

Dealing with Uncertainty

The gradual end of lockdown will trigger anxiety in some people. Let's not forget it is normal to be anxious when there is a big change in our lives; it is part of a healthy readjustment, something for example that people have to deal with when they've been off sick or on maternity leave for long periods. Lockdown has given some people permission to stay at home and they have found there were some unexpected plus points to lockdown, whereas others feel trapped and angry because of the enforced change to their lives.

The difference here with lockdown ending is that we won't be returning to normal as we've known it before the pandemic so there's a lot of concern about what the 'new normal' will be, as well as the worry of lockdown being reimposed next autumn. For people who found their anxiety levels increase through lockdown, their anxiety may not automatically dissolve simply because lockdown is lifting. Others worry about 'normality' resuming because they like their slower pace of life and do not want to return to how their life was previously, something that is called anticipatory anxiety.

Anticipatory Anxiety

When people have anticipatory anxiety they often imagine the worst, catastrophising and visualising the worse possible scenario. The reality is that life is going to be somewhere between the positive and negative extremes and stopping this way of thinking is challenging. Mark Twain's quote, "I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened" reminds us all that worrying is a pointless activity. So why do we do it?

Amanda sums up her experience about worry. "I was taught to worry, my mother would worry all the time, even when life was OK, she'd then worry about why everything was going OK and when would it go wrong". In both Amanda and her mother's cases, worrying got in the way of them enjoying life, and they were unable to live in the here and now, believing some event was just around the corner which they would have to deal with. Logically they are of course right, this is the pattern of life, but their thinking was stuck in a flight or fight response, always trying to be prepared for the worse to happen. Anxiety is an over-protective emotional response to an unknown, and probably never-to-be-experienced, event.

Amanda's experience

Through therapy Amanda was able to understand that her learnt anxiety meant she was anticipating a threat; she described it as "I'm living with my finger on the emergency button even when there is no emergency or any suggestion there is going to be one". She learnt to recognise where she felt the anxiety in her body and would stop and ask herself "Why do I feel anxious" and by noticing and connecting her thoughts and emotions she gradually broke her cycle of excessive worrying and anxiety.

To overcome anxiety, you do not need to understand the cause as Amanda did, but working through your anxiety in a therapeutic relationship will bring about change that is more sustainable than simply reading about it. Anyone who has read some of the many self-help books on anxiety may recognise that reading alone is not sufficient to make lasting change because knowing the facts does not change our emotional response. However, exploring your catastrophic thoughts, sharing your negative self-talk and reframing your anxiety in therapy sessions create new thinking patterns which are connected to the here and now and, more importantly, bring about lasting change.

Living with Uncertainty

It was Benjamin Franklin who famously said “Nothing is certain except for death and taxes” when he was speaking about how the new constitution had “an appearance of promised certainty”. Living with the uncertainty and unpredictability of life is something many people find challenging. What is your relationship with uncertainty like and can you imagine your way of life not returning to as it was before the pandemic hit last year? Admittedly this is difficult to do when we do not know whether, or what, restrictions will stay in place or for how long. Living in a pandemic makes uncertainty more real so no wonder there is a national increase in people experiencing anxiety.

If battling with anticipatory anxiety (think dealing with uncertainty) existed before you’d ever heard of COVID-19 you may now feel like you are being marinated in anxiety. If your heart rate is frequently increased and you sometimes feel a sense of panic (maybe you have even experienced a panic attack), there’s very effective therapy available and, if needed, medication. The main thing is that you do not suffer in silence. Talking therapy is a non-judgemental, confidential and safe space to explore what is going on for you. Sometimes understanding our fears, as well as hopes, seem so far out of our grasp we try and dismiss their existence but our threat-detection systems (this is one reason why our heart rate increases) continue to operate.

Some tips for lockdown lifting

As lockdown lifts it is important to try to tolerate some of the discomfort and not to avoid going out. A lot of us have become very comfortable in our current routines and making big changes can be difficult. But ultimately people need to expose themselves in a safe and incremental way to some of the discomfort if they want to come out of lockdown successfully.

If you are experiencing anxiety, especially if this has led to panic attacks, then speaking to your GP about medication is one option. Another option, and the two are not an either/or, is to seek professional help through talking therapy so you can learn to reframe your relationship with anxiety. Working with an experienced therapist, someone you feel comfortable with, you will with skill and practice build a new relationship with uncertainty. You do not have to live with negative thoughts giving you the worse-case scenario or enduring the fight-or-flight emotional response that your anxiety is currently causing you.

About the author

Anne Davies is a qualified counsellor and experienced in working with people who want to change their emotional pattern of anxiety. To find out more about her visit

www.mattersofemotion.co.uk.

Finding a therapist, someone you connect and feel comfortable with is crucial. Anne offers an initial free session so you have an opportunity to get a feeling for how she works. Email her at anne@mattersofemotion.co.uk