

FUTURE TENSE

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Why Anxiety Is Good For You?



NEUROPSYCHE
NETWORK

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Learn how to stop avoiding anxiety – and use it to your advantage instead.

“ In the book *Future Tense* by Tracy Dennis-Tiwary, there is another perspective on how to look at anxiety if you are open-minded. No one likes feeling anxious. It's a feeling that's impossible to ignore; it's distressing and even debilitating.

“ But, in a way, anxiety also acts like a good friend. It tells us something – maybe something we don't want to hear, but something important nevertheless. It warns us about the potential consequences of our actions, outcomes that could happen in an uncertain future.

“ Don't get us wrong: anxiety isn't something you should glorify, seek out, or depend on. Instead, you should simply create a new mindset around it – one in which you explore anxiety, learn from it, and use it to your advantage. This Neuropsyché shorting will teach you why anxiety is necessary – and then show you how to make the most of it.

In this Neuropsyché short, you'll learn:

- ✓ how to differentiate between useful and useless anxiety;
- ✓ why trigger warnings may do more harm than good; and
- ✓ where your anxiety might be pointing you.



The following applications are now being studied, either clinically or via community / citizen science

ANXIETY IS MEANT TO HELP, NOT HARM, YOU.

The Trier Social Stress Test, or TSST, is a famous research task used to assess and measure the effects of social anxiety. In it, you – the participant – are asked to prepare a short presentation and then deliver it in front of a panel of judges. Your performance, you're told, will also be videotaped and then compared to other people's presentations.

While the judges watch you, they repeatedly frown and shake their heads. Next, you're asked to perform a tricky math problem in front of the same panel of judges. You must count backward from 1,999 by 13, out loud, as fast as you can. Every time you pause, the judges tell you you're counting too slowly and need to speed up. When you make a mistake, you're told you were incorrect and must begin again from 1,999.

Sound like a nightmare? It's supposed to! The TSST is designed to induce stress –and reliably does so in almost everyone. But it's particularly challenging and painful for those who experience social anxiety.

In 2013, researchers at Harvard had an idea. They wondered what would happen if, before doing the TSST, participants were taught to anticipate their anxious responses. They would learn that their feelings are signs of being energized and prepared for an upcoming challenge – that anxiety evolved to help our ancestors survive by delivering blood and oxygen throughout the body. They would also read several scientific studies about the benefits of anxiety.

What happened when the Harvard researchers actually conducted this experiment? The socially anxious participants who received the anxiety lesson before doing the TSST reported feeling less anxious and more confident. They also experienced very different physiological responses. When the participants believed their anxious bodily reactions were helpful rather than harmful, their blood vessels were more relaxed, and their heart rates were steadier and healthier.

The takeaway from this study is simple and important: by changing what we believe about anxiety, our bodies believe it, too.

This doesn't mean you should like, love, or even want anxiety. All you should do is be curious about it. Question what you think you know about anxiety. You may believe that anxiety is psychologically and medically harmful. But once you truly understand that anxiety actually helps you perform at your best, your anxiety will do you much less harm. Instead of hurting you, your anxiety will help you respond as healthy bodies do when striving to succeed at a difficult task.

LET GO OF YOUR ANXIETY WHEN IT ISN'T USEFUL.

On the surface, anxiety seems to have a lot in common with fear. But there are a few essential differences.

Imagine reaching into a box in your attic and feeling something furry and alive. You immediately snatch your hand back, your heart racing and your mind alert. You look inside the box and see that it's a harmless little mouse. You close the box, bring it downstairs, and release the mouse outside. Your heart rate slows back down, and you're calm again. You've responded to the danger and alleviated the fear, which is a reflexive, automatic response.

Anxiety is different. You feel anxious the next time you reach into a box in your attic, uncertain whether you might find another rodent hiding there. Anxiety makes you feel apprehensive about an imagined future and vigilant about what might happen. And that's why it's hard to bear: it happens in between learning that something bad could happen and then waiting for it to arrive.

Anxiety is helpful when it provides you with information that you can act on here and now, or at least in the near future. But it's not always helpful or straightforward. It's worth getting to know the difference.

