

ANXIETY ADVICE: THE TRANSCRIPTS

Mental health experts and those who experience anxiety themselves offer tips on how to understand and respond to your own stressful thoughts and feelings. These transcripts are from audio clips featured in the article “Leading Through Anxiety.”



Why Anxiety Has Been Called the “Shadow of Intelligence”

David Barlow, founder, Boston University’s Center for Anxiety & Related Disorders

David Barlow: It’s important to remember that you want to be moderately anxious. Moderate anxiety is your friend. And it’s going to be with you, and —

Morra Aarons-Mele: I’m putting that on a bumper sticker. I need to remember that.

David Barlow: Right, and a lot of people do. I mean, people spend billions of dollars trying to eliminate their anxiety. And no, you don’t want to eliminate your anxiety. Your anxiety is there for a reason. It’s a normal human emotion. And it serves a function. It serves a purpose, just like fear does. Fear’s a very useful emotion, if there’s something really to be afraid of. Anxiety is more about what’s going to happen in the future. Anxiety has been called for a long time — early on, psychologists called anxiety the “shadow of intelligence,” because of the planning function of anxiety. It helps you plan for the future.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode “How the Mental Affects the Physical”



Acknowledging Your Anxiety, Especially When You’re a High-Achieving “Only”

Angela Neal-Barnett, professor of psychology, Kent State University

Angela Neal-Barnett: Most black women, particularly those who are in high-profile positions or in positions where they are the “only,” see themselves as strong black women. And to be weak and a black woman is an oxymoron. And mental health crises at work are a sign of weakness. And you’re the only one anyway. The belief is that people are looking for an excuse to pull you down, to put you down. And now this happens. And so you can’t show sign of weakness and “oh my goodness, I just did.”

Morra Aarons-Mele: So Dr. Angela, if I’m an ambitious only and I’m listening to this podcast and I think, “Oh my gosh, I need to work on this,” what’s the first step I can take starting tomorrow to help address my anxiety in a real way that applies to my life?

Angela Neal-Barnett: Well, the first step you can take is just to say, “You know what, I’m anxious.” That’s the first step. [laughter] “OK, I’m anxious, or I think it’s me. I have anxiety.” Once you do that, everything else comes into place.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode “The Anxiety of Being the ‘Only’”



How to Let Go of Your Pain

Jerry Colonna, leadership coach and CEO of Reboot

Jerry Colonna: Every wisdom tradition has taught us this. You sit with those uncomfortable feelings precisely the way you would sit with every set of uncomfortable feelings, including the uncomfortable feelings around death or the uncomfortable feelings around sadness or the uncomfortable feelings of the loss of a relationship or the uncomfortable feelings of the loss of a job or an income.

You sit. You stay with those feelings. You acknowledge their pain. You do not pretend that you are some gritty, unfeeling human, because such things don’t really exist. You welcome that pain in so that you can let yourself go from it.

And I got it. This is easier said than done, because the minute the anxious thought leaves, another one pulls right into the train station. But one of the most important teachings in Buddhism is that we watch our mind. We watch our thoughts arrive and depart from the train station. And so anxiety is the main train coming in. Hello, anxiety. See you later.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode “Managing the Stress and Uncertainty of Coronavirus”



Becoming Your Own (Nonjudgmental) Detective

Rebecca Harley, psychologist, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School

Morra Aarons-Mele: So OK, we've used this term "tune in." How do you start? [laughter] Do you tune into your body? Do you tune into emotion? Where do you start?

Rebecca Harley: Yes. Well, yes and yes. Can I say yes to all of those?

Morra Aarons-Mele: Absolutely.

Rebecca Harley: I think tuning into whatever is there in the present. So you don't necessarily have to go searching. It's just about trying to turn your attention inward. So whether the most prominent thing that you notice right in that moment is a physical sensation, or whether it's a feeling that you can put some words to, or whether it's a thought, like the social anxiety thoughts while giving a presentation of, "I'm going to do terrible at this, this is going to be terrible." So one of those things might lead the way. And so whatever's there would be the first thing.

In the culture these days, there's more and more talk about this concept of mindfulness. And that's really what we're talking about here — is just paying attention, ideally in a curious and not judgmental way, to just observing and describing whatever your internal experience is in the moment. You know, looking at life and looking at inner life and looking at even hard things that happen from that position of curiosity, and if I could be a detective here, maybe that makes it a little less scary.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode "Mental Health in the Office: Difficult Conversations"



Why Perfectionism and Overthinking Can Backfire

Alice Boyes, former clinical psychologist and author of *The Healthy Mind Toolkit*

Alice Boyes: So people will often respond to anxiety by trying to be more perfect and more in control, to not only have a plan B, but to have a plan C, D, and E for anxiety. And sometimes that can — all of the responses or traps are things that can backfire.

So what happens if you take a perfectionistic approach is that, if everything goes fine and you've used a perfectionistic approach, your brain often jumps to the conclusion that the only reason it went fine is because you did that. People often think that worry has some sort of protective benefit, so that it helps them make good decisions, like "if I don't worry about something, I'm going to let things slip through the cracks, or I'm not going to foresee something that might go wrong."

