

Mindfulness and Anxiety - Leslie Ellestad

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Anxiety is part of the normal human experience based on natural human needs of basic survival (physiological and safety), belonging, worthiness and meaning. When our perceived experience is that these needs are not being met, we seek reassurance and solutions. The body-mind experience of anxiety is experienced as physical restlessness and excessive non-productive thinking. We may have impulses to escape, to engage in conflict or to hide. When anxiety arises in daily life or while meditating, we can utilize the following 3 step mindfulness practice:

1. Become mindful of anxious thoughts

think of a situation that typically brings up worry, observe the kind of worry thoughts- what are you thinking - some common patterns: planning, rehearsing, analyzing, judging, comparing, voice in head, visual images “fear thinking”

2. Mindfulness of body -ache, heat, tightness, fluttering, bubbles, breath in and out for support

3. Offer self comfort or care through words or orienting yourself to safety. what message might most be comforting? Here are some examples: it's okay

relax sweetheart, take a breath, take another breath ground yourself (feel body on the floor) open eyes - confirm where the doors and windows are, notice there is space to move notice sound

This practice is one of recognizing anxiety, naming it, and embracing it (not giving into it or pushing it away).

As we practice, we recognize recurrent conditioned patterns

that support anxiety. These often involve fears about doing the right thing, being good enough, do we have enough, how will we keep what we have and are we well regarded enough. At the ultimate level, we become most free from anxiety when we let go of a sense of me, myself or I. In the buddhist tradition, these are called the eight worldly winds of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and shame.

Ethical behavior is a support to reducing anxiety, because when we act ethically we have less regret. The practice of ethics is a matter of gradually refining our choices through seeing the impact of our behavior and then choosing differently the next time. We are supported as humans to act ethically by two natural forces. The first is well encapsulated by the pali word (from the buddhist tradition) hiri, which means moral shame. This is the sinking feeling we get when we realize we have caused harm. Ottapa is moral dread or the revulsion we naturally experience when we shrink from causing harm. Because these are powerful forces for refining our behavior and lead to peace, we want to pay attention to them when they arise and use them as guideposts for refining our behavior.

As we practice, we can cultivate a calm that is bigger than the sense of restlessness and we begin to recognize that it is our relationship to the sense of restlessness that causes us to suffer.

Here is a reference list of some tools to use when anxiety arises and is overwhelming:

-use a comforting phrase

- feeling into the impulse that is engendered - fight, flight or freeze and allow the body to express the

impulse with small movements. [L] [SEP]

- purposely moving attention away from the experience, without aversion. Feel where it [L] [SEP] is noticeable in the body and move attention to a part of the body that is less affected. If the experience is in the centre line, move attention to the periphery of the body - perhaps hands or feet. If the experience is on one side of the body, move attention to the other side. [L] [SEP]

- some of us have a part of the body that is fairly reliable and can use this as an anchor point. [L] [SEP]

- loving kindness practice is often soothing [L] [SEP]

- calming visualization [L] [SEP]

- looking for evidence of safety in our physical environment [L] [SEP]

- inviting rest into the nervous system [L] [SEP]

- pay attention to sound-receptive and not usually associated with strong emotion [L] [SEP] Anxiety is a strong human tendency and will be part of our experience for a long time. It can be helpful to recognize this and befriend it, without indulging it or fighting it. [L] [SEP]