

Managing Anxiety in a Post Pandemic World

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The Stuck Brain of Anxiety

- Due to neurotransmitter activity (function) and structure (connections between parts of the brain or differences in the size of structures) the brain can get 'stuck' – ruminating on various topics
- The prefrontal cortex may not be able to exert enough control over emotion generated by the limbic system (function and/or structure)
- Excessive amounts of norepinephrine or glutamate may be insufficiently balanced by GABA – so physical and mental sensations of dread or agitation may occur

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Brain Structure and Function Contribute to Rumination

- The Anterior part of the Cingulate Cortex (ACC) –as a consequence of neurotransmitter activity causing overactivity in the ACC, has Negative Attention Bias – that ‘nabs’ your attention – causing rumination
- The limbic system (emotional brain that starts reactions) may have insufficient serotonin to prevent the negativity, and the amygdala may be larger, as it is in people who have experienced trauma so reacts to cues more intensely
- It triggers the hypothalamus to start ‘fight or flight’ in the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)

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Stress Response – Simultaneous with SNS

- Without thought, limbic structures react to the environment – both outer and inner – by identifying threat, risk, potential danger, causing sympathetic nervous system (SNS) arousal and simultaneous stress response
- Stress is dose specific – bigger the danger, bigger release of adrenaline and cortisol
- When traumatized individuals encounter stress, the brain releases excessive stress hormone and norepinephrine so physical and mental experience of stress is exaggerated in relation to the threat

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Why Worry?

- The sensation of anxiety is the human response to ambiguity
- It drives you in the direction of problem identification and solution
- When the sensation of anxiety exists without cause, when a sense of dread exists, the brain searches for problems
- Worry: maladaptive attempt to resolve anxiety, worsening it in the absence of a real problem

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Thought Content

- Anxiety rumination tends in the direction of “Why” and “What if...” kinds of thoughts
- Error Related Negativity. Essential ability to detect and respond to errors (e.g., social missteps). Critical to successful adaptation to a changing environment.
- The ACC (anterior cingulate cortex) is more active in anxiety for identifying errors so errors magnified and responses are exaggerated.

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Repetition Strengthens Brain Activity

- One important principle is that repetition strengthens
- Ruminative thinking results in increased vascularization and more glial cell support – makes worry path into worry super-highway
- Interrupting rumination consistently and persistently quickly starts to ‘erase the trace’ of worry

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Repetition and Imagination

- When panic events and social phobia fears that are repetitively imagined or worried about the pathways are strengthened, sensitizing the responses to cues – objective or perceived
- Brain activity reflects what is imagined, increasing possibility of occurrence– positive or negative

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Correct Cognitive Mis-Steps

- If the worry is about something *possible*, anxiety leads to thinking and behaving as if it is *probable* – teach the distinction between these
- If you can make a plan, it is a real problem with a real solution. Then planning solves the problem of worry too. (Teach Planning!)
- If you cannot make a plan it is a worry. Use worry-elimination strategies.

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Anxiety: Condition Looking for Content

- Brain scans environment for cause – usually will find it
- People seek relief by seeking reassurance: Internet searching is becoming a major source of anxiety-increasing reassurance-seeking.
- If the anxiety can be ‘de-bunked’ or it becomes obvious the worry is not going to happen, relief is brief.
- Guilt becomes a target for worry/anxiety

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Guilt is Excellent Content for Anxiety

Guilt is excellent content. So:

- Need to resolve guilt BUT without falling into reassurance trap.