Say you wake up thinking about a problem your daughter is dealing with at school, a presentation you must give at work that day or a significant repair you must have done in your home. You tell yourself to stop thinking about it. But your thoughts keep circling back anyway. This type of anxiety is a signal telling you what exactly is bothering you and how you should act to get rid of it. This is a valuable type of anxiety.

On the other hand, imagine that you go to the doctor for a biopsy of a strange-looking mole. There's nothing you can do, no action you can take, until you get the results back and find out if it's cancerous or not. You're trapped in your anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and helpless. This is a useless form of anxiety.

So, what do you do when you feel that kind of useless anxiety? The best – and perhaps only – option is to set it aside for later.

This doesn't mean suppressing the anxiety, ignoring it, or trying to erase it. Instead, it just means taking a break from it and coming back to it later, when you might find that it has lessened or even gone altogether.

Overwhelmingly, research shows that the best way to let go of anxiety is to immerse yourself in the present moment. One way to do that is to step outside and go for a walk in nature. Take the time to focus deeply on the intricate details of the trees. Notice the play of light filtering through the branches, and examine the veining on the leaves. Listen to some music to help transport your mind elsewhere. This is where the value of lowering the DMN default mode network in your microdosing program can help.

This will give you some space and time away from your anxiety, breaking its vicious cycle. When you come back to it, you'll be better able to think about and study it so you can find a way to make it useful – or at least less overwhelming.



DON'T TREAT YOUR KIDS LIKE FRAGILE, EASILY BROKEN POTTERY.

Have you ever seen a trigger warning appear at the beginning of a movie, television show, or book? This short content warning informs viewers that the images, ideas, or words in a work may be distressing to some people.

Trigger warnings have existed for years, particularly within online communities. However, more recently, the use of trigger warnings in the classroom has led to a heated debate. Some professors argue that trigger warnings allow students to mentally prepare themselves to encounter a distressing topic. Other professors say that actually, trigger warnings encourage students to avoid uncomfortable ideas, which makes them less able to engage rationally with views they find challenging.

So far, the evidence favors the anti-trigger warning crowd. In 2018, for example, several hundred participants were asked to read literary passages with varying degrees of potentially disturbing content. Some participants received trigger warnings before reading the passages, while others didn't. The result? The participants who got the trigger warnings reported greater increases in anxiety. That was especially true for those who believed that words can cause harm. What this suggests is that trigger warnings can cause unneeded distress and may harm students' ability to be emotionally resilient.

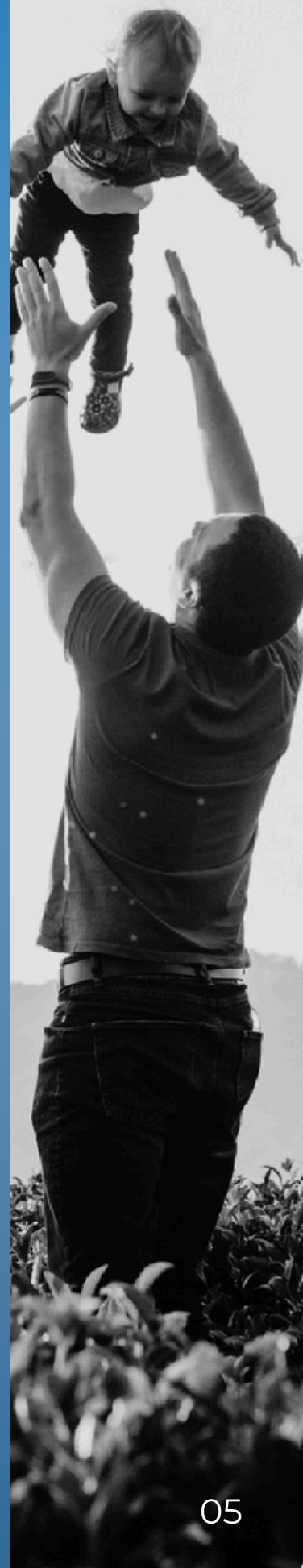
Trigger warnings are just one sign of an increasing trend: the desire to shield our children from any form of distress or pain that might come their way.

It's a normal parental instinct to want to protect your children. However, preventing them from feeling pain is not the answer. And often, parents try to make their children's anxiety go away because it makes them uncomfortable.

