Coping with Anxiety…Or is it Fear?

Visualize yourself walking home late at night and it is very dark. You have walked this route late at night before but tonight, you begin to feel anxiety in the pit of your stomach. You keep focusing on this uncomfortable anxious pit in your stomach until you become short of breath and feel panicky*.* You cannot figure out why you were so panicky, you keep focusing on why you panicked and what caused it. You are having a hard time finding the cause. Now when you walk home at night panic comes upon you quickly. You keep worrying about what is happening to you. You decide it is too scary to walk home alone and you never want to feel that feeling again so you begin to avoid situations that you decide are scary. This is the first step to making your life smaller.

Now visualize yourself walking home late at night and it is very dark. You feel something strong in the pit of your stomach and you name it fear. You tell yourself it is very dark, and you are scared. You look around and do not see anything to cause your fear. You immediately focus on determining how real your fear is and what you can do to feel safe.Maybe you decide to remind yourself that you have walked home in the dark many times and your route home is as safe as it has always been. You may have decided to use a “mantra” that that you repeat to yourself as you are walking home…*It is okay to be afraid. I can do things that are scary. Take in the night, the air, the sky, the trees, the houses, the sounds and breathe deeply in through your nose and slowly exhale through pursed lips.* Maybe you decide to sing a song after you have said your mantra for a while. You choose a song that is upbeat and always makes you feel strong and energetic.

The difference between these two scenarios is that the first one focuses on the feeling of anxiety and the trigger, or what caused this feeling. Anxiety is an anticipated threat or loss that has not yet occurred so there is not a way of dealing with it. The second scenario describes the feeling as fear and since fear is a feeling in the present alerting you to a potential danger or loss, you naturally begin to problem-solve how real the threat is and what you can do about it. The key to dealing with anxiety or fear is to focus on your *response,* your ability to deal with the situation, and not the anxiety or unknown trigger. Taking three deep breaths has an immediate calming effect and gives your brain needed oxygen. Now you are ready to analyze the reality of the danger, determine your skills, and identify options. The mantra is a way of controlling your irrational thoughts that feed your fear and remind you that you have the skills to deal with this situation, or you are ready to test your skills. The last statement in the mantra is a way of refocusing your thoughts on the present. Singing triggers a different part of your brain and is also a way of controlling your irrational thoughts, feeding your fears. An energetic upbeat song that you like will trigger upbeat, energetic, “I can do it” feelings.

Fear is self-doubt about your ability to deal with a situation. When you give into your fear by avoiding doing what is scary, you destroy your self-confidence and ultimately lower your sense of worth. Anxiety distracts you from problem-solving about how to deal with your fear, and from planning *what you can do* about the situation. Facing your fear builds self-confidence. Stepping into your fear and taking a small risk starts to build your skills in dealing with “risky” or “scary” situations. When you do not trust yourself to be able to deal with your fears, you never quite feel safe. By taking steps into your fear or doing things that make you feel anxious, you learn the skills you need to deal with your fear so you can begin to trust yourself. As you trust yourself to deal with your feelings, your anxiety and fear lessen.

Growth requires taking some risks to build your life skills and master life’s lessons, and every risk involves fear. Do not run from your fear or pretend to be fearless. Acknowledge your fear and handle the intensity of the feeling by deeply breathing into it. Then identify what your fear is about and your options. Take small steps and prepare yourself to do what is scary. You are now growing. Continue taking small steps and you will build a toolbox of skills. Remember, life provides you with many opportunities to face your fears and master life’s lessons.

# Helpful Reading

Amen, Daniel, G. M.D. 1998 Change Your Brain, Change Your Life. New York: Three Rivers Press

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