

When anxiety stops being 'normal'

Anxiety can be good when it helps us prepare for something unfamiliar or important, but when our life is dominated by feelings of anxiety, especially when it penetrates our sleep, this anxiety level is not good for us. If anxiety is a normal emotion (without which we would become cold and calculating) how on earth do we get rid of the anxiety that is blighting our lives? The answer is to better understand our own unique emotions including stress.



Stress has many causes and comes in many forms

All forms of stress, regardless of the cause, are linked to anxiety. The changes to all our lives as a result of the current pandemic and the fluctuating restrictions put in place as a consequence are, for many people, the cause of their stress. If we add this stress to what was in our lives before COVID-19, no wonder the feeling of anxiety is dominating many people's lives today. It is easy to identify some of our stresses: worries about money, the challenges of working from home, home schooling, not being able to participate in activities that helped us relax like seeing friends or family, relationship difficulties that seem worse during in lock down and there are others too.

So how can we understand our own anxiety, especially when it feels like it is not linked to any single aspect of our lives? Let's begin with exploring our stress, consider these questions: 'What is going on for me when I start to feel stressed?'; 'Do I ever start to feel stressed or do I only recognise stress once I am stressed?' and 'Where do I feel stress in my body'? Stress is subjective and based on our own individual experience, we are all different. This is why some people find public speaking enjoyable and take it in their stride while others will do everything to avoid what is for them a harrowing experience.

Therapy helped Jenny

Therapy is perfectly placed to help us because we are given a confidential, non-judgmental space in which to explore how our outer world (what we do, how we lead our lives) meets our inner world (how we think and feel, how we respond).

Jenny spoke about how, when she felt stressed, she would write out a list of what she had to achieve and put them in order of importance because then she felt more in control. She would only recognise her stress when she could not think straight and would feel overwhelmed and tearful. Discussing her use of the words 'achieve' and 'control' led her to consider the number of roles she had: working full time, running the family home (cook, cleaner, gardener, nurse) taxi driver for her two teenagers, and volunteering at the local nature reserve. Before lockdown she also enrolled on a weekend cooking course because cooking is her passion.

While some of you may feel exhausted by how much she does, but others will completely empathise with her life style. This demonstrates that stress and anxiety are subjective. Our emotions are individually unique. Jenny's use of 'overwhelmed' and 'tearful' also provide a possible clue as to what may be going on for her.

Over a few sessions, Jenny talked about how she felt good about herself when she, to use her phrase, 'had loads of plates to spin'. She identified the busier she became she would start to feel, what she described as a high, and this was the clue she was missing because it was at this point that she was about to tip in to stress mode and become anxious about not being good enough, fearful

that she would let people down. When she explored her use of her words 'overwhelmed and tearful', she recognised this was how she felt as an anxious little girl and keeping busy enabled her to feel good about herself. What living in lockdown had caused Jennie to do, was to take on far more work and responsibility than she, or anyone else, could cope with.

Mark's anxiety

Mark had a different relationship with anxiety. He was a self-confessed introvert who actually enjoyed lockdown, he described his anxiety as a distant and constant rumbling feeling he could not quite pin down. Talking through what in his life had changed since lockdown, he identified that his anxiety was linked to loss of contact from friends he would meet in the pub on his way home from work. By not linking his feelings to his thinking he was unable to recognise that the uncertainty of lockdown restrictions were causing him to fear that his life would never return to how it used to be. His anxiety was preventing him from enjoying the life he had now.

What do these cases tell us?

These accounts are unique individual experiences of anxiety and stress. When you ask yourself the three questions listed, what do you uncover about yourself? Are you able to identify where your current anxiety and stress come from or would you benefit from therapy to be better able to do this? As has already been said, our emotions are unique to us. What therapy does is help us make the link between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours to build our resilience in the face of living in conditions that are not as we wish them to be and so become better equipped to make changes that benefit us.

If you are considering therapy because of your anxiety and to better understand our own unique emotions including stress, I encourage you to make use of free initial sessions that therapists offer and find yourself someone where you can dismantle the cloud of anxiety you are sitting under to set yourself up for a much better year ahead.

Note: all names and details have been changed to protect identities.

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