

Is There A Cure for Anxiety?

How often do you feel fearful or anxious? I have suffered from medium to severe anxiety most of my life. One of my very first memories of feeling anxious is of walking down the road in Bristol with my mother when I was about 4 years old and saying to her, 'Please don't let those black things get me'. What were these frightening black things? A group of nuns in long black habits!

This funny story does have a serious purpose to it. It illustrates a crucial truth about all our fears: they are caused primarily by our thoughts about ourselves and the world, rather than what appears to be happening to us.

Let me explain further. Suppose that you are made redundant, or told that you may have a life-threatening illness of some kind. Your immediate reaction – if you are anything like me – will be to become more or less overwhelmed by fear. Your mouth may go dry, your heart may pound, your legs may start to shake, or you may find that you can no longer think clearly. But what is really threatening you in the present moment? Nothing! It is your thoughts about your future that are causing your fearful physical reactions – a future that may never come.

Most people when they are told that they are being made redundant understandably feel fearful about money and their future security. But many of those made redundant find another job before any real money difficulties kick in. Similarly, many of those diagnosed with cancer in the 21st century will go on to lead normal, healthy lives for many years and may even eventually die of something else.

I am certainly not the only person these days talking about the fact that our thoughts are primarily responsible for our endless anxieties. The author of *A Course in Miracles* no less states: *It is your thoughts alone that cause you pain. Nothing external to your mind can hurt or injure you in any way.* Now, this radical statement is not just referring to our conscious thoughts, but to the underlying egoic thought system that lies in the depths of our subconscious mind and creates a dream world full of attack, conflict and pain - a dream world that we all perceive as physical reality.

However, getting to the point on any awakening path when we absolutely know that our physical existence is not ultimately real takes years and years of dedicated spiritual practice. Enlightened spiritual masters can laugh at worldly disasters because they know they are just part of a crazy egoic dream, but we are nowhere near this level of spiritual mastery yet. So, what can we ordinary, unenlightened mortals do to reduce, if not cure, our constant anxiety?

Well, after 20 years of working with my own fearful thoughts, I do have one or two suggestions for overcoming anxiety which seem to work pretty well for me, although I am certainly not claiming they are a lasting cure!

The first practise is to notice that our personality-self is feeling anxious – which takes a certain level of mindfulness to begin with. Then, we can simply pause whatever we are doing and take a few gentle, but deep, calming breaths. As we do this, we can gently focus on relaxing all our muscles, because when we believe our fearful thoughts, we instinctively tense our muscles ready for flight or fight.

I find that this simple practise is even more effective if I gently place my palms over my heart as I breathe and silently tell myself, 'It's OK. I am here with you and everything is going to be OK.' Or, I silently recite *A Course in Miracles* lesson 34: *I could see peace instead of this.* I find that mothering myself like this usually comforts me, and has a truly calming effect on my fearful, inner child.

The second practise I have used for dissolving anxiety, that I was taught by Jason Chan, is a little more complicated, but it goes deeper into the more hidden layers of our fear. When I have a serious fear that just will not go away, I now know that I can use meditation to get down to the root of the problem. So during my meditation, I focus on surrounding myself with a really powerful healing light that I imagine is pouring down on me from the beyond. I then use the power of my own mind - and the infinitely more powerful mind of Jesus Christ - to see, or feel, my specific fear dissolving into the light like a dark cloud being dissolved by bright sunlight.

Now this may sound amazing, but I do have a confession to make. When I get into a *really* anxious state, I tend to resist meditating like this. It is as if a dark part of me completely takes over and insists that I have every right to be incredibly fearful and that even Jesus Christ himself is not going to stop me.

I don't know if this sounds at all familiar to you, but I really do not want to be one of those spiritual bloggers who makes the spiritual path sound smooth or easy. It is anything but. On my own long and sometimes really painful path, I seem to take one step forwards and then at least two steps backwards. Weirdly however, I still seem to have made some progress over the years from dwelling constantly in fear and anxiety to now dwelling - at least some of the time - in love and peace.

I am certainly not the most diligent of spiritual practitioners, but maybe because my almost constant anxiety has driven me nuts from time to time, I do have a strong motivation to keep practising until I totally crack egoic fear once and for all. I am also incredibly grateful to all those beautiful souls who have selflessly given me the tools to cure my own anxiety, including my three main spiritual teachers this lifetime, Ken and Elizabeth Mellor and Jason Chan.

One thing I now know for sure, we cannot do this on our own! There is no way I could have even begun to reduce my own anxiety levels without incredible amounts of assistance from

so many wonderfully wise, kind and loving souls whom I have met on this crazy journey that we call life.

So, whilst I would not want to encourage you to wallow in fear or anxiety, or to reinforce your sense of victimhood by constantly telling everyone how awful you feel, I would definitely urge you to find really good spiritual friends or mentors with whom to share some of your fearful thoughts and feelings. In my experience, a fear shared immediately loses much of its destructive power over us because our friends and loved ones can usually see that most of our fears are pretty irrational.

If you are really serious about curing your own anxiety, you should also find some kind of strong spiritual sangha to support you unconditionally, as you go through a long and challenging healing process. I jokingly call my own group of amazing spiritual friends 'The Sangha of Awesomeness' (from Kung Fu Panda). But beyond the jokes, I am so incredibly grateful to them all for their amazing friendship and support.

Two people joining together with the sincere motivation of transcending human fear and conflict are not just twice as powerful as one lone practitioner – they are awesomely more powerful! So dear friend, please find your own 'Sangha of Awesomeness' and then vow to keep treading on your unique awakening, healing path, until you find your own lasting cure for anxiety. Can you do it? With the mighty assistance of your true friends - of course you can!

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