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Quieting the Anxious, Unquiet Mind, Part 2 10 More Tips for Interrupting Anxious Turmoil©

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We published an article on *10 Tips for Interrupting Anxious Turmoil*. Here are 10 more favorites.

11. Analysis: The deeper reasons behind the anxiety give us clues to resolving it. We do that in two ways:

- 1) bring out the deeper emotional dynamics active in the present moment and
- 2) study the historical roots of the anxiety in our past experiences and learning.

Although anxiety tends to make us think the problem is right here and right now, the roots for how we are perceiving and reacting to the situation are usually old ones. For example, Annie experienced a panic level of anxiety after her supervisor called her in for a meeting. Let's look at her reaction.

*All she was aware of was her symptoms, namely, her rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, fearfulness.

*At an interior level, she feared the meeting would be about some error she may have made or perhaps she might be fired. You can see she inferred or projected all that.

*At a deeper level, she associated the supervisor with her father, a man who had been verbally abusive and punished her by threats of rejection.

*At yet a deeper level, she felt inadequate with the beliefs "I am unlovable," "I never get anything right." Those were her abstractions from her father's behavior. We call those *schemas*.

You can see how a simple message to come to a meeting with her supervisor triggered a *cascade* of thoughts, emotions, and memories, many of them *unconscious*. Ultimately, instead of wondering what the meeting was about, Annie experienced deep anxiety about rejection and feeling dreadful.

We can look at the current or the historical basis for the anxiety. Of course, they overlap. So, the current picture will include recall of historical events. The historical analysis will begin with the current picture of what is going on.

A. Depth Analysis

A *chain analysis* is simply a sequential account of events, *external and internal*, starting with some *Activating Event*. Then it follows through the internal perception of the event, its meaning, then through the internal reactions, then to the behavior actions one takes in reaction. We can reason backwards from a reaction or forwards from some life change activating event. Let's try both of those.

Let's assume that Annie was merely aware of her panic attack. This is common. Panic anxiety, in a sense, obliterates our awareness of whatever came right before it. We asked her to contemplate what happened right before. She got the phone call to come into the boss's office.

T: When you heard the phone call, what did you think?

A: I'm in trouble. (You see we are filling in the chain of events, external and internal. There was no reason for her to think she was in trouble. It's source is some internal complex.)

T: OK, and what made you think you were in trouble?

A: I searched my mind and couldn't remember anything I may have done wrong, but I thought 'Perhaps I had been late on something.'

T: Before that? What were your thoughts about your supervisor? (Notice the work to complete the chain analysis.)

A: I thought my supervisor might not like me.

T: Why is that?

A: Sometimes she walks past my desk without saying "Hello."

T: Anything else?

A: Sometimes when she asks me to do something, I think she is a bit short with me. Maybe I'm just reading into her tone?

T: OK, so, assuming she's short with you, **is there any other explanation?**

A: Maybe she's in a hurry.

T: **Could you be primed to see a situation in a particular way?**

A: Yes. Authority figures always scare me.

T: Why is that?

A: They remind me of my father. All the abuse.

T: Go with that. **What comes to mind?**

A: He would say things like 'Can't you get anything right? Who needs a daughter like you?' when he was really pissed off, he would go to his office in the house and lock the door.

T: **What emotions does that memory stir up?**

A: I felt like he would not want me any more as a daughter. Scared.

T: So, in summary, you get anxious and ruminate about what could be the matter, when your boss is business-like with you and you are prone to having an anxious mind.

So, we see how we can go back to the deepest cause of her reactions.

In depth analysis, we are looking for the key variable that set the chain going in a troubling direction. In her case, it was the thought the supervisor wants to talk to me and 'My supervisor must not like me' and the belief she would do something to Annie. There was no evidence for this. It was an assumption that we call a *transference projection*. That means transferring an experience from a childhood relationship onto one in the present and then projecting onto the supervisor, which we can liken to a movie projector sending an image onto a screen (the supervisor). We all do that in various ways.

While in the example, Annie's anxiety had roots in unconscious, automatic associations learned at the hands of her father, many other kind of deep memories may shape our present-day anxieties.

