Fight Anxiety By Finding Your Groove

If there was no future there would be no anxiety.

That sounds pretty radical but it makes sense the more you think about it. Where is your mind when you start to feel anxious or panicky? Chances are the answer is... the future. How am I going to pay for my kid’s education? Is my marriage going to last over the next few months? Will I make a fool of myself during my presentation at work tomorrow? All of these very common questions, and millions more just like them, push our minds into the future and into anxiety’s domain.

Here’s another example of how anxiety is totally future-oriented. Do you know someone who is afraid of heights? I’m betting if you talked about it with them they would say they’re not actually scared of being up high – what really makes them sweat is the thought of falling from up high. I’ve never been in this situation, but I imagine that once someone is falling from up high, they aren’t afraid of falling anymore – it’s the landing that has them worried. So it isn’t “the thing that’s happening” that triggers the feelings of anxiety it’s the thoughts about what’s going to happen. You may say “Well, there is an angry guy - who I accidentally cut off - getting out of his car, and walking towards me right NOW. This is all in the present, and I’m definitely feeling anxious!” True, but the fact is you’re not anxious because he got out of his car, or because he’s walking towards you - you’re scared because you think he’s bent on doing harm to you... in the very near future! And the key word here is still “future”.

It’s really helpful to realize this link between the future and anxiety because it focuses how we deal with anxiety. Technically, if we can keep our minds in the present we won’t feel anxious. Okay great, but I know you can see at least 2 problems with this theory. One, it sounds easy so why do people still get anxious? And two, even if you could keep your mind in the present all the time how could you ever plan for anything? Part of being responsible and mature is being able to think ahead and plan things out. You can’t do that without thinking about the future. These are both good points, so let’s look at each of them.

It’s easy to understand that keeping our minds out of the future can reduce our anxiety, but actually putting this into practice can be very difficult. For example: we love our kids, so how can we stop worrying about their future!? There’s no doubt... it’s hard. Worrying and anxiety are often habits that have grown over the course of a lifetime. Changing habits is difficult, but not impossible. Think about using an old manual handsaw. Remember how hard it is to actually start cutting the wood. The saw bounces around because there is no groove for it to fall into yet. Worse than that, if there is an old groove in the wood just beside the place where you want to make a new cut you know where the saw is always going to want to go. We’re exactly the same.
If there’s an old groove (an old habit of ours) close by we are naturally going to fall into it. It takes a lot of slow and steady repetition to start a new groove, but once it’s started the work becomes a lot easier. The more we practice our new habit of staying in the present the easier it will be (we’ll talk later about strategies for doing this).

The other problem we raised is: how can we plan ahead if we aren’t supposed to think about the future? In reality I think it’s important we acknowledge that it’s just not practical to stay in the present every second of every day. Living a successful life absolutely involves careful planning, and dreaming about what our lives will look like – both “future-based” activities. The secret here is to separate concern, and worry. Let’s define concern as the mental effort you put into dealing with future issues that are under your control. Worry then will be the mental effort that you put into dealing with future issues that are not under you control. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to decrease the amount of time you spend “worrying”, because if you start to feel anxious “worry” is usually the culprit. Fixating on future events that you have no control over is by any measure a waste of your precious time.

Okay, so being able to keep you mind in the present when you need to is important. Let’s look at some strategies that will make this easier to do. Probably the most effective tool in your “staying in the present” toolkit is your senses. If you think about it, you can’t sense things that aren’t in the present. You can’t hear sounds, see sights, touch objects that aren’t in the “here and now”. This means that if you are focusing on the things you can hear, see, touch, smell, and taste you are 100% in the present. And we know when your mind is in the present you reduce your anxiety.

Here’s an easy activity you can do any time any place to help you to stay in the present and focus on your senses. For each sense pick out 5 sensations and describe these sensations in detail. So for example you could start with your “seeing” sense. Look around you and pick out 5 things you see. Describe each thing in as much detail as you can. If it’s a picture, what are the colours in the picture? What are its dimensions? Is it in a frame? If there’s a flock of seagulls in the picture, count how many seagulls there are. Describe the movement and shape of each seagull. Then you can move onto another object that you see in your environment and describe it in as much detail as possible.

Once you’ve described 5 things that you see you can do the same for 5 things that you hear, then 5 things that you feel, and, taste, and smell. In some places you may not be able to come up with 5 sensations for your taste and smell senses, but find as many as you can. What this activity does is give you 15-30 minutes of “anxiety free” time. It can act as a reset button, allowing your emotions to return to their normal state. And it’s not something you need to do all the time, only when your feelings of anxiety start to get in the way.

Anxiety is something that affects everyone to varying degrees. What we’ve learned is that anxiety is a future thing. The better we get at controlling our minds, the easier it is to pull our minds out of the future and into the present when we feel that anxiety is becoming a problem. Through this practice we create a new habit - a new groove - and over time it will become easier to put our minds where, and when we want them. So…go find your groove!