

The arduous
journey from
dismay to peace.
What works
when nothing
else resolves
anxiety?

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Anxiety

Anxiety is part of normal human emotions and most people experience it at some point in their lives. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) describes anxiety as the continuous anticipation of future threats (APA, 2013). It can cause repetitive, intrusive thoughts as well as constant rumination and worrying. Worries can be excessive and interfere with life's normal routine. When anxious, a person can struggle to concentrate and feel confused. It also manifests in physical symptoms such as muscle tightness, increased heart rate, dizziness, high blood pressure, sweating, dry mouth, shallow breathing and insomnia (APA, 2013). Counsellors are presented with anxiety that can range from mild and worrisome, to panic attacks, to phobias, to generalized anxiety disorder. Clients describe being overwhelmed by uncertainty and feeling out of control. Some clients have also reported feeling very anxious about being anxious. Anxiety can be very distressing.

The most widely-used and accepted therapeutic approach to address anxiety is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) as well as Behavioural Therapy (Corey, 2017). What if the usual approaches do not have significant results for the client? In this article, I want to share my experience journeying with clients struggling with anxiety. I will relate and examine different approaches tailored for the specific need of the individual client. What works, in my experience. To provide context to this article I want to share some personal background and beliefs. After graduating with a degree in Psychology, I did extensive training in counselling, completing my Masters, in order to be effective in helping people work through life's difficulties, crises, grief, traumas, relationships, stress and anxiety. I have been a counsellor for 16 years, working for state Carers' Associations for a number of years, before going into private practice.

Therapeutic Approach to Treat Anxiety

My approach is eclectic and my toolkit consists of Psycho-dynamic therapy, Brief-Solutions therapy, Transactional Analysis, some CBT techniques, Client-centred therapy, Narrative approaches and Existential therapy. Although not an Existential therapist, I align my therapeutic approach with the main goals of existential therapy. These goals are focused on enabling and assisting clients to reflect on their lives, values and beliefs. I help clients to work through the influences of the past, investigate the present and explore the future in order to widen the perspective of themselves and the world they live in. My hope for clients is to gain a real understanding of themselves, grasp their freedom to choose and realise the meaning and purpose of their life. My approach is underwritten by the core my personal worldview as summarised by existential philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who considered our being to be a gift from God who has left us to take responsibility and make the most of this gift (Van Deurzen, 2010). I believe I was created by God with a unique personality, talents and strengths for a purpose. That purpose is to make a positive and loving difference in the world. Counselling is thus not just my passion, but my calling and my ministry.

The Starting Point – Discovery

The starting point of the journey with the anxious client is exploring the individual's anxiety. Every client has a unique story. What happens when the client is anxious? What does the anxiety feel like? What kind of thoughts are repetitive? Where in the body does the anxiety manifest itself? What kind of anxiety is the client experiencing? Is it a mild, but a constant feeling of dread? Does it result in panic attacks? What are some of the triggers? How does the client manage the anxiety? What kind of coping strategies work or which ones may be ineffective?

We need to understand the role of anxiety, where it comes from, what it is saying to the client and what the function of anxiety in the client's life may be. Engage with your curiosity, creativity and openness to explore.

According to Freud anxiety is part of the ego that controls access to consciousness and represses the instinctual desires of the id. Freud identified a developmental hierarchy of anxiety, including superego anxiety, castration anxiety and separation anxiety (Gabbard, 2005). A deep unconscious issue may be masked by a conscious and acceptable fear. This can stem from childhood experiences of separation and the fear of losing a mother or father. It may even be linked to the death of a parent or a divorce during childhood. The interpretation of circumstances from a child's perspective as unsafe and threatening and the basic need for safety and security, may take the form of anxious thoughts, avoidance, even phobias. The origin of anxiety may originate from a variety of issues (Gabbard, 2005). The psychodynamic approach encourages the counsellor to understand the unconscious origins of anxiety. This is a fine and worthwhile theory, but how will the counsellor and client gain that understanding? Gabbard (2005) suggests that the counsellor use creative ways to explore and facilitate the process of insight and understanding.

Photolanguage Cards

From my experience the counsellor is not going to gain an understanding and unravel unconscious origins of anxiety merely by asking questions and identifying feelings and cognitive patterns. I feel that this approach remains on a surface level and the counsellor and client continue to deal with symptoms and coping strategies. I love to work creatively. There are some excellent resources to assist in the facilitation of the therapeutic process. I often use Photolanguage Cards to tap into the unconscious, stimulate the conversation and uncover memories. Photolanguage Cards Australia were developed by Burton and Cooney (1986) for the Catholic Education Office