B. Historical Roots

As you can see, the historical roots of an experience fit into the chain of our reactions to it the current situation. We could have asked Annie this question,

T: When you got the phone call, what came to your mind?

A: She doesn't like me, and she's going to fire me.

T: What is this about not being liked, **what comes to mind about that from way back?**

A: I never felt that my father liked me. I always thought that he saw me in a very critical way.

T: **What can you say about that in depth?**

A: Well, he would come home from work and he would tell me whatever it was my mother had complained that I had done that day. I was always in trouble with him. And sometimes what he would say to me is was so nasty as if I purposely was the scourge of the family.

T: **What did that make you think about yourself?**

A: I'm just in the way. I never have been liked. And I am probably just plain unlovable.

T: **How does that play out in your current life?**

A: I walk around anxiously waiting for someone to criticize me and make me feel worthless.

T: That's a pretty anxious way to live your life.

You can see that a bit of analysis helps us get to the bottom of our anxieties. That is like putting a hole in an anxiety bubble or balloon. All the air may immediately rush out and the anxiety balloon may collapse.

Useful questions for probing deep thoughts are bolded in the text above.

12. Activity: Physical Activity as an Interrupt: Engaging in vigorous physical movement can use up the adrenaline that fueled the anxiety. Activity also consumes mental focus and moves it away from the anxious thoughts.

Do your favorite forms of intense activity – jumping jacks, running in place, or brisk walking.

But focus the mind on the activity. For example, count each movement or say left-right-left-right. Perhaps pair the movement with a mantra or phrase, such as "I am here. I am safe." Physical activity not only redirects focus but also engages the body in regulating stress hormones.

13. **Thought Restructuring:**

A. Cognitive Restructuring.

Cognitive Behavioral therapists have developed a number of ways of overcoming severely anxious moments. The core method is called *Cognitive Restructuring* -- identifying underlying anxious beliefs and challenging these illogical, anxious thoughts with logic. Then coming up with more reasonable thoughts that may be more accurate.

Write down the thought causing anxiety. E.g., for Annie, it was the boss is upset with her and will fire her and then her life will go down the drain and never be fixable (because she is too broken to be fixed).

In SBT, we ask: **What evidence supports this thought? Are there other explanations?** Annie used suppositions (the boss didn't say hello) rather than evidence. There was none.

What evidence contradicts it? Annie received a positive review just the previous week and a compliment for her thoroughness.

Is this thought helpful or harmful? Harmful, as Annie had a panic attack and her mind was flooded with angst. What would be more self-supportive?

Replace the anxious thought with a balanced alternative. Annie could say, "Stop and let me wait to see what the problem is. It could just as well be the boss trusts me with a new assignment because she knows I'll get it right."

Thus, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach directly questions the validity of ruminative thoughts.

B. Combining CBT with Mindfulness

When struggling with anxiety, including anxious insomnia – note that a racing mind is one of the biggest obstacles to sleep – realize that worries, to-do lists, and intrusive thoughts can keep the brain in a state of alertness. That makes relaxation feel impossible. To counter this, mindfulness offers strategies to gently interrupt this mental over-activity and refocus.

The "Noticing and Labeling" Technique

Racing thoughts often persist because we unconsciously engage with them. Mindfulness teaches us to step back and observe these thoughts rather than getting caught in them.

How to do it:

- 1). Close your eyes. Instead of fighting your thoughts, simply notice them as if you were watching clouds drift across the sky.
- 2) Label each thought using a word that describes what kind of thought it may be —e.g., "worrying," "planning," or "remembering" — and then let it pass without judgment as to whether it's a worthy thought, a bad thought, a good one.
- 3) Gently return your focus to your breath or a calming body sensation (like the feeling of your head on the pillow).

This approach helps create distance from thoughts, reducing their grip on your mind. As the one doing the labeling, you are no longer identifying yourself with the thoughts passing through.

14. **Externalization:** Clients like this method. Basically, name your anxious thoughts or give them a persona. That creates a sense of separation from the thoughts. After all, you are not your thoughts.