Potential guilt: something you *maybe* did wrong or *possible* negative outcome of an action – this has trapped people in virus infection fear

- Use thought stopping/thought replacing

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Legitimate Guilt

Legitimate Guilt

1. Write down what you did wrong
2. Talk it over with someone safe
3. Decide what will make restitution
4. Make restitution

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Handling Magical Worry

Worry can have an unrecognized function

- It may relieve some anxiety about whether a person will stop being careful enough. “As long as I am worried I will remain cautious.” Discuss the concern – identify appropriate caution
- It may be a protection to ward off bad things, e.g., “If I worry about this it won’t happen.” – bring to awareness. Use thought stopping.
- It may be center of a relationship or identity – develop an image of life without anxiety

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Invite the Worry

- The model of inviting rather than fighting
- Natural follow up is “What is the worst that could happen?”
- Then the focus shifts to coping and resourcefulness – facing reality and recognizing skills (or planning how to develop skills)

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Erase the Trace of Ruminative Thought

First, Ask oneself, “Do I ever need to think this thought again?” Then do “Stop!” and Swap (Thought Replacement) – Always planned, used **consistently**:

- Sing
- Two-P method (Pleasant/Productive) thought replacement list – has relevance and novelty
- Re-focus on work or people around you
- Be prepared with an inspirational/positive thought to recite

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Health Anxiety

- Need to clarify the actual worry. Is there a legitimate health issue, such as whether a cancer may recur? Or waiting on test results?
- Is this hypothetical, “If I ever got sick...”
- If so, then set up the steps that person can do to follow through with appropriate care.
- Decide “When do I need to worry about this?”
- Then, between now and that date, when the anxiety arises, DO NOT rehearse all the reasons not to worry. Simply say “Stop! On this date _____ I will think about it!” and then distract.

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Contain Worry: Clear the Mind – Imagery or Concrete Methods

Use guided Imagery of “Contain Your Worry”

- Teaches the defense mechanism of suppression
- Calm down physically or settle thinking, relax to sleep
- Start any activity that requires focus (home-to-work transitions, writing tests or reports, therapy)
- Help reduce anxiety about transitions
- Can be done concretely with list, “God-box”, worry backpack, etc.

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Contain Your Worry (in Time)

Necessary for important concerns that are outside of normal control or are irresolvable.

Most effective by making it a kind of ritual:

- Same place and time (10 minutes maximum)
- Symbols or reminders of the problem or intention
- Physical objects that focus the mind
- Sounds that starts and stop the worry time.

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Types of Stress: Increase Anxiety, Increase Risk of Relapse

Stress – directly affected by perception of control:

- Quantity (capable but overwhelmed)
 - more likely with generalized anxiety
 - High activity clients
 - Work Addicted Clients – may not recognize stress from work
- Quality (skills deficits, need help) –
 - Parenting
 - ADHD or other neuroatypical condition

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Fear of Financial Outcomes

This can feel overwhelming to the therapist. Make sure that you are prepared to communicate calm even when you do not have an answer.

Find out from which sources they are getting information. Social media are filled with misinformation and alarmist projections

- Reality may mean helping them list their resources
- Differentiate projections of disaster from immediate concerns
- You do not have to have all the answers

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4 Competencies for Stress Recovery

Eliminate stressor: Being chronically stressed interferes with ability to appraise the detriment of the stressor. Look at relationships, caregiving especially, and work

- What if you cannot eliminate the stressor? There are ways to manage it.

Attitude about degree of control: (think about clients' locus of control)

- Is control possible?
- How about influence vs. control?
- Is this a situation where no control is possible – can the person let go?

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Passive Anxiety – Manage Intake of Stress

- Can't Get Rid of Stressors: Virus, Protests, Relatives, War and Politics
- Societal anxiety affects personal anxiety – those with anxiety are already vulnerable: Prescriptions for anti-anxiety and SSRI drugs increased (34% and 18%) between 2/20 and 3/20.
 - Germ-o-phobs
 - Worriers
 - Panic
- Note your reactions to new information
- Eliminate the amount of attention you give to these topics.

