

## **A Comprehensive Approach to Recovering from Anxiety Disorders**

The causes of anxiety disorders vary greatly. So why shouldn't the approach to recovery not be the same? Long lasting recovery occurs when you are willing to look at all aspects of your life and dedicate yourself to making changes to "habit, attitude, and lifestyle" (Bourne, 2010). The way to achieve this goal is to tackle anxiety by looking at seven different levels: physical, emotional, behavioral, mental, interpersonal, "whole self", and existential/spiritual. An intervention might not be needed for each level, but when addressing anxiety each level should be assessed.

Physical contributions to anxiety may include imbalances in the brain or body, shallow breathing, dietary factors, muscle tension or perhaps an untreated medical condition. Ways to focus on recovery from physical level symptoms can be accomplished through meditation or progressive muscle relaxation. When practiced regularly breathing techniques can be a successful way to calm yourself. Exercise is another practice, which is considered by many to be the most effective way to combat stress and tension- both factors contribute to anxiety. Changing your diet or getting a physical exam to rule out any medical conditions are two more ways to eliminate anxiety in your life. Finally, medication can be another component to managing your condition. Using a health professional to determine these needs is a critical component to reaching your desired result.

The next area to assess is the emotional level. Many times anxiety or panic can be the symptom of suppressed or buried emotions such as anger, frustration, grief, or desperation. If you grew up in a family that did not encourage expression of feelings, as an adult you may be struggling not only with expressing emotions but identifying what you are feeling. Focusing on an intervention in this level will provide you with strategies to recognize the symptoms of suppressed feelings, identify what you are feeling, learn how to express that emotion, and then communicate them with others (Bourne, 2010).

We might not realize that certain behaviors we exhibit perpetuate our anxiety. Attempting to resist the panic attack can cause our feelings to escalate. Rather than fighting back, learning how to work through and cope with the emotions you are feeling during the panic attack will provide you with long-term benefits and skills. Strategies exist to help you minimize the panic before it starts and learn to "go with it" instead of reacting to the physical or physiological symptoms you are experiencing. Phobias are also important to assess. Avoidance is the number one behavior that causes the phobia to persist, which contributes to increased anxiety. With the help of a support person you can work on desensitization to eventually confront the phobia overtime.

Self-talk is what we say to ourselves internally, which has the potential to negatively affect our mood. This concept makes up the mental level in the comprehensive approach to recovery. "Self-critical thinking or perfectionist self talk" (Bourne, 2010) both contribute to anxiety. Many individuals also engage in "what if" statements causing excessive worry and fear. It is important to recognize these destructive thinking patterns before you can challenge the underlying mistaken beliefs preventing you from reaching a healthier outlook of yourself, others and the world around you.

The fifth and sixth levels refer to the interpersonal aspect of your life and the “whole self,” which incorporates self-esteem. Much of the anxiety individuals experience stems from challenges in interpersonal relationships. If you are unable to set boundaries or communicate your feelings to others, you may find yourself chronically tense and anxious. There are several strategies for learning assertive communication, limit setting, and expressing your true feelings and desires to those that are important to you or involved in your life. The “whole self” level refers to our self-esteem, which is among the most intense contributor to anxiety. Self-worth begins being defined in childhood, and if you consider your childhood dysfunctional, you may carry a negative self-image, feelings of insecurity, shame, and inadequacy into adulthood. There are many ways to build self-esteem and one way includes cultivating a relationship with your *inner child*. The inner child is the part of you that carries the possible negative views that rose from childhood. With the help of a healthcare professional you can begin nurturing the child within to strengthen your self-worth as an adult.

The final component to assess for recovery from anxiety disorders is the spiritual or existential level. This not only includes developing a connection with a Higher Power and spiritual commitment but also finding a broader purpose or meaning to life. This may involve looking into a vocation or hobby that fulfills your happiness and showcases your talents. Anxiety can push you towards “intellectual development, emotional development, and even getting more in touch with your own body” (Bourne, 2010). Try treating your panic attacks as a call for reaching your full potential rather than a response to negative factors.

Not everyone who experiences anxiety needs intervention on all levels, but again remembering to assess each level will be imperative to finding a well-rounded approach to beginning recovery. Seek help from a professional to assess your anxiety and set up a plan to implement goals towards recovery. Managing your anxiety disorder may seem overwhelming but remembering to break your goal down into smaller, obtainable objectives will set the stage of a successful recovery.

Bourne, E. (2010). *The anxiety & phobia workbook*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New Harbinger Publication, Inc.