T: Imagine the rumination as a character or separate entity, for instance, 'Oh, here comes 'Anxious Annie' again.' What name would you use?

A: AnnaLee, which is the name my father used when he was angry with me. She is just scared as a kitten running to hide under a bed.

T: How did she take over your life nowadays?

A: I don't know. Whenever any situation comes up where I may be judged, I guess, there she jumps up like a Jack-in-the-box.

T: In that analogy, it's like a scary part.

A: Right. So, when you're scared, your body just reacts and that's what's on your mind.

T: When did she first come into your life way back?

A: My earliest memory of her is around age 7 when I got some check marks on my report card for talking class and missing some homework. He was so angry. I remember feeling two ways, a scared way like AnnaLee and an angry way. But the angry side got suppressed, I guess. I was too afraid to be like he was or to get punished worse.

T: Let's discuss more about AnnaLee's biography and then how you would outrun her now?

By personifying the thoughts, you create emotional distance and reduce their power over you.

15. **Thought Stopping:** The idea here is to have a strong physical experience that 'snaps' us out of it, so to speak.

The Rubber Band Snap: Wear a rubber band on your wrist. When rumination begins, snap the band against your skin. This creates a mild physical sensation that interrupts the mental cycle.

The Shock Technique: A sudden sensory experience can "snap" the mind out of rumination. Hold an ice cube or splash cold water on your face. Engage in a loud, purposeful clap or stomp and say, "Stop!" firmly. The physiological shock disrupts the brain's repetitive anxious patterns.

16. **Thought Extraction:** Anxiety-Writing Dump -- Quickly write down every anxious thought racing through your mind without judgment or structure. Then you may rip the paper to symbolize letting go of the thoughts or read the list aloud in a silly voice to diminish their intensity. Perhaps you will see patterns in all those jottings. Perhaps keep them in a journal for latter review.

17. **Disengagement from Thought:** Cognitive Defusion Technique -- Imagine your thoughts floating away like clouds or leaves on a stream. Instead of trying to stop the thoughts, visualize them gently drifting out of focus.

18. **Logical Consequences:** The "If...Then" Contingency Plan: Challenge ruminative "what-ifs" with logical outcomes using this formula:

If [worst-case scenario] _____ happens, then [x and y could happen] _____ and [I'll CHOOSE to respond this way]_____. This creates a mental plan and removes the catastrophic edge of rumination.

19. **Breath Work:** Focusing on the breath has advantages for changing anxious focus and also for calming the body. Rapid breathing is associated with anxiety. Slow breathing seems to activate the parasympathetic

Box Breathing: This breathing technique provides structure and rhythm without requiring a fully calm mind:

- Inhale for 4 counts.
- Hold the breath for 4 counts.
- Exhale for 4 counts.
- Hold the exhale for 4 counts.

Repeat this cycle several times to engage the parasympathetic nervous system and refocus the mind.

Another method for engaging the parasympathetic system is 4-2-8 breathing. The long, slow, quiet exhalation has a calming effect.

20. **TIPP Skills:** TIPP skills are a set of four techniques from DBT therapy that can help you re-regulate your emotions and cope with acute or overwhelming distress.

Temperature: Changing your body temperature can help slow your heart rate and calm your nervous system. You can try flashing cold water on your face or using an ice pack.

Intense exercise: Exercise can help you regulate your emotions.

Paced breathing: Slow down your breathing and breathe deeply from your stomach. You can try watching a clock and focusing on breathing five or six times per minute, or you can use a breathing pacer online.

Progressive muscle relaxation: This technique can help you relax. In this method, one tightens a muscle group very hard, holds, then full releases. Muscles released after tightening tend to relax more completely. Muscle groups for this exercise can start with the cheeks/forehead, then neck/chin, then shoulders, arms, then fists, then, chest/abdomen, hamstrings, lower legs, then curling the toes. Tighten each and then relax it totally. Take it slowly, no rushing.

TIPP skills work by shifting your nervous system from the fight-or-flight response to the relaxation response. However, while TIPP is not a long-term solution, it is a practical set of skills for quieting the unquiet mind..

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