is normal to want to reduce anxiety in the moment, and to suppress such bothersome feelings and issues until we are ready to do with them, feelings and issues threaten to resurface when triggered, and the threat is typically experienced as anxiety, even if it is mild, vague, subtle or unconscious. Suppressed feelings typically produce mild anxiety, not only because we are of the concern that such feelings could be triggered and erupt back into consciousness, potentially overwhelming us, but also because it takes energy to keep such feelings pushed down, almost as if the unconscious is a spring which pushes back when compressed. Thus, if we're trying to reduce unmanageable anxiety, it is important to ask ourselves what issues in our lives are unresolved and/or suppressed, and to address and resolve these issues and perhaps traumas, whether they come from our childhood or our adult life. If professional help is needed to resolve these issues, so be it, muster the courage and move forward. In summary, the management of anxiety involves a multifaceted approach, tackling the problem from a variety of angles, including cognitive,

emotional, physical, and environmental issues. None of these approaches is likely to be a panacea, but if each can reduce a small portion of our anxiety, a multifaceted attack is likely to have a major cumulative impact.

What about panic attacks? Some see panic as an altogether different entity than anxiety, even if they are in the same neighborhood. I tend to see the difference as a matter of degree, with panic essentially being the extreme version of anxiety, represented between level 7 and 10 on the 0 to 10 scale of anxiety described above. To reduce the severity and duration of a panic attack, we need to use our physical and cognitive skills to gradually reduce the anxiety back to manageable proportions. On a cognitive level, it is important to remind ourselves that panic attacks are time limited, typically lasting less than a half-hour or perhaps an hour at worst, and are typically not life threatening. Your physician can provide input, and usually reassurance regarding the risk of panic attacks if you have cardiac problems, but in the absence of any cardiac problems, keep in mind that panic attacks usually reflect the misapplication of our fight or flight survival capabilities to a situation which is not life threatening. Thousands of years ago, if a saber tooth tiger appeared, fight or flight would be necessary. You would need to either beat him into unconsciousness when he attacked, or run away quickly, at least faster than the slowest person around you!. The ability to be emotionally alarmed, and then to breathe quite rapidly to oxygenate your blood supply, and produce a rapid heartbeat to pump this oxygenated blood to your limbs, would be essential to your survival. Note that these are the same symptoms that characterize a panic attack. An emotional alarm triggers the autonomic nervous system (which automatically controls involuntary activities such as breathing and heartbeat) into action, producing physical responses which enable fight or flight. But sometimes the same reaction is triggered by situations which are not life threatening, such as the threat of divorce, or fear that people will think you are stupid at the party tonight. Your autonomic nervous system reactivity exceeds the level of actual threat in this situation, as you do not need this much autonomic activation, because there is no need for full-fledged fight or flight. In each of the above examples, there is a social threat to be dealt with, but it is not life threatening. To control your panic attack, you will need to control both your mind and your body. Controlling your mind requires you to control your thoughts, e.g., by telling yourself that you are not having a heart attack, and that panic attack symptoms are the body's natural fight or flight mechanism for survival, which your body is well equipped to endure. You need to calm your mind by reminding yourself that this is just a panic attack which will dissipate fairly soon, particularly if you do not scare yourself further (e.g.,

with an OMG reaction that it's a heart attack), while calming your body by controlling your breathing. Some people hyperventilate during panic, that is, they breathe in an increasingly shallow and rapid manner, even to the point of passing out. If you want to control your body during a panic attack, you need to reverse this process, and breathe deeply rather than shallowly, and slowly rather than rapidly, as in the exercise above. Controlling the mind by engaging in reassuring rather than catastrophic thinking, and controlling the body via slow and deep rather than rapid and shallow breathing, will gradually decrease your autonomic reactivity and panic attack. For a far more detailed look at the nature and treatment of panic, check out White's "An End to Panic."

