

This Is a Good Time to Stop Fighting Anxiety

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Anxiety has been my constant companion for as long as I can remember. My earliest memories are of intense worry — I was sure, for instance, that my parents would never come home when they left the house for an evening, or that each cold I got was the beginning of a deadly illness.

As a young adult, I would bite my nails down to the quick as I worried over a financial situation or replayed a conversation in my head in the middle of the night. I've been to more therapists than I can remember, read books on anxiety and filled out scores of work sheets trying to identify my "cognitive distortions" and change them so that I could begin to think rationally.

The problem is, I never did begin to think very rationally. Anxiety is inherently irrational — it deals in what-ifs and worst-case scenarios — and so, for me, it didn't respond to training my mind.

Indeed, there were times that cognitive-behavioral therapy seemed to make my anxiety worse: I would shame myself for not being able to respond rationally to the thoughts generated by my generalized anxiety disorder, the diagnosis I had been given when I was a freshman in college. One therapist recommended that every time I feel anxious, I get up from my chair at work and "walk" my anxiety out of the cubicle. After an hour of walking it out every minute or so, I realized I couldn't keep this up. I needed something new.

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So, about a year ago, I found a new therapist. Julie, a white-haired, Eileen Fisher-wearing counselor, practiced out of an old home a few towns over from where I live. I told her about my lifelong struggle with anxiety, and instead of giving me work sheets or recommending books to read, she invited me to sit with my painful feelings. "Invite" and "sit with" are words she uses a lot.

Julie practices a form of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, ACT for short, which helps patients recognize how they often overreact to unpleasant feelings, to see their unpleasant feelings as just feelings — not reality — and to accept that parts of life are hard and that that's OK.

ACT, which was developed in the 1980s and has since gained broad acceptance, isn't opposed to cognitive or behavioral interventions — in fact, those are very important components of it. But it doesn't suggest that we need to change the thoughts that bubble up and cause us pain. Instead, it says, negative feelings are an inevitable part of life, and we can best deal with them by accepting them, learning from them, and then acting in accordance with our larger life goals.

The idea that I could accept my anxiety — as opposed to trying to get rid of it — was revolutionary to me. And the way I do it — by recognizing it when I see it, saying something like "I accept this anxious thought," or perhaps even using my imagination to invite it in to stay for tea, and then telling it I need to move on to something else — has been more helpful than I could have even imagined when I started seeing Julie.

My anxiety certainly isn't gone, but its hold on me has significantly loosened since I discovered the idea of acceptance. It's so counterintuitive to allow in the thing that wounds me, but it turns out that befriending my fear has actually caused its voice to soften.

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I've started to call my anxiety Susan. She goes pretty much everywhere with me, and while she means very well, she's simply too loud and too concerned about everything. So I tell her thanks for looking out for me, and then try to go about my day knowing that she'll continue to pop up, and that I don't need to walk her out of my cubicle anymore. She can stay.

We live in a time when anxiety is a mental health issue of epic proportion. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America estimates that each year, 40 million adults deal with an anxiety disorder, yet only about 37 percent of them receive treatment of any kind. That means that there are millions of adults living with anxiety in America — and why shouldn't there be? Given the volatility and cruelty of the current administration, the uncertainty of the coming election, and a pandemic landing on our shores, there is plenty to be anxious about. Even those who haven't been formally diagnosed with anxiety may find themselves suddenly afraid, a cloud of fear following them around.

So, we have two choices: We can fight the anxiety, getting caught up in a cycle of trying to answer our fearful thoughts with a rationality we may never be able to truly attain — or we can simply accept our anxiety as a fact of life, no more good or bad than the weather. It comes and goes, and for many of us, the more we try to make it go away, the stronger it comes back and oozes its way around our rational arguments.

Accepting our anxiety doesn't mean that its focus isn't valid — there is plenty to be worried about personally, politically and globally right now. But it does mean that we don't want anxiety to be our solution to these problems. Instead, we want to remain as calm as we can so that we are able to engage our rational brains. We want to save our energy for focusing on the important issues in our lives, rather than using our energy on mentally spinning out for hours on end.

I wish so much I had learned this coping mechanism much earlier in my life. I think of all the worry that could have been saved had I not been spending my energy trying to fight back against my anxiety.

But I'm grateful that I know now that I can accept it as it is, without trying to change it. There is healing in that. Now, whenever Susan knocks at my door, I let her in and invite her to sit down. I tell her to stay a while. She's welcome here.

Laura Turner is the author of a forthcoming book about the cultural history of anxiety.

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