So people end up believing that they need to think through everything in advance, they need to worry about things in order to make good decisions. And if anything, it often goes in the other direction as well. So occasionally overthinking something will result in a new idea, but it's equally likely to make you feel just more confused and more stuck, and make you get into a pattern of inaction.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode "Strategies for Managing Day-to-Day Anxiety"



What to Do with a Hurricane of Internal Anxiety

Jerry Colonna, leadership coach and CEO of Reboot

Morra Aarons-Mele: I'm with you, but I want to finish — sorry I got us off track there — with a control question, where you're putting your fear. Because I know you must have some fear.

Jerry Colonna: Absolutely. I mean, just before we came on the recording, my daughter's texting me, "Hey, Dad, do you have corona?" I was like, "No." [laughter] But I did have flu three or four weeks ago. So it's not without base. It's not without merit to be concerned. This notion around what do we do with the fear, is what your real question is.

And a friend of mine tweeted out this morning — a Buddhist friend of mine — he said, "Hey, all my dharma friends, remember this is what we've been training for all of our life." How do we confront fear, uncertainty, sickness, death? Oh, right. What do you think I've been putting my butt on the cushion for, for 16 years, other than for these moments?

And what true dharma has taught me, what every wisdom tradition has taught, is that in the face of fear, we hold ourselves steady. Like my favorite teacher, Pema Chodron, would say, "You sit like a mountain in the midst of a hurricane."

Now, your question — the following question should be, what do you do internally when the hurricane feels like it's internal? What you do is, you acknowledge that fear to yourself. You parse out what is probable from what is possible.

It is possible that we're all going to die. It's not probable. It is possible, and even likely, that many people that we love and care about will get sick and struggle and may pass away. That is entirely possible. But it is not probable that everybody and everything that we love and hold dear will disappear.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode "Managing the Stress and Uncertainty of Coronavirus"



How Making Lists and Schedules Helps with Anxiety and PTSD

Gabrielle Union, actor, activist, and sexual assault survivor

Gabrielle Union: And sometimes, all you need is to have a minute and to self-talk. And sometimes for me, it's pulling into a parking spot at a grocery store. There have been times — and it comes and goes over the last 20-some-odd years — where I have this feeling of I'm going to be robbed, or carjacked, or something terrible is going to happen. It's like, insert worst-case scenario here, the second I pull into a parking spot.

And I have to sit in my car and tell myself that “the likelihood of you being robbed or the likelihood of something terrible happening right now is very low. It's OK. You're going to be OK. Just count. You've got your list. It's going to be OK.” And for me, making lists gives me comfort and calm. I don't know how that works with everyone else. But it was something that — when I first, first, first — it was almost like a week after I was raped. My workman's comp kicked in, and it paid for therapy after I was raped. And something that one of those therapists said was sometimes making lists can make you feel like you are back in control of a situation.

Morra Aarons-Mele: Do you make schedules, too? Like, do you schedule out the day?

Gabrielle Union: Schedules, lists, mapping out driving instructions — again, this is before Google Maps and Waze and all those different driving apps. I used to have a Thomas Guide. And I would map out when I would have to make left-hand turns at uncontrolled signals. That would be enough of a trigger, where I just — it's like I would damn near black out, like full flop sweat, full terror, just massive anxiety attack having to make a left-hand turn without a turn signal.

Morra Aarons-Mele: Was that about seizing control where you felt like you didn't have control? What was that about?

Gabrielle Union: Figuring out a way to map out a day to give myself to take back some power, and to take back some control, and give myself a little bit of normalcy. The problem, of course, later, as you find out, life happens when you're busy making plans and making lists. Anything that would disrupt that could throw off my whole day, throw off my whole week. I would have a month where I couldn't sleep, because I'd made a plan and something happened. Well, that's life, right? So I had to develop more coping mechanisms. But to this day, I still have my lists. Even making the list, whether I stick to it or life happens, gives me a bit of calm.

Adapted from *The Anxious Achiever* podcast episode “Gabrielle Union on Toxic Workplaces, PTSD, and Social Anxiety”



An Exercise in Mindfulness

Carolyn Glass, social worker and therapist

Carolyn Glass: First, identify the worry that leads to anxiety at about the 3 to 6 range out of 10. It could be any worry that pops into your head throughout the day.

Once you have it, identify a book to use as an object. Place the book in front of you on your desk, table, or lap. Sit back in a comfortable position and look at the book.

I want you to keep your eyes on the book but have most of your focus being on your thoughts, just like what happens when you're worrying throughout the day. Gaze at the book, but really try to engage the worry thoughts. Keep them going. Let them run. If you run out of worry thoughts, then just keep repeating the ones that have already shown up. Keeping your eyes on the book, rate your anxiety level on a 0 to 10 scale.

Now turn your full focus to the book. Really focus on what you see. Notice the physical properties of the book, the colors, the shapes. You can notice the book as a whole or focus on a specific area.

As you do this, you'll notice that your mind is going to wander, or you'll get caught up in your thoughts. Each time you become aware of the thoughts, gently bring your focus back to the book, on what you see. It's OK if you notice thoughts in the back of your mind as long as you bring what you see — the book — to the front of your mind.

You might also start to notice body sensations or emotions, which you can choose to accept and let be there while you focus on the book. No matter how many times your mind wanders, every time just become aware that it's happened and gently bring that focus back to the book.

There's no need to criticize yourself when your mind wanders because that's what our minds do. All you have to do is notice that it's happened and gently bring that focus back to the book. Try to see the book through your eyes and not your thoughts by just noticing its physical properties.

Now rate your anxiety level between 0 and 10. It should be below the 3 to 6 range. And then you can open your eyes. That's it. ■