Then there is the issue of social anxiety. Persons with a social phobia, the term sometimes used to describe social anxiety, typically function fairly comfortably and spontaneously in one-on-one situations with individuals they are close to. However, with strangers, and particularly groups of strangers, especially if stuck at the center of the group's attention, severe anxiety and panic attacks often paralyze them. Fighting is obviously inappropriate, and therefore the fight or flight options associated with panic turn to flight. The problem in these situations is evaluation apprehension, that is, overconcern regarding the impression one is making on other persons. The fear that one is coming across as a fool, or otherwise making a bad impression, often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Specifically, the fear of making a bad impression results in anxiety, which disturbs concentration and spontaneity. You cannot be yourself and flow spontaneously if you are preoccupied with the impression you're making upon others, and you cannot concentrate on your presentation to a group, or be an effective contributor to a conversation, if your concentration is impaired by anxiety. As a result, you come across as ineffective, and you may in turn receive a poor response from others. You have thereby unwittingly fulfilled your own prophecy or expectation of failure. But you have not failed because you are unskilled; you have failed because you are afraid of appearing unskilled.

As with many fears, it is not the object of your fear that produces the fear, it is your thoughts about that object. Thus, bridges, high or enclosed places, snakes, etc. do not scare people; if they had the power to scare people, all people would be afraid of such objects. If bridges had the power to frighten people, all people would be afraid of bridges. Bridges do not scare people, but some people have negative thoughts about bridges which create such fear. Some people cross our local Destin, Florida bridge and enjoy the beautiful turquoise waters from a high vantage point, while others imagine

the bridge collapsing and plunging them into the deep waters where they could face an agonizing death via drowning. Thus, the answer is not to avoid the object that you fear, but to approach that object with a different set of thoughts regarding that object. You need to control your mind rather than avoiding your environment. So it is with social anxiety. We must realize that the group, or the presentation to the group, is not the source of our anxiety, but rather, that your negative or catastrophic thoughts about the group's perception of you is causing the anxiety. And what produces such thoughts? Typically, our own negative thoughts about ourselves are the basis for our belief that others are thinking about us negatively. We project our own negative thoughts about ourselves into others' minds, then reinternalize what we think we see, and feel even worse about ourselves. While it is true that these thoughts may sometimes be accurate, since we, as well as others, can view our behavior and perhaps reach similar, accurate conclusions regarding our strengths and weaknesses as a person, is also true that some of us have a distorted view of ourselves, and may project these distortions into others' minds. When such distortions are negative and involve an overly critical view of ourselves, we will likely perceive disapproval where it does not exist. So if you find yourself experiencing a good deal of social anxiety, check your thought processes and determine whether or not you are overly concerned with others' perceptions of you in the situation at hand. Also check your self-esteem. Do you typically feel poorly about yourself? Do others seem to feel more positively about you than you typically feel about yourself? Is it possible that you are projecting your own negative self-image, and thereby setting yourself up to perceive others as critical, when they are actually more neutral or positive? Does your concern about others' reactions to your presentation or conversation paralyze your concentration and spontaneity to point that you function much more poorly than you would in a one-on-one situation with someone who accepts you?

If so, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your social anxiety. The process of unwittingly manufacturing social anxiety involves a series of four steps, each of which can be counteracted. First of all, most socially phobic individuals have low self-esteem. Persons with good self-esteem typically did not experience social anxiety, because they expect others to by and large accept them. Secondly, we project our negative thoughts about ourselves into others' minds, imagining them thinking about us poorly as well. Thirdly, this process creates anxiety, since disapproval by others is bothersome. And fourthly, to reduce the anxiety, we avoid people. We can intervene at each of these four steps. To counteract low self-esteem, we need to first of all monitor our self talk, i.e., what we say to ourselves

