**The Response Cycle (aka Anxiety Cycle):**

**The response cycle** is a visual summary of the various skills and resources that I teach clients dealing with anxiety (as well as anger, depression, etc). The inspiration for this originated with Virginia Satir: “All real change takes place in an atmosphere of lightness and clarity.”

Satir suggested that for change to occur, there had to be a change in a thought, a feeling and a behavior. To this I have added attention to body and imagination, leading to the Five Dimensions of Change, or the five aspects of any response or reaction: body, emotion, thought/belief, images, and actions/behaviors.

The basic idea is that the greater the number of dimensions in which we help a client change, the more of a chance for change to endure. In the visual representation of the cycle, the circle, when uninterrupted, simply feeds upon itself and creates something of a snowball effect. It builds and builds with each re-cycling. The rectangles around the circle represent the five dimensions in which the client can learn to develop mastery. Inside of the boxes are some (not exhaustive) of the specific skills I teach clients to interrupt the cycle in the respective dimensions. In all of this, I stress to the anxious client that this will lead to being in control, but now healthy control.

Of primary importance is the necessity of Awareness (or mindful awareness) at the top of the cycle. Nothing changes without awareness. The very act of awareness signals the client that something needs attention, be it body sensations, feelings, thoughts, images and/or behaviors. And it is awareness that enables the client to step back and create some space between Self and the reaction, in this case anxiety. Without awareness, there can be no relatedness with, no freedom from, the anxiety. Without awareness, anxiety takes over and the Self is overwhelmed. Self is in the back seat, while anxiety is driving the bus.

Although all dimensions are part of the response picture, I believe that we must begin on the physical level, since, when anxiety kicks in, it doesn’t do it as a thought. It is a visceral and emotional response, the sympathetic fight or flight alarm, that takes the thinking part of the brain offline. For this reason, I typically begin with the body dimension, teaching breathwork, muscle relaxation, place and time orientation (I think Rick Hanson’s first suggestion can help here, viz., realize that you’re basically okay in the here and now), and simply and mindfully watching the breath come and go.

When anxiety first hits, in my experience, strategies that have to do with thinking, remembering, and even imagining (safe place, etc.) are ineffective. When the alarm quiets down and the thinking, executive functions of the brain (left and medial prefrontal cortex) return, then it’s time to do the thought changing, etc. I’m not opposed to cognitive therapies. I just think that it’s a matter of sequencing and timing. Body alarm first.

I would also point out that my **approach would proceed** **from these skills to applying them** to actual situations, either by recall (anxiety events since the last session) using corrective mental movies or role play and by anticipation (when is the next time you expect to run into this). This is where exposure and relapse .prevention comes in.

However, a major component of how I’ve been approaching anxiety is from a **trauma-informed perspective.** Anxiety can be primary (more genetic and inherited) or secondary to something, be it an internal or external event. Once clients have mastered the basic skills and can cope with daily life, I believe it is crucial to explore the possibility of anxiety as avoidance, as a warning signal that something of a feared emotional event is about to take place. Anxiety can also be triggered by various reminders of past, painful events (PTSD), as well as by the often unconscious realization that life events are demanding they shed old identities and undertake the journey towards more authenticity. In such cases, the anxiety is secondary and will continue to be triggered until we begin to address the roots of these reactions.

Here is a link to two documents. One is the “Response Cycle”, the second being a short introduction to and practice in awareness for clients (actually for anyone!). The latter is a summary of the third chapter on Awareness in my book,

*The Courage to Feel: The power and freedom of emotional honesty*.

Thanks for your interest. I would enjoy continuing this conversation, since, once one is in the trenches with anxious clients, the learning curve continues and any input is always appreciated.

Be well. Andrew Seubert

**Links:**

[The Response Cycle](http://nebula.wsimg.com/6188fc2b2e1bb741823beaabb0398d03?AccessKeyId=E5CCD5B6C01950E7BA35&disposition=0&alloworigin=1)

[THE POWER AND PEACE OF AWARENESS](http://nebula.wsimg.com/dbbea04d5aa7f7fb64883101956bdf6c?AccessKeyId=E5CCD5B6C01950E7BA35&disposition=0&alloworigin=1)