

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Anxious? Mourn Your Control

Those of us who tend toward the anxious, control freak(ish) end of personality spectrum have probably heard about certain techniques for coping with anxiety somewhere along the way, even if we don't necessarily choose to use them. The usual suspects include things like breathing and relaxation, identifying and changing negative thoughts, health and lifestyle changes, and/or medication. Sound familiar? But what about mourning? That one's usually prescribed for grief and loss, not anxiety, right?

I had an experience the other day where mourning effectively wiped out my anxiety, while my other techniques were flailing at best. So it got me wondering whether anxiety often conceals losses that refuse to respond to typical stress management techniques, but might be helped by some intentional grieving.

The Power of Mourning: A Personal Example

Here's what happened. For starters, it would help to know that I've got a baby due tomorrow, and there are few things in life that invite such a nice, wide range of anxiety like everything having to do with a first pregnancy: tons of conflicting advice and "research," unpredictable and constantly changing types of discomfort, tests with large margins of error for a host of life-threatening and disabling diseases, the guarantee of painful labor or high risk pain alternatives like surgery, and then of course, all the veteran parent promises that "everything about your life will never be the same and you will never be able to control anything again and you won't ever sleep and you might be severely depressed and you will lose your identity, energy, non-kid friends, enjoyment of your significant other...but it will be magically and totally worth it for reasons that we can't explain to you at all, we'll just tear up when we talk about it and nod knowingly." Pregnancy is pretty much Disneyland for the anxious person—one terrifying "ride" after another.

So of course when I got a medical test back that was an eensy, teensy bit abnormal, with an eensy, teensy chance of damaging this precious child I love a ton—even though I haven't met her yet and our relationship mostly consists of her treating my organs as squeeze toys—naturally, the anxiety started to fester. I responded with my good therapist skills, starting with research about how big a deal the test result was. I practiced focusing my thoughts on positive things rather than all that can go wrong. I breathed. I stayed occupied with a balance of pleasurable and productive things. And...I was still just about as anxious as before. Not fun.

Somehow along the way, though, I realized that it wasn't so much the test result that was scaring me. It was the fact that it had pulled the mask off of one of my favorite illusions: that if I care enough about something or someone, then with enough thought, skill, practice and effort, I can not only influence what happens to them, *I can actually control it*, actually prevent harm and make good things happen instead. Sadly, this illusion, while useful for keeping me motivated to help others as much as I can, is also a big, fat lie. In this world, my very best efforts can and do influence things, so my effort is worthwhile, but that influence never actually crosses the line to become the ability to *control* things, even when whatever I am trying to control is super

important and matters deeply to me.

When my test result painfully reminded of this, I took some time to go through some of the mourning stages regarding the loss of my illusion. I let myself be angry, then sad, and then resigned to accept the fact that my doing everything “right” cannot guarantee my daughter’s immunity from health complications, death, or any number of heartaches and tragedies that this world contains. I had to mourn the fact that my ability to influence her life in positive and protective ways falls way short of control, and instead, practice gratitude for whatever time I get with her, whether that’s a few hours or the rest of my life.

Oddly, on the other side of that sobering and depressing mourning process, my anxiety was gone. Apparently, it had come from the pressure of thinking that if I only thought enough and did enough, I could control what was impossible to control. Once I accepted that I could not, the pressure to do so subsided and my anxiety stopped stalking me mercilessly.

How to Mourn the Loss of Control Part of Your Anxiety

So what would that look like for you? How could you knock out a big chunk of your anxiety by identifying and grieving the losses so cleverly hidden beneath it?

1. Ask yourself what circumstance is causing your anxiety. Is it finding a job after nine months of searching? Waiting for college or grad school acceptance letters to arrive? Trying to figure out if the person you are with is a keeper? Wondering if you are ready to step into a new opportunity? See if you can distinguish exactly which parts of your life are making you nervous.

2. Figure out which actions would allow you to positively influence the circumstance. When it’s not over-functioning or misfiring because of past traumas, anxiety can be a helpful motivator in getting us to take action to protect ourselves or make a positive life change. See if there are realistic, effective actions that your anxiety is inviting you to take in order to improve your circumstance...and then do them!

3. Examine the remaining anxiety for losses you are resisting accepting. After you’ve taken these reasonable actions to improve your circumstance, if your anxiety still remains, ask yourself what part of it might be driven by your desire to maintain the illusion of control: that if only you work hard enough, express yourself well enough, change yourself enough, research enough, or *whatever* enough, then you can control or change something that any reasonable person could tell you is actually beyond your control or ability to change.

4. Grieve the part you can’t control. Having identified the uncontrollable aspect of your circumstances, explore the following mourning questions regarding it:

- In what ways do you keep resisting the awareness that you can't control that aspect of your circumstance?
- Where's the point at which your efforts to change your circumstance are going beyond what you'd need to do to give yourself evidence that you did what any reasonable person would do to influence the situation?
- What most frustrates or angers you about your inability to control this circumstance?
- What is saddest or most distressing about your inability to control this circumstance?
- What could you do to continue to remind yourself that no amount of effort can actually allow you control this particular part of your circumstance, no matter how much you may be able

to influence it?

5. Keep returning to acceptance of what you can't control. After you've gained insight into the loss you are grieving through the questions above, then, when your anxiety returns, gently but persistently remind yourself about 1) which aspects of your circumstance you *can* influence, taking action to do so, and 2) which aspects you can't control, so that the "action" you need to take is accepting whatever is beyond your control, rather than putting in extra (but realistically ineffectual) thought or effort you'd be tempted to use to sustain the illusion that you can control the uncontrollable.

With practice, I bet you'll notice that when you think about the uncontrollable aspects of your situation that used to make you anxious, you will likely feel a temporary anger or sadness, but it won't be nearly as long or as distressing as the haunting anxiety that used to be there. And you can be sure that as I brave the constantly changing and profoundly uncontrollable territory of parenthood, I'll be out there practicing this right along with you.

If you or someone you know would like help overcoming anxiety and hard-to-beat illusions of control, I'll be back from maternity leave in July and available at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation. Until then, I'd be happy to direct you to another great therapist who can help.

Thanks for reading!

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