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“Be Still” Methods - Apps can help monitor screen time and set limits on social media

- Consider using the ‘mute button’ on Twitter and Instagram – others do not know their posts/comments are blocked
- Can turn off all phones who opt in using a master app such as Disney Circle
- Create awareness of time-wasting and limit time using apps like FocusMe, Freedom, Stay Focused, FlipD, Cold Turkey (many other similar ones)
- These are self-limiting methods that may improve impulse control and aid in the development of emotional regulation

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News Breaks

Repetition increases rumination (vice versa) And when the topic is agitating, stress rises. Choose one time a day to check in

- COVID-19
 - Protests
 - Election
1. Turn off Non-stop YouTube
 2. Turn off notifications for newsfeeds on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram
 3. Use Apps: Virtual Hope Box, COVIDCoach App, HelpKidsCope (with trauma)

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2nd Stress Management Competency

Managing Attitude - the Stress of the Pandemic

- Acceptance – This is what is. Anger, frustration, fear are all emotional responses based on interpretations and assumptions. What are yours?
- Find ways to express emotional responses responsibly and then step back. Note what is catastrophic vs what is inconvenient
- What has not yet happened, and might not ever happen – when should you deal with it?
- What are your resources to cope with the challenges?

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3rd Stress Management Competency

Manage Time and environment

- Utilize calendars and reminders – electronics can be helpful!!
- Set/Keep a schedule
- What does environment contribute? – Treat work space as work space. Organize. Tidiness – is it necessary for you?

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4th Stress Management Competency: Learn to Rest and Relax

- Rest from Rumination: Default Mode Network = “Sit and stare time” creates insight, empathy, creative problem solving.
- Find time to sit and look at moving water, moving clouds, fire flickering
- Walk or run without earbuds giving you input

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Move Your Body, Move Your Mind

Shake it off really works – it seems to reset the nervous system

- Have a planned play time with children – outside as much as possible: hide and seek, basketball, tag, etc.
- Have a daily dance party
- Move your activity to a different room in the house
- Walk, run, ride a bike

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Learn to Physically Relax

- Relaxation
 - Progressive muscle relaxation
 - Mental/physical relaxation through meditation
- Physical activity is desirable relaxation – movement can release tension and create mental relaxation as well via fun and change of focus.
- Alternate breath techniques
 - In 2, Out 2-4-6-8-10
 - Alternate nostril breathing
 - In 5, Out Huh-huh-huh-huh-huh

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Meditation and Spiritual Discipline

- If you have a spiritual discipline, this is the time to continue practicing it. Whether you pray or meditate or read religious literature or listen to music that raises your spirit, connecting to these sources can help you come away inspired and reassured.
- If you live with other people, make sure that you have some time to yourself if constant contact is likely to increase your inner tension. You might not be accustomed to having a spouse or children or roommate with you all day. Plan activities to do with family or friends, but also make sure you take some time to replenish yourself.

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Anxious Parents and Family Time

Help clients define (and perhaps relax) about screen time for self and children.

With online learning going on at home, discuss how to separate schoolwork from fun time

Separate passive scrolling from interactive or content creation time on screens.

Ask clients to make sure their family has some planned interaction time – living in the same house may be better experienced in a structured way so that alone time is predictable and achievable

Help them think about outdoor family activities.

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Social Media, Shame – Parenting

Shame = “I am bad, flawed, wrong, imperfect” Brene Brown states shame is nearly intolerable unless met with opportunities for **verbalization and empathy**.

Social Media create a sort of standard (parenting, work from home, exercise, baking) and failure to meet it creates shame

Connecting with the image, not the person may create a sense of disconnect

“Facebook shaming” offers no corrective opportunity.

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Help with Monitoring Goals/Behavior

Therapists can get more comfortable with a coaching style during this time of interacting online, e.g., offering specific suggestions with accountability and follow through.

Set specific, reasonable goals

Online learning – doing it with a schedule and follow up on progress

Monitor unhealthy coping, e.g. more alcohol or marijuana use

Plan exercise goals.

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Schedules Reduce Stress/Anxiety – Manage Depression and Isolation

- Parents managing children who are not in school
- Working from home
- If not working or not able to work from home, daily schedule becomes more important
- Go to bed and get up at the times you normally would.
- Eat at regular mealtimes and try to maintain nutrition. (It might be tempting to eat more junk food or snack all day.)
- Especially if you are home with children who are out of school, plan times for games, times to be outside, and check-in online with the many sites and bloggers who are offering ideas for activities.

