

Breaking Free of Anxiety, Part III, Thinking Styles and Anxiety

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How the way you think can create the way you feel...

In his groundbreaking book, *The Biology of Belief*, Dr. Lipton takes his reader step-by-step, through the process of how thoughts impact our biology. I strongly recommend this book! The bottom line is that science has now identified the mechanism through which thoughts directly impact the health of ourselves. Through our thoughts, we can enhance our thoughts and healing, or conversely damage our health and lower our resistance to disease. And yes, create anxiety and panic!

Cognitive psychologists over the last several decades, have discovered mental patterns that make one more susceptible to stress and anxiety. Mental patterns, or thinking styles, are learned and tend to be passed on from generation to generation. Let's examine a few of the most common thinking styles, which can create anxiety and panic.

1. Perfectionism.

Perfectionism is a setup for anxiety. Individuals who are perfectionistic have a deeply seated belief that if their performance falls short of perfect, there is something wrong. They have a need to do everything "just right" in order to feel safe and in control. The problem, of course, is that we live in an imperfect world--how often do things fall perfectly into place? On a logical level, most perfectionists can admit that perfectionism is a faulty strategy for evaluating one's performance and worth. However, as I addressed in Part I and Part II of this series, anxious thinking patterns are not based on logic. A deeper, more emotional part of the brain sends signals of distress whenever it perceives an imperfection. Any perfectionist becomes hypersensitive to even minor errors or flaws in themselves or others, which triggers high levels of nervous anxiety. What some see as an opportunity for growth and learning, the perfectionist sees as an attack upon their worth and esteem.

2. Worry as protection.

Another mental pattern common to anxiety sufferers is a deeply seated belief that worry somehow provides them with a form of protection and comfort. Again, at an unconscious level they may know this makes no sense. But, on an emotional level, they feel vulnerable to disastrous consequences, if they do not worry about every possible outcome and obsess about everything that could go wrong in any given situation. They believe they need their worry and anxiety in order to stay safe and prepared to deal with what might happen. The truth, of course, is that worry and anxiety only create more of the same and diminish one's problem-solving abilities.

3. Globalized thinking.

Some like details, while others like to see the big picture! Mental health is facilitated by the ability to do both. For some, all they can see is the forest, and never the trees. Globalized--negative thinking is a tendency to over-generalize in a negative way. Anxious individuals tend to be highly globalized and negatively focused in their thinking. As a result, they are easily overwhelmed. The more one thinks in globalized, negative terms, the more one is apt to overestimate the risks involved in a given situation, and the body responds with stress and anxiety. In a new social situation, for example, the anxious person may be more apt to focus on a memory when they felt socially inadequate and overlook all of their positive experiences. The result is heightened stress and anxiety.

As you can see, what we think and how we think has a direct impact on how we feel. While medications can alleviate the symptoms of anxiety, they do nothing to change the mental patterns that create it. That is why a combination of medication and cognitive therapy is the most effective strategy for breaking free of anxiety and panic.