

Anxiety: A Therapist's Regard for Good vs. Bad Emotions

by Dr. Sharon B. Stone, PhD, LCSW

Ultimately, my primary goal as a therapist is to assist my patients in achieving the ability to fully experience the entire complement of emotions with little distress within any given time period. As such, I frequently encourage patients to analyze their “emotion judgments” or judgments about whether a particular emotion is good or bad. When deemed therapeutically appropriate, I provide deliberate guidance while the client is encouraged to navigate through a thorough dissection of the relevant emotion. It is through this exercise that the patient eventually recognizes that emotions are simply emotions and it is actually the feelings associated with the emotions that may be experienced as uncomfortable or undesirable. One of the most notorious emotions demonized within this context is anxiety.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), anxiety is the most common mental illness experienced in the United States. Anxiety is an emotion that is characterized by both physiological and emotional feelings such as tension, heightened blood pressure, and worry. When disordered, anxiety can also produce intrusive thoughts, and avoidance. To the extreme, anxiety can be the catalyst to very frightening panic attacks. The feelings associated with anxiety therefore can be exceedingly unpleasant. The actual emotion of anxiety however produces some very positive outcomes including increased motivation and awareness, engagement of survival instincts,

relaxation through chemical changes in the brain, and increased alertness to impending danger. In essence, anxiety is the anticipatory emotion. It facilitates anticipation of danger so as to incite survival responses.

In practice, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) guide the majority of my treatment modalities. Both CBT and DBT strongly support provision of homework as a practical mechanism of therapeutic progress. Once the patient is able to affirm the positive virtues of anxiety in general, homework empowers them to apply their discovery to personal experiences, further reinforcing the concepts. Homework also provides an avenue to practice the particular distress tolerance or mindfulness skills taught during the session. These skills not only provide the patient a tangible means to assist in riding out the uncomfortable feelings associated with anxiety but, it also provides an additional mechanism for the therapist to actually “be with” the patient.

Relatively recent, robust research has demonstrated that distress tolerance and mindfulness skills significantly decrease the uncomfortable feelings associated with anxiety. Some suggested exercises, specifically well researched may include adult coloring books, therapeutic breathing, journaling, progressive muscle relaxation and imagery among many others. During each session, the patient is taught how to use

these techniques and is encouraged to practice with the clinician. This rehearsal session serves, not only to have the patient practice the newly acquired concepts but to ensure that these concepts were understood by the patient. Homework then provides patients the opportunity to adjust and individualize exercises so as to increase the probability of successful integration into home life. Eventually, over the course of several sessions, the patient collects an entire toolbox filled with various coping mechanisms that they can successfully apply, independently in any context of their lives.



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