

ANXIETY AND PERSISTENT PAIN

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotion which all of us experience at some time or another. Think about a time when you have attended an interview for a new job, focus in on the feelings that were there when you entered the room for your interview. Undoubtedly there will have been some feelings of anxiety or nervousness. Think about when you last watched some athletics on TV and watched the runners preparing for a race. At the beginning of the race the runners prepare themselves, going through the race in their minds eye. This helps to build up feelings of anxiety in the body which produce what we call the “fight or flight response”. This response helps the runner to react quickly and run faster.

All these are normal experiences of anxiety. In our evolutionary history human beings needed the “fight or flight response” to react quickly to danger and to be able to respond when hunting for food. It was necessary for our survival. As we have progressed through the centuries the threats to us have changed and we need this ability to react quickly for different reasons. There are still times when we need to react fast, such as getting across a busy road. However there are also times when our feelings of anxiety can start to take over. If this happens anxiety can have a detrimental effect upon the quality of your life. It can stop you from engaging in social activities, or make you afraid of going out. If this happens it is time to start working on the anxiety so that it impacts upon your life less.

So how do we feel when we are anxious?

Below is a list of some of the most common features of anxiety:-

Increased heart rate,
Increased breathing rate
Poor sleep

Feeling nauseous
Tearfulness
Worrying thoughts

Poor concentration and memory

Sweating

Avoidance of situations

Butterflies in your stomach

Withdrawal from social contacts

Shaking

Feeling cold and clammy

Frequent need to use the toilet

Irritability and snappiness

Constant checking

The vicious cycle of pain and anxiety

If you develop symptoms of pain or fatigue you can become hesitant and anxious about movement and exercise because it hurts to do it. This can be a particular problem if we do not understand why it hurts when we move. If we do not understand we have a tendency to create our own ideas as to why it hurts and this can be problematic as our beliefs and understanding are not always accurate. If we have worrying thoughts about why pain is there this can lead to an avoidance of activities for fear of creating more pain. The more you do this the more anxious you can feel about doing anything and a vicious cycle begins.

You can also start to lose confidence in yourself when you have pain. This means that it becomes more difficult to engage in social events and being around crowds of people can feel overwhelming. If this happens we tend to withdraw from our social contacts and then when you are invited out it becomes more difficult to cope. Eventually if this continues you can start to avoid being around other people and life can feel like it is getting smaller and smaller.

How do we work with anxiety?

1. Education about why pain can persist

Very often you need to understand pain better in order to feel less anxious about it. Knowledge is power and the more you can understand what is happening to you the less fearful you are likely to be. Read the handouts we have on this website which will help you to learn more about our current understanding of the research literature on why pain can persist.

2. Work on your thinking

One way to work with anxiety is to work with our worrying thoughts that make the anxiety worse. We already know that by changing the way we think we can alter the way we feel emotionally and alter what we do in response to our pain. Look at the handout on “patterns of thinking” located on this website as it gives you ideas as to how to work with your thoughts.

3. Mindfulness Meditation

If the idea of challenging and changing the way you think does not work for you then another way to work with your thoughts is to begin to see them for what they are merely thoughts. In mindfulness meditation the idea is to begin to learn how to disconnect from the emotional reactions such as anxiety that come with your thoughts and merely observe thoughts as they happen letting them float away. Breathing is used as the anchor for this approach. Please see our handouts about mindfulness meditation located on this website.

4. Relaxation

Relaxation helps to break the vicious cycle of anxiety by starting to work on the physiological reactions we have when we become anxious. It can also help to take your attention away from worrying thoughts which might be running through your mind. Read the handout on relaxation located on this website for more information.

4. Behavioural Experiments

Very often the best way to work with our fear and anxiety is to face the things we fear the most. In a pain management context this does not mean throwing yourself into situations which you will be very fearful of. Instead we would encourage you to gently begin to challenge yourself, to slowly take a step outside the safe space you might have created for yourself. This might mean gently beginning to engage in exercises and movement which challenge your fears a little, but not to such an extent that you feel unable to start. For more information on how to do this please see our handouts located on this website which relate to beginning to engage in gentle exercise and movement. This will give you ideas about how to get started.

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