Undoing the Anxiety Trick

Treating Anxiety Disorders with Acceptance-Based Methods

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Treating Anxiety Disorders

- The core of the task can be simply stated: get people to do the opposite of what they’ve been doing.
- They’ve invested in anti-anxiety methods, and have been struggling to avoid and fight anxiety; they need instead to work with anxiety.
- Everything else about the treatment has to do with how you help people discover this, and learn how to do it.
What is an Anxiety Disorder?

- It’s having anxiety in excessive quantities, and inappropriate situations…
- but, more importantly, it’s a persistent pattern of recurrent anxiety which sounds an alarm in the absence of actionable danger…a false signal
- The alarm comes to be treated as the danger itself, rather than as a signal of danger
The Worst Feature of an Anxiety Disorder is not Anxiety

• It’s trying NOT to be anxious…and trying to protect ourselves in the (relative) absence of danger...

• or in the absence of a timely, actionable signal of danger

• Since the client views the anxiety alarm as a threat, he engages in excessive self protection

• It’s the excessive self protection which forms the most dysfunctional parts of the problem
How do you treat an Anxiety Disorder?

- Not by protecting oneself from unrealistic threats
- Not by minimizing or avoiding the anxiety
- But by reversing the process that creates and maintains dysfunctional anxiety
Why Don’t I Just Get Over it?

• You have repeated episodes of high anxiety, with the characteristic fears
• And they each pass, typically without the feared outcome, the only aftermath a scary memory
• What prevents a natural, spontaneous recovery?
• The client’s answer to this question will shape his future
The Client’s Usual Answers

• They develop two kinds of explanations
• One is that they are weak and defective, incapable of solving this problem
• The other is that this problem is insoluble, or that others take foolish risks
• Both these views are obstacles to recovery
A Different Answer: They’ve been Tricked

- Not just tricked into believing they’re in danger when they’re not
- Tricked into responding in ways that make the problem more chronic, more troublesome and more powerful over time
- Tricked into making themselves worse as the direct result of their recovery efforts
- Tricked into “putting out fires with gasoline”
Understanding the Trick: The Nature of Anxiety

• A common sense assumption - “If I’m afraid, then I’m in danger” – is the basis for the catastrophic interpretations of panic attacks and chronic worry.

• If this is always, literally true, then high anxiety is a grim prediction indeed.

• Is it ever untrue?
Is Fear Always a Sign of Danger?

- Can you think of a situation in which a person might become quite afraid, even without being in danger?
- Even when she knows that she’s not in any danger?
- Beyond a shadow of a doubt?
A Scary Movie

• A worldwide industry that rakes in millions each year is built on this premise
• We don’t need to be in danger to get afraid – we just need scary pictures
• (we don’t have to be “crazy”, either!)
• This is a characteristic of our species
A Scary Movie is an Illusion – it Tricks you!

• What’s the trick?

• You experience discomfort as you view the unpleasant material

• You (and especially your body) get tricked into responding as if it were danger
Anxiety uses the Same Trick as a Scary Movie

You Experience Discomfort, and get Tricked into Treating it like Danger
This understanding allows the client to turn to a different task

- The client doesn’t have to change the way her brain or mind works.
- She needs to become better acquainted with how it actually works…
- …and thereby form a more adaptive, flexible relationship with brain and mind
The Power of the Trick

- What’s good for danger?
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze

- What’s good for discomfort?
  - “chill out”, and wait for it to pass
  - “float”, per Claire Weekes
  - Occupy yourself with current tasks
The Anxiety Trick is powerful and insidious because:

- What’s good for Danger is the opposite of what’s good for Discomfort
- When you get tricked into treating one like the other, you get tricked into reacting in ways that strengthen, rather than relieve, the problem
- The power of your recovery efforts get turned against you
How People Get Tricked into Making it Worse

- They hold their breath, rather than breathe comfortably
- They try to replace anxious thoughts with happy ones
- They flee instead of wait
- They turn inward, to worry, rather than engage the world
- They grip the steering wheel/armrest, rather than hold it lightly
- They try to kill all germs, rather than acclimate to them
- They denounce themselves & demand calm, rather than calming
- They avoid anxiety cues, rather than befriend and tame them
- They keep shameful secrets, rather than self disclose
- They isolate themselves, rather than mingle
Anxiety doesn’t just Fool you once

- It fools you into living, and acting, in ways that make the problem more severe, chronic, and persistent
- It takes your own efforts to help yourself and turns them into methods of enslaving you
- It reprograms you and puts you on perpetual guard duty
Finding Evidence of the Trick in Client observations

• “It’s so irrational”
• “The harder I try, the worse I get”
• “I know it doesn’t make any sense, but that doesn’t help”
• “Why can’t I just get over this?”
• These are expressions of frustration, but if we look more deeply at the meaning, these are key points of departure
The Revised Anxiety Narrative

