

Feeling Anxious? Your Anxiety May Be A Gift

In this "feeling good" society of "human doings" (as opposed to human beings) people tend to look on anxiety as a curse, something to get rid of as fast as possible.

But anxiety, like physical pain, and like any kind of uncomfortable feeling often points to a problem that is crying out for your attention. If you don't pay attention, and let it go on a long time, the results can be disastrous. Consider the pain of an infected appendix. Consider the vague anxiety some people feel when a spouse is having an undisclosed affair. Both situations call for action. It may be too late to save the appendix but if you go directly to the doctor, it will not be too late to save the patient. If you go directly to a marriage counsellor, hopefully you can discover what was missing in your marriage that led to the affair and hopefully you can repair the hurts in your marriage and replace what was missing in order to save your marriage.

People feel anxious for many reasons. One reason may be lack of structure and routine in your life. Most people do not feel safe and secure without structure. After a move to an area where you do not have your old familiar interest groups, neighbours, friends, and activities, or job, you will often feel lost and uneasy. The same is true after any major change in your life such as graduation from University, marriage, or your first child.

Closely allied with this is the problem of lack of meaning in the form of goals, sub goals, and even daydreams and plans. Everyone needs to have a sense of going somewhere, things to look forward to, and a reason to BE here. Even a plan for a holiday, or for visitors who will be coming next summer, can give us something to work toward. After a major shock such as a death of a parent, spouse, or child, a marriage break-up, or a major job change, all of those goals and dreams may change and for a time there may just be a void. You may feel anxious and/or depressed until you are able to find new meaning in your life. Everyone needs something to do that feels important to them. This is especially important for people who have left work because of retirement or to look after the children. Our society tends not to reward homemakers, child caretakers or older people very highly so they may need to find other ways to feel important. It is very important for the working parent to acknowledge and appreciate the homemaker and child caretaker to help make sure that both parents are getting their needs met. It is important for older people not to isolate themselves from younger people where they can help with their wisdom and their caring. They have time to care when everyone else is running to keep up with the pace of the times.

One more thing people need in order to not feel anxious, is contact with other people. When we are around others, their feedback keeps us clear about who we are and what others think of us. Since others are not usually as hard on us as we are on ourselves, this is important for maintaining self-esteem. It is especially important for those who live alone or with a partner who does not like to talk or one who is especially needy or controlling. Telephone contact is not as helpful as person to person contact is. Someone who says your name and looks you in the eye will help you most. Co-operative work on a joint project is good for self-esteem because it gives us feedback that we are valued and it gives us a sense of belonging.

Abraham Maslow was a groundbreaking psychologist whose books and lectures were very influential in creating the ground swell of interest in psychology in North America in the twentieth century. His hierarchy of human needs shed much light on human behaviour and on feelings. If our needs are not being met we may feel anxious or depressed. Before you head for the doctor for medication or for a referral to a psychiatrist, take a look at the basic needs that Maslow places in his famous pyramid. (You can find them on the Internet or in the library). He says that these needs have to be met from the bottom up. In other words, if we are deprived in the lower rungs, we have little chance of meeting our needs on the higher ones. Here is what the pyramid looks like

Self-actualization needs
(reaching your full potential)

Self-esteem needs

love and belonging needs

safety and security needs

physiological needs

If you see some areas where your needs are not being met, why not address that problem before you try to shut your body up with medication. Your body may be sending you those uncomfortable feelings to get your attention. Would you do anything about the problem if it did not do that? There are times where anxiety is caused by old memories and/or old beliefs. In that case you may need some help, especially if those memories and/or beliefs are denied or buried. If the problem turns out to be more than you can handle alone there are lots of good counsellors out there these days that can help you. Even then, your anxiety is trying to tell you something. If you can change your attitude toward uncomfortable feelings they can be your friend.