about ourselves. Do you have any notion regarding the percentage of your self talk that involves positive encouragement versus self-criticism? Monitor this, and then direct your attention to the self-criticism. What portions of it are well deserved because of your unacceptable or inadequate behaviors, and what portion involves undeserved self-trashing. Commit yourself to working on your own negative behaviors, but train yourself to stop bashing yourself, even for your mistakes. When you are raising a child, you may criticize the behavior, but not the person. Likewise, learn to give yourself support even (and perhaps, especially) when you make mistakes. Be constructive rather than self-destructive. And when you succeed, give yourself credit. Positive affirmations can help, although some child within work and paternal/maternal self-nurturing may be necessary if your negative self image originally emerged during childhood. If you have internalized the emotional abuse of others early in your life, you may benefit from psychotherapy in order to work through this abuse and neutralize its impact upon your self-esteem. Self help books (e.g., McKay) may also help improve self-esteem, which is the first domino in the sequence of social anxiety.

Next, be aware of the process of projection, the second domino of social anxiety. Insist on evidence before you conclude that others are thinking about you negatively, rather than assuming that others think about you the same way you think about yourself. If someone says, "Ed, you're a jerk," I have excellent evidence of disapproval, but if I'm walking through the mall and someone looks at me, I do not. People can be like inkblots or clouds, and their non-expressive faces become a sponge for whatever you project onto them. As with your self talk, learn to monitor your thoughts about what others are thinking of you, and assess the evidence for such conclusions. You may be accurate regarding others' negativity toward you at times, and that negativity may be merely their problem, or the reflection of a behavior you'd like to change. But socially anxious individuals will often find that they have no evidence for the imagined disapproval by others, and in this case, you need to revise your perception of your relationships with others, and allow yourself to become more relaxed socially.

Anxiety is the third domino, created by imagined disapproval by others. Since anxiety is noxious, we scramble in order to minimize it, and the fourth domino, avoidance, is quickly effective in temporarily reducing such anxiety. If you're anxious about how you will be received at the party tonight, simply don't go. You will be less anxious at home. Keep in mind, however, that the reduced anxiety that follows avoidance actually rewards the avoidance behavior, and makes it more likely in the future. It is as if you've been given a \$100 bill each time you avoid the situation, only the

payoff is anxiety reduction. The problem is that avoidance results in reduced opportunities for development of new skills in managing anxiety, and we therefore tend to stay stuck in an anxious, avoidant posture and fail to develop our competence in managing fear and anxiety. And our avoidance, if consistent, leaves us alone, and therefore lonely and perhaps depressed. Depression thereby often becomes a fifth, domino in the process. We can either approach anxiety producing situations, and tolerate anxiety at the moment as we learn to manage it, and thereby feel less anxiety and depression in the long term, or we can avoid anxiety producing situations, and feel depressed regarding our loneliness, while failing to learn how to manage social anxiety. If you are going to muster the courage to approach anxiety producing social situations, it is best to proceed gradually, just as you would if you were attempting to overcome panic reactions involving phobias of bridges or whatever. Pick less anxiety producing situations to confront initially, and gradually increase your exposure as you succeed in managing your anxiety. During such exposure, you will need to manage your self-talk as well as your projections, preferably without so much internal preoccupation that you lose your capacity to be spontaneous. In their workbook, "Managing Social Anxiety," Hope et al. provide a systematic approach to managing the irrational thoughts and avoidance behaviors that characterize social anxiety.

We have briefly examined panic, generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsive symptoms, and social anxiety. Later, we will devote an entire section to managing trauma, and the anxiety disorder known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Since anxiety is so pervasive, there are many self help books available, providing more detailed and specific explanations and advice for a variety of anxiety disorders. Some of these are listed in our bibliography herein, or on the Turning Point website. Clark and Beck's "The Anxiety and Worry Workbook," and Bourne's "The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook" are a pair of useful resources for understanding and conquering anxiety, and include helpful exercises, so you can practice, not just think about recovery. I encourage you to actively research whatever difficulties you have in life, whether they are psychological, physical, financial, marital, or otherwise. Approach and master your issues. Avoidance is the enemy.