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Staying Connected Online

- Social Distance should be more appropriately be called **Physical Distance and Social Connection** - can occur online in many ways.
- Stay connected to family and friends.
- Help children to connect via video with family and friends. Know whether the child is getting overstimulated from constant messaging and how much is helping
- Make a list of people you could/should/want to be in touch with. Try to reach someone every day in person or by voice. Texting is great, but to feel more connected, voice is better.
 - Start by asking how that person is doing.
 - Try discussing something other than how upsetting the world is.

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Social Media Plusses and Minuses

- The greater the need to be connected, the more important the use of social media becomes
- Facebook is a source of great ideas and great stress
- Help clients identify how social media is helping or is raising anxiety. Social media communicates too fast about things that are untrue and frightening – remember what spreads on Twitter and why
 - If it is NOVEL or SHOCKING it gets retweeted faster and wider
 - Humans hear/read new information 3 times, even if they know the first time is suspect or possibly untrue, will believe it.

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Fear and Escape

Social anxiety and panic: conditions of fear (fear of fear, fear of humiliation)

Fear prompts escape attempts

Anticipation of fear leads to 'pre-escape', i.e., avoidance behaviors

Avoidance can be mental (e.g., avoid hearing or reading fear triggers)

Panic can lead to social avoidance (like agoraphobia) or to specific avoidance

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Identify Panic Cues

Triggers or cues for Panic Attacks:

Spontaneous Kindling – leads to cue creation

Memories – Learned & remembered fear

Un-Remembered Trauma Cues

Panic Diary – use 5 senses memory

Go backward to the moment before panic when you felt good

Scan forward one thought, bodily sensation, event at a time and scan the 5 senses

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Breathe

Diaphragmatic Breathing works if you do it. How?
 Stimulates the vagus nerve to initiate parasympathetic activity to slow heart, lower BP
 Teach the longer exhale = Decrease CO2
 Use technology or apps like Breathe2relax, MyCalmBeat, Relaxlite
 Breathing also minimizes anxious arousal for crisis management, in social settings or in vivo exposures

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Prevent = Predict, Prepare, Plan

- Predict when panic may occur to be ready to succeed without panic
- Prepare to be there without scare = what will help to prevent the event
- Preparation includes a specific plan for if it goes wrong, e.g., "What if I panic?" "What if I can't remember what to do?" "What if I really turn all red?" "What if my voice shakes?" "What if my mind goes blank?"

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Stop Catastrophizing

Correct Extreme Language and note how it feels different in the nervous system:

“I’m freaking out!”

“Panic is unbearable!”

(What I feel is a real feeling, but it is not true.)

Stop Projecting: Interrupt catastrophic expectations and notice that the outcome has not yet occurred.

Distinguish between possible and probable

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Mindfulness

Being in the moment (observe-describe) is the antithesis of anxiety.

Awareness of here and now without judgment/assumptions helps anxiety.

You choose what you pay attention to.

Try grounding with 5-4-3-2-1 (See, touch, hear, smell, taste)

Effectively: Minimizes importance of sensations

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Telehealth Sessions

- Consider the medium – younger have more comfort with text while older clients more comfort with phone call
- Consider privacy issues for client
- Handling accidental disclosure on video
- Turn off feature where you look at your face- teach clients to do it
- Look at your limits of energy – Zoom Fatigue
- Structure sessions to accommodate the distance

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Technology Impact on Pace Also Affects Therapy

- Expectations of faster work
- Talking too fast without listening to self or therapist
- Therapist can slow pace
 - Repetition
 - Pausing and rephrasing
 - Send a reminder with the client – notes, an object or picture and especially a metaphor

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How are you caring for yourself?

- Repetitive nature of sessions
- Limit the exposure to what seems manageable emotionally
- Do your own self care- doing what works best for you