

Breaking Free From Chronic Anxiety and Its Effects

Anxiety, from the Latin for “a lasting state of fearfulness,” is the biggest mental health problem of our time. An estimated twenty million people in the US suffer from anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder. The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry estimates that anxiety disorders cost the US more than \$42 billion a year – one third of the nation’s total mental-health budget. And for every diagnosed case of anxiety disorder there are many more that are not diagnosed or that occur at a level of intensity that people learn to cope with.

While anxiety is usually viewed as a mental disorder, it is really the product of our mode of living perpetually in narrow-objective attention, furthering a chronic engagement of fight or flight that has kept fearful, high-intensity memories and feelings repressed in body and mind. Faulty attention is not the only cause for the accumulation of anxiety – genetics and environment play a role; but whatever other causes there may be, attention is a fundamental and controllable factor.

Because of genetic and environmental differences, high-frequency electrical activity in the brain manifests differently in different people. Its effects can destabilize the entire mind-body system and contribute to a host of problems, from apprehension to worry, emotional reactivity, impulsivity, and impatience.

Many cases of depression are a product of living in a chronic emergency mode of attention; a nervous system that has struggled to repress anxiety for so long becomes worn out. Quite often anxiety and depression exist simultaneously and are used to control each other. One can repress anxiety unconsciously leaving one depressed but less anxious. Some recent research on depression supports the view that depression is caused by an overactive stress response (in other words, by chronic anxiety). But narrow-objective attention contributes to the occurrence and worsening of many symptoms, from migraines to insomnia, chronic pain, stuttering, bruxism (or teeth grinding), tics, and many other problems. It is also at the root of the most common disorder of attention – the inability to pay sustained interested attention in a relaxed way – which is known as attention deficit disorder: ADD or ADHD.

The good news is that the nervous system is malleable and the chronic symptoms of increased stress can be reversed. When we learn to become more flexible in shifting our style of attention, we find that our physiology starts to normalize as effective training begins. The human body comprises more than 650 separate muscles. Indeed, humans of all ages are sensitive to stress on the muscular level. Muscles tense throughout our bodies to keep us from feeling the unpleasant stress that occurs in the emergency mode of attending. Some of those muscles can stay tensed for years or even a lifetime. It’s as if the energy of fear gets trapped in the muscles. The fear is not gone, though; it’s just hidden from consciousness. In addition to keeping the feeling of fear locked in our bodies, tense muscles can also cause chronic pain. When we find the tension, it is a gift – for once it is made conscious, it can be completely dissolved.

If we live our lives resisting painful memories and feelings we come to fear our present experience; and if we organize our lives to avoid discomfort, we separate ourselves from life in the moment. Or we simply focus narrowly away from the unwanted inner feelings, distancing ourselves from emotional awareness and any unpleasant manifestations in our bodies. We lose a sense of flow in our lives; we become cut off from the moment, numbed out, and separated from the intimacy of the full here-and-now experience. This kind of reality, managed around tension, is flat and dull compared to the vivid experience of life available through neurofeedback.