Humans need a little bit of challenge, uncertainty, pain, and disorder to truly flourish. Think about the human immune system. The immune system learns how to respond to germs and pathogens by being exposed to them. In a similar way, people don't learn how to respond to challenging situations with creativity, effort, and vigor if they aren't exposed to those situations first.

This is why you shouldn't act like a snowplow parent – someone who tries to remove every possible obstacle from your children's paths. Too often, parents of anxious children endlessly accommodate them. If a child fears airplanes, the family goes on a road trip instead. If a child panics when separated from his parents, they spend every possible moment with him – even if it means allowing him to skip school. These coping mechanisms might help the parents feel more comfortable, but ultimately, it's damaging for the kids.

So stop trying to take away your children's anxiety, and instead teach them to manage it. The most effective way is to teach yourself how to manage it. Allow your children to be anxious, but support them at the same time.



DISCOVER WHERE YOUR ANXIETY IS POINTING YOU, AND GO THERE.

Anxiety is the primary driver of obsessive-compulsive disorders. People who experience these disorders repeatedly engage in certain behaviors, like hand-washing, checking lights, or seeking reassurance from others. These behaviors provide temporary relief for feelings of anxiety. But the anxiety always returns, and then the compulsions must be performed again. The cycle repeats because compulsions don't actually solve a problem or help a person grow. In other words, they are not purposeful.

Yet anxiety itself is purposeful. It's connected to the circuitry in our brains responsible for seeking rewards and feeling the pleasure of attaining them. Therefore, anxiety isn't just about avoiding disaster. It's also about achieving satisfaction and delight. The overcoming of these anxious feelings is what leads to natural responses in dopamine and serotonin. The courage you start to experience when heading toward your anxiety and learning how to overcome it is more potent than the anxiety itself.

In a way, if we listen carefully, anxiety can point us toward our purpose.

You, too, can channel your anxiety toward pursuing your purpose. This doesn't mean some kind of burning passion or grandiose vision you have about the future. It's just about the values and priorities that feel most meaningful to you. To understand what those are, try a technique called self-affirmation.

Here's what you do. First, consider the following list of eleven different domains: artistic skills and aesthetic appreciation, a sense of humor, relationships with friends and family, spontaneity, social skills, athletics, musical ability and appreciation, physical attractiveness, creativity, business and managerial skills, and romantic values.

Out of these, which are the top three that make you who you are – that make you feel good about yourself? Once you've got them, take a few minutes to explore and write about each. Keep writing until you feel like you can't anymore . . . and then keep writing.

This technique, developed by researchers at Stanford University, has been proven to lift people's moods, improve their concentration and learning, and make their relationships more fulfilling. And it's as simple as expressing and reflecting on what you hold dear and why! Even your physical health can get a boost from the exercise – and the benefits hold for months, and sometimes years, later.

Channel your anxiety toward pursuing whatever purpose you've identified. Used in this way, anxiety becomes a form of courage. It provides fuel and momentum and helps you release your strength. And when you take purposeful, meaningful action, it will naturally disappear.

Like a good friend, anxiety won't always hold your hand. It will just point you in the right direction. Then it's up to you to go there.

FINAL

SUMMARY

Anxiety has a bad reputation. It's a sensation that no one wants to feel, and everyone wants to avoid it. **However, anxiety evolved as a way for us to plan and prepare for an uncertain future, to address potential threats, and to let us know when we've taken actions that will be good for us.** Instead of trying to escape anxiety, we should shift our mindset to view and use anxiety as the helpful tool that it is.

Another quick word of advice:

Strive for Excellence, Not Perfection.

Like anxiety, perfectionism is a state that keeps us focused on the future and caring about whether we're taking the right actions. **Perfectionism can stimulate us to achieve and create. But it also causes us to hold ourselves to unrealistic, overly demanding expectations that make us relentlessly self-critical when we fail to meet them.** Instead of perfectionism, strive for excellencism – setting high standards but not beating yourself up when you don't meet them.

Be open to trying new experiences and approaches to problem-solving, and treat your mistakes as learning experiences rather than reasons to criticize yourself.

