

Breaking Free of Anxiety, Part IV, The Process of Change

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In previous postings, I have made every effort to stress that anxiety and panic disorder doesn't just happen to some as a result of faulty biology. Anxiety is the result of cognitive, social, and biological factors. Anxiety disorders don't just happen. They come about as a result of deeply held values, beliefs, perceptions, and judgements. To break free of anxiety, deeply ingrained cognitive patterns need to be changed and replaced with healthier ways of assessing potential risks.

With this awareness, let me address some key psychological issues involved in the process of creating any positive change.

First...the basic law of perception states that "what we focus on, we amplify." Breaking free of anxiety is all about learning how to increase your mental focus in a way that is comforting and empowering. What we think and how we think has the power to lead us into or out of the experience of anxiety.

Secondly...change is a process and not an event. Change evolves over time. Changing the way you think is in and of itself a process. It takes commitment and consistent practice. Cognitive therapy is all about learning tools that, when applied over time, have the power to shift and change deeply held beliefs and perceptual styles. Cognitive therapy is not a quick fix, but grows more powerful over time. That is why the most effective treatment for anxiety is a combination of medications and cognitive therapy. Medications provide immediate symptom relief while you go about the process of changing underlying mental patterns into behavioral habits responsible for creating anxiety. Significant changes in cognitive patterns can be made with consistent practice in as little as six to eight weeks.

Because cognitive change is a process, I record key sessions with clients, so they have the ability to listen over and over again. This strengthens cognitive change. Once again, change is a process and not an event. You didn't learn to walk with your first step, and you don't change a cognitive pattern in a single session. Some cognitive patterns have been learned and reinforced over years...even generations. Repetition is the mother of habit. New skills take time and practice and as they grow stronger, so does your confidence and sense of empowerment. One skill which is especially important for breaking free of anxiety, is the ability to reduce worry and rumination. In my next posting I'll address this issue directly.