

Anxiety: An Expression of the Soul

I didn't learn to swim until I was around 10 years old, thus was one of the last among my adolescent friends to take the proverbial plunge. I remember feeling great fear and anxiety as I moved deeper and deeper into the swimming pool and was unable to do anything to help myself maneuver in the water. Every time I moved into the deep where my feet could not touch the bottom, panic would set in and I would struggle, kicking and paddling until I crossed back into shallow waters.

One of the first things I learned during swimming lessons is that our bodies float. The paradox of my own buoyancy did not make sense to me as a 10-year-old. The instructor warned me that wildly flailing about would not help keep my head above water but would rather cause me to sink. I was taught that the body naturally floats, but to experience this I would need to calm my anxiety and become reasonably still in the water. I soon realized that to move forward with swimming, I would have to work through my anxiousness. With the help of others and many attempts at the cusp of the deep end I eventually was able to move into the water and swim.

Learning how to face anxiety can also be like learning to swim, overcoming anxious feelings by being placed in anxiety's waters and moving out of the shallow and into the deep. We must learn not to move away from anxious feelings, but dive in and embrace these experiences as an expression of our souls. Being placed in the midst of our anxiety we realize that we are buoyant. Once past the anxious shallows we realize that we just might swim.

Living with Anxiety

Our souls are very articulate. The soul finds ways to communicate with us along our peregrinations. A big presentation on the horizon can make us feel knots in our stomach. Problems in meaningful relationships can keep us awake at night in contemplation and reflection. Relocating across the country can put wear and tear on our vehicles but also on our psyche. We find that even when we are not directly focusing our attention on a particular issue, our souls still find a way to express what is troubling us internally. Often, this expression takes the form of anxiousness.

When we feel anxious, we often try to fight off the sensation, telling ourselves that it is uncomfortable or abnormal to feel so overwrought. As our struggle continues we begin to feel self-contemptuous and irritated with ourselves for not having the ability to flee from anxious thoughts and feelings. Sadly, moving away from anxiety does more harm than good, as this heightens our emotional sensitivity to anxiousness, setting up a perfect storm for anxiety to disquiet and impair. In this catch-22, the feeling of anxiety makes us feel anxious which leads to more anxiety and on and on.

Whether we fight, repress, medicate or just stay in bed, anxiety continues to show up in our lives. These feelings can at times be debilitating, as every move we make to escape leads us further entangled in our anxiousness. How do we begin to move forward when we feel caught in the webbing of anxiety?

One of my childhood friends had a great interest in puzzles and practical jokes. His favorite brainteaser is known as a Chinese finger trap. This cylinder shaped contraption is beguiling because of its paradoxical interlocking. When first given the opportunity to take off the bamboo gadget, the natural maneuver is to pull outwards. But this motion sets the ruse to work, as the apparatus pulls tighter around one's fingers, further

trapping them inside the mechanism. Simply put, the more one tries to get out, the more they are trapped. The way to escape is counterintuitive, as you must push deeper in to be able to free yourself from the device.

Dealing with anxiety can feel a lot like being stuck in a trap because no matter how hard we try to pull away feelings of anxiety continue to linger. The paradox is that the path through anxiety is not moving away but moving into the anxiousness. Could the action of moving towards anxiety then make things open up rather than close around us?

Listening to Anxiety

Every person has an internal dialogue among the various parts of their soul. Often when stressors show up in our lives, this discussion begins as we become cognizant and contemplate the issue. If we might begin to reframe our fears of anxiety and let ourselves embrace our anxious parts, we would find that anxiety has a voice that deserves to be heard. Feelings of anxiousness are significant, as it is one of the many ways our soul communicates with us.

Imagine while driving the engine light begins flashing in the car. The first inclination would be to look under the hood or find someone, a mechanic perhaps, who could help you look deeper into the issue with the vehicle. The unwise choice would be to simply ignore the engine light's message. Furthermore, we would not want to simply have the engine light turned off, as that would silence its communicative ability. If this was done, all that was happening inside the car would continue and the driver would be heading for disaster. When the vehicle does collapse, one might be stranded, in an accident or worse. The engine light is not the problem. The engine light simply communicates to us that the vehicle needs to be further examined. The engine light is valuable, keeping us from driving our cars to the point of breakdown.

Anxiousness is one of our body's engine lights. When these feelings of anxiousness arise, it is important to explore further and ask what might be happening under the hood. We must listen to what our soul is trying to convey to us during anxiousness and not foolishly drive ourselves to the point of collapse.

Engaging in the Soul's Discourse

As a therapist, I have had the privilege to journey with many clients into the depth of their anxiety. The stressors that initiate anxiety vary among individuals and can be actuated by social situations, finances, romantic relationships, or the mystery of the unknown. The consequences of anxiety, however, are similar and include feelings of being stuck, fears of failure, loneliness, physical discomfort, panic and feeling out of control.

It is important during the times when we feel anxiety's sting to remember that anxiety is a symptom of formation in that it shows that our souls are alive, feeling and communicating with us. We should not seek to silence the soul's voice but rather be attentive when our souls speak to us in anxiousness. Seeking to listen to our souls during bouts of anxiousness can feel unfamiliar at first but with time and practice can be a comfortable and illuminating experience.

Often good help is found in community when feeling anxious. This might mean having a weekly time for a friend, group or counselor to help us interpret and put language to our soul's communication and share the burden of our anxiety.

Others find that taking a walk, practicing breathing exercises, sitting in a quiet place or changing normal patterns and routines gives particularly fresh insight and ability to listen more carefully to the soul's dialogue and desires. The path one chooses on the road of engaging the soul's discourse is different for everyone. It is not the mode of transportation that is important, but the journey.

It is possible for us to keep from seeing anxiousness as an enemy but rather an important internal voice that possesses words we need to hear. The very anxious feelings we fear can be significant to us if we would but take the voyage of embracing our anxiousness and float into the deep end of the pool.

- D. Jeremiah Simmons