



WELLNESS SHARE 7

ASKING FOR A FRIEND: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH ANXIETY?

Anxiety. Let's talk about it.

By: Meagan Wilson

I don't need to introduce this article by describing to you what anxiety feels like. If you're a person in 2016, you've probably *slash* definitely felt it. Especially that specific, special brand of low-grade anxiety that just kind of hangs out with you all day, manifesting somewhere in your gut, making you nauseous. The worst, right?

It's been kind of fascinating to watch our current definition of anxiety take shape. At this point, it could be likened to a vague buzzword that speaks to a much larger social shift, akin to "wellness" or even "millennial pink" (lol). That shit is fucking *everywhere!* Semi-regular panic attacks and a Xanax prescription have become signifiers that you're busy, important, deep, relatable, or any combination of A, B, C, and D. It's cool, though! It's a relief that, as a whole, we're becoming more tolerant of people not being weird corporate robots who don't experience the ups, downs, and seasons of this thing called life. Executives and Very Important People everywhere are penning think pieces, personal essays, and even social-media updates about dealing with not just anxiety but all manner of ugly things, like depression. It's the first, itty-bitty baby step in destigmatizing all things mental health. Right?

In an effort to keep the conversation going, we thought it would be fitting to float some of our basic and bigger questions about all things anxiety over to a few professionals (Dr. Deborah Sandella, author of Goodbye, Hurt & Pain 7 Simple Steps to Health, Love and Success, and Tanya J Peterson, author of My Life in a Nutshell: A Novel) who can demystify and clear up our queries. Here goes nothin'.

SO...WHAT IS ANXIETY, EVEN?

"Anxiety is fear about the future, especially when you don't know what will happen and are imagining



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bad outcomes. Many times, we aren't aware of the specific fear, which creates generalized anxiety without a focus, which is why we feel helpless. We aren't conscious of the hidden issue." – DS

"Anxiety involves worry, fear, or both. It can be a vague, shapeless thing that engulfs people and keeps them from fully enjoying life, or it can be specific and sharp and targeted on a distinct area of someone's life." – TP

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE & WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

"It is experienced in the body as physical symptoms like butterflies in the stomach, racing heart, inability to focus, stomachache, headache, feelings of insecurity, and lack of confidence. In the extreme of a panic attack, the body actually imagines it's dying. At this level of intensity, fear triggers a survival response of fight, flight, faint, or freeze. When you pay attention, you can begin to identify your unique symptoms that tell you that you are anxious and *not* dying*. These are helpful to recognize, so you are empowered to take steps to calm your body and isolate the specific trigger." – DS

"How it manifests is very individualized. There are physical symptoms that can be felt anywhere in the body and mimic things like heart attacks or asthma. There are emotional symptoms, too, such as feeling keyed up, on edge, irritable, or easily upset. In general, anxiety can be all-encompassing, taking over thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and behaviors. It's very disruptive to wellbeing." – TP

* [Ed note: Cue us making that emoji face with the big eyes and the full mouth of teeth, like "Thank god, but also are you *sure*?!"]

WHAT'S CAUSING MY ANXIETY?

"Past experiences where we have felt threatened emotionally or physically and have remained silent and immobilized cause the body's stress response to automatically turn inward on itself. Our stress hormones turn inward and create the physical and emotional symptoms listed above. This remaining hidden fear can repeatedly trigger anxiety when we're in situations like being emotionally attacked or bullied or even taking risks to assert ourselves at work or in relationships." – DS

"Anxiety is brain-based. Something, whether conscious or subconscious, triggers us. Sensory information regarding the trigger goes to the brain, and the pinball machine's spring-activated ball shooter propels the anxiety ball. It's now loose in the brain, wreaking havoc wherever it hits. The anxiety brain is on overdrive, and it tells our bodies to react accordingly." – TP

ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF ANXIETY? WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

"[There's] natural anxiety—when you stretch out of your comfort zone, yet you feel resourced enough to go for it.

