Q: I really struggle with anxiety when I’m at work, and it seems to be spilling over into my family life. How do I deal with this?

A: The first thing to do: Take a deep breath. Anxiety has never killed anyone. It is easy to let our anxiety run rampant and take over. Anxiety tells us to go faster. Taking a breath helps slow us down physically and emotionally. Take a moment to ask yourself where you are and what is going on right now. Anxiety is all about the future - it is about things that haven’t happened yet. Returning our attention to the present helps us remember that, while things might happen, they aren’t happening right now. Orient yourself to what is going on right now around you. Are you at work or at home? What is occurring right now? What needs to happen right now? What is the best/most important thing I can do right now to deal with what is happening?

Anxiety very often can overwhelm our ability to cope with things by getting us to look at irrelevant issues or to believe things that aren’t actually true. Reminding ourselves about what reality is and centering ourselves and our response in the present helps us to make a clearer-headed choice. It can be very easy to let our anxiety from one environment cross over into another one. Staying in the present moment is a great way to address this.

When you’re dealing with anxiety at work, one thing that can result is a “stress hangover” when you come home. And that can cause problems in what would otherwise be an unstressful environment. But, if you can identify what is causing your anxiety, you can start to look at options to resolve the anxiety. If you are worried about a presentation, a task you have to accomplish, or something else that you have control over, you can begin to plan. Thinking through what can be done to help you to stay relaxed, focused, grounded, and cheerful – even under pressure. After all, anxiety is not produced by something external. It’s an internal response to stress. We can train the mind to respond in a more skillful way.

FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE: THREE RESPONSES TO ANXIETY

Anxiety is a low-grade fear. It’s difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of one’s anxiety. That’s because anxiety is pervasive, whereas fear has a clear target.

We are hardwired to respond in three different ways when faced with danger: fight, flight, or freeze.

Imagine that you are hiking in a national park. Suddenly you spot a bear. Faced with immediate danger, you instinctively choose one of three options: you either try to scare the bear away, run as fast as you can, or freeze in place. Anxiety is your body’s way of preparing you to respond to danger.

HOW TO TACKLE ANXIETY

One way to tackle anxiety is to change our ingrained thought patterns and emotional responses.

Luckily there are some wonderful techniques that can help us to stay relaxed, focused, grounded, and cheerful – even under pressure. After all, anxiety is not produced by something external. It’s an internal response to stress. We can train the mind to respond in a more skillful way.

“Keeping in Touch” is a monthly publication for employees covered by The Village Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through their employer’s benefit package. If you have questions about your EAP benefit, or if you would like to access services, call 1-800-627-8220.
Anxiety, From Front

off the bear by making yourself look big, or by shouting (that’s the ‘fight’ response). Or you immediately turn and run to safety (that’s the flight response). Or you stand very still in the hope that the bear won’t notice you (that’s the ‘freeze’ response).

Let’s look at how these responses play out in everyday life:

1. **Fight:** When we’re anxious, we tend to be irritable. This is the ‘fight’ response. Because anxiety is pervasive and doesn’t have a clear target, we tend to snap at those around us.

2. **Flight:** Sometimes we try to avoid what makes us anxious. People who suffer from severe anxiety even avoid stepping outside their home.

3. **Freeze:** The freeze response produces procrastination and stage fright.

Note that I’m talking about ordinary anxiety, and not about anxiety disorders. If you suffer from panic attacks or phobias, get professional help.

Anxiety is an emotion that sends our mind into the future. After all, nobody is anxious about the past, right? As human beings we tend to think in stories that are like mind-movies. Anxious mind-movies usually have a ‘what if?’ scenario.

So what winds up into anxiety are particular thought patterns and stories. Take a look at the following list and see if any points seem familiar:

1. **Self-doubts:** Do you doubt your ability? Do you think you haven’t got what it takes in order to succeed?

2. **Wanting Control of the Future:** Do you want to want to control what happens in the future? The truth is that even if we lay great plans, the unexpected can happen. And life has inescapable tides: we age and finally die.

3. **High Self-expectations:** Sometimes we become our own slave-driver. It’s good to step back at times and check out whether our expectations are realistic – and kindly.

4. **Fear of Failure:** Are you afraid to fail? The truth is that all learning entails failure. Prof. Tal Ben-Shahar, an exponent of the Positive Psychology movement says, “Learn to fail, or fail to learn.”

5. **Not Being Present:** This is a key factor of anxiety. When our thoughts dwell on the future, and we stop being truly present, that’s when we can become anxious.

As you can see in the list above, all these internal factors are mental habits that we can change in order to alleviate and transform anxiety. And it’s the last one – being present – that’s the key to inspiration.

**FOUR WAYS TO TRANSFORM ANXIETY INTO INSPIRATION**

Here are four ways you can start to transform anxiety into inspiration:

1. **Simplify Your Life:** The best guide I have seen so far, is Leo Babauta’s lovely new ebook “The Simple Guide to a Minimalist Life.” He takes you right through the necessary steps to simplify your life. It doesn’t happen overnight, but can definitely decrease anxiety in the long run.

2. **Write Everything Down:** Holding too many ideas and plans in your head can cause anxiety. A very simple remedy is to record all your ideas, dates, and schedules so that you free up your memory. Buy a simple notebook that you carry with you, or invest in a smart phone that can store appointments and ideas.

3. **Learn to Relax:** The anxious body is tense and needs rest and relaxation.

4. **Practice Meditation:** If you really want to change the mental habits that keep you ensnared in anxiety, you’ll find meditation a real help. It can be daunting to learn to meditate. And busy people sometimes find it difficult to set time aside to practice meditation. Try the Three-Breaths meditation. You can do it in one minute or less. It’s a natural way to meditate and doesn’t require you to learn complicated techniques.

The Three-Breaths Meditation entails taking a few moments each day in order to pay tender regard to three breaths as they flow in and out of your body. For best results, keep upright posture so that your body and mind are well balanced. As thoughts come and go, observe them with soft attention and bring your focus gently back to your breath. Practice this easy micro-meditation a few times during the day. You’ll notice that it brings you right back home to the present moment.

Learning to guide our mind away from unskillful emotions, like anxiety, fear, or anger, and towards kindness and cheerfulness, is a wonderful way to enhance our life and bring about happiness.

—By Mary Jaksch on Zenhabits.net.