for the year of peace. The two sets of cards consist of 130 black and white photos depicting slices of Australian life through images of people, scenes, nature and landscapes. The sets have been developed to stimulate communication and help people to express themselves through the photographs (White, Sasser, Bogren & Morgan, 2009). I only use 28 of the black and white photos. The selection has been made with the focus on depicting mainly landscapes; nature, such as a spider web or a growing fern; scenes, such as a fence with a gate on a farm or three figures standing on a rock watching the ocean waves; and snapshots of everyday objects such as the intersecting railway lines at a railway. I unpack the photos on the floor and ask the client to choose any picture that stands out, that provokes a reaction, or depicts a feeling. I do not prescribe or direct the client's choice. The facilitation process of this activity involves exploration, curiosity and open questions from the therapist. As an example, I may notice that the client chose the scene of a dry, parched land with a kangaroo carcass. I may ask questions: "What comes up for you when you see this picture?" "Where is this place?" "Do you know this place?" The client may see this picture as a metaphor for the isolation that he feels. "What happens when you go to that place of isolation?" "Is it a scary place?" The client may also report feelings of being trapped. I would then explore for example a time, quite often during childhood, when the client felt trapped and scared, hiding under a bed, while parents were arguing. Through this process of talking about the photos, the client provides invaluable information that relates to the anxiety or unveils new dimensions of the issue.

Metaphor and Symbolism

The use of metaphor and symbolism in counselling is useful and helpful. Metaphors provide insight into how the client conceptualise the emotion. It is a way that individuals use to cognitively construct emotion (Wagener, 2017). The metaphor often expresses the essence of a feeling or situation. It reflects the client's inner world and experiences

(Innovative Resources, 2017). I have experienced profound insights gained from this process. One of my clients, a 25-year old man was struggling with debilitating anxiety. He coped with the constant fear and worry through aggressiveness. His relationships were suffering due to his aggression and anger. But the real issue was his anxiety. One of the Photolanguage cards that he chose depicted a landscape with a fallen dead tree. We explored the scene and through the photo we discovered one of the core issues. The photo reminded him of the farm in rural Australia where he grew up. When he was 7 years old, he was diagnosed with an illness that required a lengthy hospital stay in the city. His parents were not able to stay with him, probably due to the demands of the farm. From the experience and perspective of a 7-year old it was all about being alone and left at the hospital. He experienced incredible anxiety about being abandoned. The clear message from his parents, albeit well-meaning, was that he needed to be a strong and brave boy who did not need to be scared. "All will be well in the end." Unlocking the origins of the unconscious anxiety was incredibly powerful. Although this is a succinct description, the therapeutic process occurred over a number of sessions.

Narrative Therapy

Externalising is a concept used in Narrative Therapy. There is recognition that often by the time a client comes to counselling the client does not have a problem, but feels he is the problem. The issue has been internalised (Carey & Russell, 2002). When it comes to anxiety, feelings and thoughts can be overwhelming. Externalising anxiety into a storyline can provide insight into the significance and influence it has on a person's life. It also provides access to understanding and knowledge of the issue as well as new, individual and unique coping strategies (Carey & Russell, 2002). A 13-year old boy developed a social phobia and paralysing fear about leaving their house, after the family moved to a new city. I used Photolanguage Cards very effectively

in externalising his fear and while creating a new story. As a result of the therapeutic facilitation he chose photos that depicted the place of fear – the desolate landscape with the kangaroo carcass and a burnt out bush landscape. He next chose a photo that depicts animal footprints in the sand as the start of his journey away from the fear. The footprints led him to the next photo of the farm gate and the vista beyond. He needed to go through the gate in order to get to his peaceful place next to a stream portrayed by the last picture. Through externalising the anxiety, he created his own story and found some strategy of what he needed, in order to leave the safety of the house. It was so interesting to experience the creation of his storyline and the self-regulation that resulted. The metaphoric images generated and supported therapeutic growth through emotional and behavioural changes (Wagener, 2017). We copied and laminated the photos for him to put it on his bedroom wall. He created a visual pathway that helped to reclaim control in his life.

Existential Perspective

Understanding anxiety from an existential perspective is very useful. It seems that in today's Western society anxiety is increasingly viewed as a disorder, something undesirable that needs to be eliminated from our lives, often through psychiatric treatment. Anxiety and the uncertainty that goes with it, is viewed as unacceptable and wrong. (Kirkland-Handley & Mitchell, 2005; Spinelli, 2005). What if anxiety is an inevitability of life underwritten by the principles of our existence: The fact that we are thrown into a world we did not choose; the necessity of constant choices throughout life and the inescapable journey towards death that we all face (Kirkland-Handley & Mitchell, 2005; Spinelli, 2007). Spinelli (2007) argues that although anxiety often generate feelings of despair, turmoil, fear, caution and vigilance, it can also be energising, motivating, stimulating and inspiring. Anxiety can connect us to the essence of being alive and stimulate creativity. It may sound quite disturbing that we

cannot escape anxiety. Whether we deny anxiety or embrace anxiety, anxiety exists. This leads us to reflect on what anxiety can do for you? What is the function of anxiety? If anxiety is an existential given, what do we do with it? The existential philosopher, Kierkegaard encouraged the actualisation of possibilities by embracing and accepting anxiety (Kirkland-Handley & Mitchell, 2005).