- When people come to see anxiety as a trick, this opens the way for a revised view of anxiety, one that promotes recovery.
- They now see themselves as good, competent, and worthy people who have unfortunately been tricked.
- It’s too bad they’ve been tricked, but now that they know, they can choose a different course for themselves.
Belly Breathing

- I usually pair this intervention with a brief intro to the Rule of Opposites
- I’ll describe the benefits of the exercise, demonstrate it, have client practice it in my presence, and assign regular daily practice
- All too often, clinical presentations of belly breathing leave out a key step
- Detailed instructions, a video, and troubleshooting suggestions at www.anxietycoach.com
- Some view breathing as a safety behavior, but I find it too valuable to omit
The Rule of Opposites

• My gut instinct of how to respond to moments of high anxiety is typically dead wrong

• It’s wrong because it’s based on treating panic as danger, rather than discomfort

• What’s useful for discomfort is the opposite of what’s useful for danger

• When you panic, do the opposite of your gut instinct
Common Applications of the Rule of Opposites

- Death grip on wheel
- Hold breath
- Resist the fear
- Tense the body
- Stand still
- Hide the fear
- Be a wallflower
- Flee
- Check repeatedly
- Be sure & perfect

- Hold the wheel lightly
- Belly breathing
- Accept the fear
- Relax the body
- Move, use your body
- Acknowledge the fear
- Introduce self
- Hang out
- Trust experience
- Be unsure, do good enough
“Creative Hopelessness” of ACT

- Clients typically have made a number of efforts to rid themselves of their anxiety, to no avail, and I want to honor this.
- A systematic review of their efforts can help the client unmask the trick and take a more accepting attitude.
- This review can help a client see that the efforts failed because the task was misconceived.
Paradoxical Interventions

• Basic form is prescribing the symptom
• Intended to produce confusion, humorous response, or opposite reaction…
• Just as relevant to worries as it is to environmental cues
An Observing, Accepting Posture

• As we describe panic and high anxiety, we make it more comprehensible
• That’s not how people experience it!
• The experience of panic and high anxiety is often one of confusion, racing thoughts, and an inability to comprehend what is happening
• Helping the client develop an observing capacity is an early focus in treatment
Observational Tools

- What did I give up for anxiety today?
- Journals for peak anxiety moments
- Symptom inventory for fearful fliers
- Panic diary
- Worry diary
The fruits of the observational tools

• From the client’s observations we can derive:
  – Components of anxiety
  – Rules governing recurrent anxiety
  – Cycles of anxiety

• These will help in demystifying the process, enhancing awareness, and developing more adaptive responses
How to respond to fearful thoughts?

• Traditional CBT offers cognitive restructuring - the recognition and identification of mistakes in thinking, and their correction

• ACT offers enhanced awareness of these thoughts, an understanding that thinking is often a “rigged game”, and acceptance of the thoughts without regard for their apparent meaning
These thoughts are the voice of The Heckler

• Persistent, dysfunctional, exaggerated “what if?” thoughts

• To engage them in a truth seeking dialog is to play the Heckler’s game, and become embroiled

• The voice of the Heckler is simply another modality by which to experience anxiety, and that’s all the thoughts mean: “I’m anxious”.
Thoughts as Objects of Exposure

- Humor the Worry (“Uncle Argument”)
- Repetitions of core worry
- Call the Question
Graph of Anticipation

- Current View
- Historical View
Worry Periods

• Worry on a regular schedule, 2x/day, ten minutes each

• Scheduled for a time when you can give worry your exclusive focus

• worry, don’t brainstorm, problem solve, or soothe yourself – just worry

• “what if” this and that, repeatedly, without creating solutions
continued

• Out loud, standing, in front of full length mirror
• Coupled with postponing, or forced choice
Secrecy and self disclosure

- People with AD often go to great lengths to hide their trouble from others.
- They do this to avoid the risk of being judged, feeling embarrassed, disparaged as “crazy”, etc.
- But they pay a high price for this secrecy – it’s another very bad trade.
- Helping the client engage in appropriate self disclosure is a key task in recovery.
Cost-Benefit Analysis of Secrecy

• **Main Effect:** typically, the prevention of others from finding out how afraid/defective I am

• **What are the side effects?**
  – Imagining the worst
  – Feeling like a fraud
  – Increased worry
  – Increased social isolation
So, as I was saying...

- The core of the task can be simply stated: get people to do the opposite of what they’ve been doing.
- They’ve been trying to protect themselves from anxiety; they need instead to expose themselves to it, to embrace it, to practice with it.
- Presenting, and treating, Anxiety Disorders as a Trick can be a powerful umbrella for a variety of methods that have acceptance at their core.
Thanks for coming!

- For more resources: www.anxietycoach.com
- And one more thing...
And now for something completely different…

• Come see our comedy group of therapists tonight!

• The Therapy Players will perform at 9:30 tonight at Chicago Salon C/D – 5th Floor