"[Then there is] chronic, generalized anxiety. If you have suffered early emotional/physical pain of feeling attacked or threatened, these fearful memories may continue to be stuck in the body without your awareness and cause general anxiety. When this happens, anxiety may be triggered with simple things like making choices, decisions and taking assertive actions. Noticing your unique triggers is very helpful in discerning the cause and realizing the hidden issue. The more you know and understand about how anxiety happens in your life, the more you can both address it in the present and uproot it from your past.

"[There there's a] panic attack—when something is happening or has happened in your life that feels so scary and unknown that your body interprets it as potential death." – DS

"The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth-Edition (the DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association, describes seven different anxiety disorders: separation anxiety disorder, selective mutism, specific phobias, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder. There's also something called existential anxiety, which isn't a



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diagnosable illness. It's that vague feeling of anxiety that hits us all simply because we're alive, because we exist." – TP

IS THIS A NORMAL THING TO FEEL?

"Anxiety is incredibly common. Together, the anxiety disorders are the most common of all mental illnesses. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, over 40 million adults in the US alone experience some type of anxiety disorder during their life. That's almost 20% of all adults. That figure just applies to diagnosable disorders. Anxiety in a very general form is experienced to some degree by almost everyone. So I suppose that anxiety is as common as humanity." – TP

WHAT ABOUT WHEN I'M FEELING ANXIETY IN THE MOMENT?

"Anxiety arises in the body, so calming it must happen in the body. Otherwise, we're using our left brain to try to talk ourselves out of it, which can feel a little safer but doesn't dissolve the deep body fear. Trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk says that when one's safety alarm goes off in the lower brain, no amount of reason will [completely] quiet it. Try this exercise:

1. Breathe—controlling your breathing pattern connects the automatic and involuntary nervous systems and immediately returns your attention to your body (centered-in-your-body feeling).
2. Feel your feelings—rather than push the feelings away or let them scare you, sense where they are located in your body and gain awareness of their form and movement through imagined sensing.
3. Express—it's never too late to speak up and move to keep yourself safe. This new way of using your voice on your own behalf without fighting reassures your scared vulnerable self that s/he is seen, heard, and is free to act on his/her own behalf to stay safe." – DS

"When you're anxious, it's important to regain a sense of calm. Many people find it helpful to develop a toolbox of strategies they can use when anxiety strikes. You can keep a notebook to record ideas, write them on index cards and keep them in a recipe box, or write them on large craft sticks and keep them in a mason jar or other container. Create a collection of strategies in any way that suits you, and draw from it when you need to." – TP

HOW CAN I MANAGE MY ANXIETY LONG TERM?

"The RIM (Regenerating Images in Memory) [theory] that I originated over the last 20 years is a simple way to uproot the original fear, pain, and hurt stuck in the body. One thing you can use when feeling anxious is to close your eyes and sense where the focal point of the anxiety is located in your body. Invite your imagination to sense the size, shape, color, texture, temperature of the anxiousness so you actually begin to have a concrete sense of it. Now imagine moving your attention *into it*. If you want to bring a virtual friend or resource with you, the perfect one will pop into your awareness. As you and your resource rest here, the anxiety naturally begins to dissipate. With pen in hand, spontaneously write whatever words or feelings arise. Express yourself on paper as fully as you can. Keep writing till the anxiety calms. Doing this regularly whenever your anxiety rises retrains your body to know how to recover a feeling of safety and control even in the scariest times." – DS

"There are many different approaches to managing anxiety. A big one is to remember your greater goal. Of course you want to stop anxiety, but if you focus on that, you're concentrating on anxiety and inadvertently fueling it. Instead, think about what's important to you, what you want in your life. Create little action steps to take every day to live for your own values. Being able to take purposeful actions toward your overall goal is effective in reducing anxiety. It's about perspective. Shift your attention to what you do want instead of the anxiety you don't want." – TP

Part of the series:

