



Anxiety

In this series of articles I make no claim to be an 'expert' on every person who has ever experienced anxiety. I do have levels of expertise as a therapist of course however I am not an authority on every client and have no inclination towards labelling myself so. I have always been of the opinion that the day a new client walks into my office and I feel that I know exactly what is 'wrong' or exactly what is going on for them then I will gladly retire and find a new occupation. I hope to never reach that point of arrogance.

This is also not a theoretical article and neither is it a self-help remedy. I don't profess to add anything to current research as I make no attempt at a scientific enquiry. This is merely my professional (and sometimes personal) experience of a 'presenting issue' in therapy. As a health professional I am privy to a wealth of often very personal information and as such I value this and of course keep it confidential. As such, there will be no reference to direct work with clients as there will also be no 'alluding' or 'vague reference' either. My experience will be shared in a generic or 'thematic' sense with no reference to individual cases. Therefore if you feel that you 'recognise' yourself in any of this article then this is purely coincidental.

So! The purpose of these articles? To give potential clients an insight into how I work and to help them decide whether I am the right therapist for them. To also inform people and not least, let them know that they are not alone with their 'issue'. Although everyone is a unique individual, there are often themes and/or patterns with certain issues. Some or all of this article may resonate with you and some or all of it may not. You may instinctively feel that I am not 'the right therapist' for you, yet you may also like what you read, get a sense of what I am about and intuitively feel that we could work well together. Alternatively you may just be reading this article out of pure interest.

Throughout many modern studies of counselling and psychotherapy, it has been shown that with most methods (although not all) the relationship you have with your therapist (often called the 'therapeutic relationship') is considered paramount in its success. This means that often something minor, such as a therapist reminding you of an old boss who you had a bad experience with can, believe it or not be a 'block' to the success of your therapy. There are times of course when 'blocks' are useful and can be overcome in therapy. In fact they can actually be an integral part of the process if worked with professionally and skillfully, however at the outset, blocks of this nature can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help.

It may sound rather strange that you would have a 'relationship' with your therapist however we have a relationship of a kind with *everything*. Indeed you are 'relating' in a sense even to the chair you are sat on! Does a therapist have the same type of relationship



with all their clients then? No. That would be impossible. Each relationship is unique and is co-created by both client and therapist and we both bring different things to the process, such as professional and personal experience, gender, genes, relationships and mood to name a few. Add all those together it is easier to see how a therapist can not possibly have the same relationship with each client and for this reason amongst others this is why a therapist will not be able to work with *every* client that walks through his/her door. This is the main reason why I offer a free consultation. For us both to see how we get along and to see whether we feel that we can work together.

I don't give 'advice'. Advice can be gained anywhere and everywhere. You will instinctively know if your potential therapist is the right one for you. If you feel comfortable enough and feel that you could learn to trust and talk to this person then you're on the right track. If however you don't feel comfortable in the surroundings and 'just something' niggles you, then perhaps this is not the right therapist or environment for you. For instance, some people like a clinical white room with two white chairs whereas some like a more 'homely' feel (mine is the latter – my days of cold clinical rooms are over!) And if you don't find the right one straight away, don't let it put you off..., find another. There is a therapist out there for everyone!

Our experience of anxiety can vary from what's seen as 'normal' anxiety which may be due to an interview or a presentation perhaps, to crippling anxiety which is more pernicious and can affect our daily life to the extent where it may stop us doing things that are important to us, for instance within our relationships or something seemingly simple like going to the shops. It can also vary throughout life and at one point in our life we may feel less anxiety whereas at another point we may feel incredibly anxious.

It is evident through certain studies in this area, that some people appear to be more 'prone' to anxiety than others however this does not mean that because someone has shown no outward signs of anxiety that this can not change throughout the course of their lives. Often I have worked with clients who after many years of functioning at a very high level both in their career and in their private life suddenly and for no (apparent) reason, anxiety begins to affect their lives in a negative way. Sometimes this can manifest in not being able to do things as easily as they once did, for instance going for dinner, attending a meeting, sleeping or they may begin waking with a 'start' feeling scared and fearful. These are all general examples and are not necessary requirements for being anxious. Anxiety can take many forms and self-diagnosis is not recommended particularly based on what you read in a book, or on the internet (or indeed in an article like this!).

There is a type of anxiety or anguish that is termed 'existential angst' and this can occur at any point in life however it occurs quite commonly on the approach or during mid-life; approaching or during retirement; or indeed on the approach or during other major life



events such as someone close dying, or having or losing a child. As the name suggests it's a type of anguish related to your 'existence' and your 'purpose'. Your place in life and your 'meaning' can often come into question at these times when we can be evaluating what we have done with our lives, what we would like to do with the rest of our lives and the realisation that we may have reached a certain point and that time is more of a focus. Often for women mid-life is a time where 'child-bearing' years are coming to an end and whether they *have* had children or not, or *want* children or not, this can be a time where they call many things into question and as such this can be a challenging time. Having studied feminist therapy in depth, I am more than familiar with working with women who feel that society puts them under pressure to be 'brood mares' or to be successful business women as well as being 'perfect Mothers' and this can be fraught with issues related not only to society but also to what was and is expected of us by our selves/parents/family/peers. Of course this is not exclusive to women and men are also under pressures regarding having children, however it is naïve to think that they are not different challenges.

As previously mentioned, a certain level of anxiety is usual and is an essential part of life and survival. It keeps us alert and in actual fact, alive. It is important to remember that we are animals; sophisticated ones intellectually and emotionally however animals nevertheless. In a state of nature, a certain level of anxiety was necessary to ensure our survival. We are both 'predator' and 'prey' animals and historically we needed our wits about us and our senses well-honed in order to withstand day to day threats to our survival. You may have heard of our 'fight or flight' instinct.

Modern society as we know it has grown at a rate that is faster than evolution and as such we are left with many of our primitive instincts that are to some extent, obsolete in the 'modern jungle' we find ourselves in. Think of a deer with its head raised out of the long grass and its eyes constantly wide and unblinking looking for signs of danger. The deer is rarely *not* in a state of hyper-vigilance and this ensures that it survives. We have similar instincts and this can be a hindrance in our day to day lives because the modern 'threats' are very different to our primitive ancestors' 'threats'. Added to this, being on constant 'alert' is not conducive to a balanced and healthy life either emotionally or physically.

There are many different theories on anxiety, what it is, how it affects us and how to 'treat' it. This article is not an attempt to cover all of these; more a 'whistle-stop-tour'. An attempt at describing anxiety in a 'user-friendly' way, built on personal and professional experience as a therapist. It is neither a 'self-help' book. There are many out there and my experience of them is limited to clients presenting to me after trying most of them exhaustively with little or no benefit. This of course may not be reflective of self-help books' inadequacy per se, it may simply be that these particular clients work more effectively in a relational way where they can work through their anxiety with a real human being and not by simply reading and following a formulaic system on their own. For some, self-help books may do



the trick, but those people don't usually end up in a therapist's chair so by the very nature of my work, my experiences of meeting these people are limited.

It is important to remember that there is no 'elixir for all' with any mental or emotional issue. We all come from different backgrounds, with very different experiences and indeed genetic and physiological make-up. Some people have more of a likelihood of experiencing certain issues and this can be as a consequence of genetic or other physiological predispositions or it could be that their upbringing or life experience can make them more likely to develop particular issues. Yes good old fashioned 'nature vs. nurture'.

From my experience with anxiety related problems, it is more commonly a mixture of the two. Almost like a 'cocktail'. For instance, we may have a certain predisposition towards anxiety from the outset (genetically for example, or through 'inheriting' some of our parents' traumas and anxieties – known as 'transgenerational trauma'), but we may never realise this without other factors coming into play such as a particular or series of life events where we may then begin experiencing heightened anxiety. Sometimes our anxiety can come to the fore at a particular stage in life without ever recognising that we have been exhibiting behaviours for many years, indeed sometimes all our lives, or alternatively it may simply come completely 'out of the blue'. Therapy can help with identifying this and also in exploring how anxiety may have become (believe it or not!) a form of 'coping mechanism'. It may sound bizarre that anxiety may have worked *for* you in some way but rarely do human beings repeat things that have no 'pay off' and sometimes we experience one emotion because to feel another one would be on some level more painful or feel more 'negative'. It could be that we have never been encouraged to recognise and express anger for instance and we may experience anxiety instead. However crippling the anxiety is, it may be easier to cope with than anger. Finding the 'pay off' can be a key factor in identifying what role anxiety plays in your life.

21st century Western society views certain emotions as 'negative', for instance anger, sadness or anxiety. I as a therapist view emotions as morally neutral. Neutral in that I hold no judgement as to whether someone's anger is 'bad' or 'good'. I appreciate that you as a client may experience it as 'bad' which I can empathise with and indeed have and do experience them myself. However to a therapist as well as being a very real feeling to empathise with, it is also information. Data if you like. A barometer of something going on for you. Our bodies work in a holistic way and as such our mind sends information to our bodies and vice versa in a circular motion so for instance it is not uncommon for someone with IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome) to show significant improvement in their symptoms after counselling or psychotherapy. Our anxiety, like other emotions always finds a way of being expressed and if for instance we repress it in one way then it may manifest itself in our body. Another example could be bruxism (teeth-grinding) which is another bodily sign of anxiety or even anger. The list is endless but this gives you a general idea of how an emotion



can make its way 'out' through our bodies if we don't succeed in 'attending' to it in more healthy ways.

This can take some time to learn or re-learn. Some people for instance, present to a therapist with anxiety and manage to work through it in a relatively short space of time, perhaps months and in some cases even weeks. It is difficult at the outset to be prescriptive about how long it may take to help you get over your anxiety. One thing is for sure, just because someone takes longer, sometimes even years to overcome anxiety or indeed any other issue, does not mean that they are failing in anyway and vice versa because someone finishes therapy in a few weeks does not mean that they have necessarily 'succeeded'. It is important to talk to your therapist about this during the process and to regularly reassess where you feel you're up to in your therapy in order to ensure that you're still getting what you need from it. It can happen that what you start off with in therapy can change when we look at it a little more closely. It can also 'uncover' things that may have not been in your awareness which can sometimes involve a longer-term commitment to therapy. The choice is always yours and there is no reason why you should feel that you have to remain in therapy when you no longer feel it is useful.

This has been a 'snapshot' really. But I hope it gives you some more understanding of anxiety and also what therapy is about (at least from my perspective) and how it may 'look' in practice. All therapists are different and even when trained in the same methodologies, bring different things to a therapy room. You may simply 'get along' with one therapist over another. Obviously simply 'having a chat' is not good enough in order to get over certain issues and this is not what you visit a therapist for. 'Talking therapies' do not mean 'having a chat' like you would with a friend, but instead a particular type of talking and it may be easier to attain with a particular type of therapist, for example it may be important to you to have a middle-aged black, heterosexual married mother as your therapist; whereas another person may want a middle-aged, educated and atheist male; or a young, white, gay Christian woman. You may also feel that none of these attributes are important at all and you don't want to know anything about your therapist apart from what is obvious. 'Matching' in therapy is a huge debate and not one to be entered here but generally if you feel at the outset that a certain 'type' is important to you then that is your choice and as such is to be respected. Like I said earlier, there is a therapist out there for everyone so good luck in your search!

If you have any concerns about what's been written here or you would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me on: info@balancedlifestyles.co.uk

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