Case Study

I had a very interesting case of a 35-year professional male, who suffered from debilitating anxiety on and off since he was at university. The main issue was his constant worry about his career, that he might have chosen the wrong career, that he was not achieving well enough, that he would be fired, that he needed to make a change. During stressful and pressured periods at work, his ruminations would start and he would become so anxious that it was difficult for him to concentrate and function. Since university he has been seeking answers and has seen various therapists over the years. He had quite a lot of insight into the origins of his anxiety. His father died when he was 8 years old and he believed he "had to" become the man of the house. We looked at childhood issues, we tapped into the unconscious through metaphors and symbols, we looked at ways to challenge the worry and ruminating as well as discussed coping strategies. Nothing really seemed to make a difference. Until, I proposed the idea that anxiety is a given and posed the question what it would mean if he accepts anxiety as part of his life. What if there was nothing "wrong" with anxiety? What can anxiety do for him? What would it look like if he embraces anxiety and channel it into something that will work for him. During that session, a new dimension was unlocked and we started to work with anxiety instead of against it. The feeling of relief and the subsequent transformation to freedom was quite incredible to witness.

A 20-year old female client grasped this concept, accepted and "befriended" her anxiety and has found ways to harness and channel the energy of her

anxiety into music. She is not afraid of uncertainty and anxiety, but rather recognises and acknowledges it and uses it to be creative.

Kirkland-Handley and Mitchell (2005) sum the therapeutic application of an existential perspective up as an ally that the counsellor use to encourage the client to embrace possibilities and live life more authentically.

Self-disclosure

Through experience, I discovered a useful tool for my toolkit: self-disclosure. This can be seen as very risky. Initially, I felt discomfort around self-disclosure. Not the concept of self-disclosure itself, but the fact that I self-disclosed. Initially it felt like my professional "secret", as the impression I got from my training as well as through peer contact and supervision, was that self-disclosure was to be avoided. Nevertheless, I believed that my self-disclosures contribute to the effectiveness of my counselling. It was very interesting and affirming when I became aware of the role of self-disclosure in existential therapy. Yalom (2002) and Spinelli (2007) discuss the positive role of therapist disclosure. Spinelli (2007) describes his experience of "self-being-in-relation-with-the-client" and defines the nature and content of what is disclosed in the interaction between therapist and client. I find it useful and encouraging that Spinelli (2007) and others like Yalom (2002) believe in the efficacy of sensible and useful disclosure. However, it is vital that a therapist is conscious of the motive and purpose for disclosing. It always has to be to the benefit of the client, and for the purpose of gaining insight.

When working with anxious clients I have at times disclosed my own experience with paralysing fear, the development of a phobia and how it impacted my life. When I was 5 years old my best friend at Pre-Primary and her dad died in a car accident. She was asleep at the time of the accident. It was my first encounter with death. My parents supported, guided and loved me through the tragedy. Although I already

had a deep faith and was comforted by the fact that my friend was with Jesus, my 5-year old perception and cognition concluded that "one dies in a car accident". This belief was not in my consciousness and for years it had an enormous impact on my life. I became a very nervous passenger in a car (still am), never slept in a car (still don't) and was physically unable to drive when it was time to learn. I would be overcome by paralysing fear and froze when I had to drive a car. I arranged my whole life around the fact that I could not drive. By the time I was 24, I realised I needed to work through this and overcome my fear. Through therapy I gained an understanding of the irrational fear and my unconscious belief. Since then I have been a confident driver, although I am still a nervous passenger.

I have found that clients have responded really positive when I chose to self-disclose and have reported feelings of relief and normalcy that I am like everyone else, a human being, faced with life's challenges and struggles.

God's Presence

Ultimately and most importantly, the golden thread that is woven through all of my therapeutic work is God's presence. I am completely dependent on His guidance and wisdom and am so grateful for His insight. Often, because of the established trust relationship with my client, I talk about my understanding of the spiritual aspect of anxiety. I find it essential to recognise that anxiety and fear distracts us from our relationship with God. The focus becomes the fear, that feels and looks so real. I think most of us have experienced the feeling of being isolated from God and desperately afraid. We talk through how difficult it can be to hear and believe the repetitive command and encouragement in Scripture to "fear not" (Gaultiere, 2016). I encourage my clients to hold fast to Scriptures such as Philippians 4 (NIV) "Do not be anxious about anything..." or Psalm 56:3 and 4 (NIV) "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise – in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do

to me?" . I often use John Ortberg's book *If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat* (2001) as a reference and encourage clients to read it. Ortberg (2001) has a wonderful and God-inspiring way to explain the reality of anxiety and fear. This book is an easy read and provides a great spiritual guide to overcoming anxiety.

What Works?

God-inspired, creative, innovative, authentic therapy. I believe that if we as counsellors are open and willing to be curious and creative, we can explore different and effective ways to help our clients navigate the arduous journey from fear to freedom.

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