THE
BARNABAS
CENTER

Toolkit

Resources, Tools and Support for your Personal Journey

Counseling Toolkit

Understanding the Anxiety Cycle

In the world of psychology, we often tell people that if you want to change how you feel you must change how you think. There is truth to that, but there is also something deeper happening when our emotions escalate. Research shows that your nervous system, in addition to your thoughts, is really running the show. For many of us, we can't just think ourselves out of emotions, but when you calm your nervous system down, you can relieve your emotions and gain control.

What's Really Happening in Your Brain and Body

When you feel anxious, your amygdala—the brain's emotional/ fear center—activates your sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for fight or flight. This releases a cascade of stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline. Your heart beats faster, breathing quickens, and your muscles tense preparing you to flee or fight.

While this "fight-or-flight" response is designed to protect you, in anxiety, it often misfires—even when no danger is present. This is because the amygdala cannot differentiate from a perceived threat (like public speaking) and a real threat (being chased by a bear)—the stress response is induced regardless.

For many of us, our nervous system is always stuck in the "on" position, having a hard time sleeping, relaxing, and settling down. This can be a habit we fall into caused by worrying too much and not knowing how to self-regulate.

The good news is that when you learn to identify what is happening, you can change it. Like a muscle, you strengthen what you exercise.

What is the Anxiety Cycle

Understanding how anxiety loops into a habitual cycle is key to alleviating our symptoms of worry and stress. The anxiety cycle includes 4 stages:

-**Stage 1.** Feeling anxious and wanting to deal with it.

-**Stage 2.** Attempting to avoid the situation.

-**Stage 3.** Feeling a temporary sense of relief.

-**Stage 4.** Returning to a state of heightened anxiety.

For example, if you are supposed to talk in front of a group of people you may feel a lot of anxiety leading up to the event. Here's how it could go:

-**Stage 1.** The thought of standing in front of a group of people at work and delivering a presentation makes you break out in a cold sweat.

-**Stage 2.** Your inclination is to escape, so you call in sick to work that day.

-**Stage 3.** You immediately feel relieved since you don't have to do the task that's causing you to feel so anxious.

-**Stage 4.** This relief is short-lived when you learn that the presentation has been rescheduled for the following week, causing you to feel anxious all over again. But your avoidance grows your anxiety, it doesn't lessen it.

Avoidance plays a key role in perpetuating the anxiety cycle. When we avoid our fears, they don't go away, they just get bigger, and we are teaching our brain and our bodies to create more tension, anxiety, and stress around that trigger the more we avoid it.

How to Break the Anxiety Cycle

We can't just think ourselves out of our anxiety by telling ourselves to "relax" because our thoughts don't control this part of our brain. We must calm the body first to calm the mind through a "bottom-up approach." Bottom-up means we go from the body to the brain because we can't think ourselves calm. If you're stressed out and you say, "Don't be anxious!" that never works. We can never actually tell ourselves to calm down by just forcing it from the top down.

That's partly because our brain, when it feels threatened, reacts at a very animalistic level. It's using this deep part of our brain in the limbic system and the brainstem to react impulsively or instinctively to danger. If a tiger jumps out at you, you're not going to use the thinking part of your brain to say, "Hmm I wonder what I should do with this?" Your body's going to naturally and instinctively run away.

The body has a natural counter-balancing response to the sympathetic response (our fight-or-flight response) called the parasympathetic response, or "rest and digest." I like to think of it as a "parachute." This response slows your heart rate, releases muscle tension, and helps you relax. You can activate the parasympathetic response through things like progressive muscle relaxation, breathing, and grounding exercises. Here are some examples:

Grounding Techniques:

- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding:** Name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. You can do this anywhere and anytime and is a great exercise to teach your kids too to gain control of their emotions by distracting from the anxiety by engaging the senses.
- **Box Breathing:** Breathe in, counting to four slowly. Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Slowly exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds. Wait for another 4 seconds before you breathe in again. As you do this imagine drawing a box with each breath in and out.
- **Grounding:** Place your feet on the ground (barefoot if possible). Feel the ground underneath you and notice what it's like to feel the ground beneath your feet. Touch your hands to the chair and notice how the arm of the chair feels against your hand.
- **Washing your face in cold water:** This slows our heart rate and breathing.

Grounding techniques help us activate that safe feeling in our brain by reminding ourselves that here in the present moment we are safe. When we're grounded and calm were able to work through emotions and memories in a healthy way. We can train ourselves to trigger this calming response by practicing grounding activities. It's important to practice these exercises over and over again so that they become habitual and we can draw on them in moments of stress or anxiety.

Exposure Hierarchy:

You can also break the Anxiety Cycle by creating an exposure hierarchy. Take one thing that scares you and break it down into teeny tiny steps, and you start by courageously facing the easiest one first. THIS IS THE PART MOST PEOPLE MISS! They jump in too fast and then panic, escape or never do it again and that fear is reinforced.

For example, if you are afraid of dogs:

- Start with watching a dog scene in a movie.
- Next, look at a dog through a window.
- Walk by a dog park.
- Pet a small, calm dog on a leash.
- Pet a small, calm dog off a leash.
- Pet a bigger dog on a leash.
- Pet a big dog off leash.
- The final step is visiting a family member who has a big dog and sit and pet the dog for a while.

Change the Rules:

Courage doesn't mean the absence of fear but choosing that something is more important than avoiding fear. We call this willingness- allowing yourself to do something even though it makes you uncomfortable. If you make a rule for yourself "I'm going to do this until I get too anxious" then your brain will be like cool- let's do that, then I can escape. So, it will make you anxious and we're inviting anxiety to make all our

decisions for us. Instead choose something that matters more. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

Do it. Face it. Go get anxious and see if you survive. (You will):

There's the simple solution to Anxiety, **face your fears and they will decrease**. This may seem too simple, or too impossible, too big of a leap. This is where counseling comes in! Recognize where you are anxious or stressed in your life, identify triggers, and consider to change to bring more peace and calm to your life. Reach out to us at connect@barnabascenterhou.com if you want to address and change your anxiety and stress. And check out these books and resources on stress and anxiety:

Unwinding Anxiety- Justin Brewer

The Anxious Generation—Jonathan Haidt

Anxiety Relief for Teens-Regine Galante

Winning the War in Your Mind—Craig Groeschel

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