

Getting a Handle on Anxiety

Dr Emma Loveridge

Sometimes, this is how our families and relationships feel – finely balanced, fragile, vulnerable to the waves of fortune. Anxiety can creep in, and it feels as though things might just tip. How can we remain steady?



The Slip and Fall

Consider this scenario: a mature, highly experienced person arrives to give a talk to a large audience. As they arrive, they trip over the doorstep and fall. At this moment their state of mind changes from the ‘competent adult’ they started out as, and by the time they hit the floor they feel something very different.

It could be a baby-like state, where they feel quite dependent and would really like someone to help them get up. Or it could be a toddler state, where they get themselves up without a hand because they feel the need to be independent. Then, rather than accepting it is their own fault for tripping up, they tell off the stair or the carpet. Or they could end up in the ten-year-old state of mind where they just need someone to say, ‘Come on, up you get!’ – i.e., an external

authority to encourage them to keep going in life. Then again, they could arrive at the adolescent state of mind, where they are cripplingly embarrassed that they have made themselves look clumsy and foolish in front of people whom they respect and want to impress. Now they have been noticed, but in a negative way, and they just want the floor to open and swallow them up.

In this situation, every one of us would slip to a different state of mind. But what actually matters is not that we have fallen down this trajectory from adult through adolescent, child, toddler to baby, or even where we've landed. What matters is, *can we recover?* Some people can get up and continue on their way in a very adult manner – the recovery is immediate. Some need a cup of tea to quell their adrenaline and calm down. Others will have to go home – they cannot possibly carry on as normal now. And some will legislate against the institution that owns the step.

What this example shows us is that every single one of us, every day, goes up and down this developmental trajectory. Most of us don't even notice, it is just a part of daily life. We can be walking along and bump into a sibling, and immediately, unconsciously, our state of mind changes, reverting to a time when we were growing up together, with all its attendant rivalries and preoccupations.

The Chemistry of Anxiety

Whatever the trigger for anxiety, whether it be Coronavirus, job or relationship loss or an imminent move, it is helpful if you don't think of it as a feeling. It is a chemical reaction to events, where adrenalin, cortisol and other chemicals are produced and released in the body in response to an external trigger. These are painkillers to keep us moving when we are injured. However, these external stimuli can trigger internal individual fears which are often unvoiceable, unnameable and unreachable, predating by a long time the present trigger. Some people can process these fears without too much difficulty; others are able to shut down the fears, to deal with the job in hand and tackle the fear at a later – more convenient – time. In some, it creates a panic reaction which can take many forms. One of the most common is anxiety, but underneath the anxiety is a myriad of real feelings.

Adrenalin is a very good painkiller of emotional as well as physical pain, and it stops anger. When anxiety is provoked, therefore, it covers anger, and underneath it there can be feelings of fear, abandonment, loneliness, intrusion,

exclusion, unworthiness and so on. The anxiety covers the deep rage that your very existence is being challenged. This can come out in our daily lives when we fear being taken over by another and sibling fears resurface - *who* has more right in our household to the silence, the space, the view, the nice desk, the noise, the biggest bedroom, the last cake? They may seem trivial, but they are universal fears, everyone has them, and they are primitive – and therefore deep.

Acknowledging the Rage

That primitive rage stays with us, but becomes easier to process as we grow emotionally. However, it can rear up again, with the right trigger, and a deep level of rage can be exposed, as we slide back down the emotional developmental ladder from adult to childhood or babyhood. Babies in their rage want to hurt, but fear hurting those whom they rely on: this is a well-known human cycle through which we all live.

Some learn to live with it, to accept it without accepting all the behaviours which arrive on the back of that rage. Others *do* behave badly on the back of those feelings – we have all seen panicked and irrational behaviour in the face of fear. That makes co-existence very difficult. For yet others, the rage is unacceptable and they learn that pretending that the rage does not exist – pushing it down inside into a hidden place – is the best social way forward. This is okay in everyday life, but when something external trips us up, the rage does not stay in its nice, adult corner. Our adult-trained self doesn't think it is appropriate to show, though, and so an internal conflict is created, which leads to production of adrenalin, which leads to a state of panic and anxiety – a more acceptable manifestation of rage.

And Breathe

The key to breaking this cycle and making issues conscious is to work out what feelings are being stopped or masked by the adrenalin. There are many old fashioned techniques such as breathing exercises to slow down adrenalin, which give us time to find words to frame the feelings. We need to do this so that we can name the emotions, interrogate them to see where they come from, and communicate them to others. It is only by talking about them that we can reduce them and ultimately have more power over ourselves. And it doesn't depend on a certain level of education – ten emotionally literate words are worth a king's ransom. In fact, sometimes, we can hide behind articulacy, using words to mask emotional illiteracy. Ten emotionally literate words are enough,

and better than silence. If you thought you were emotionally open but you feel the anxiety rising, you may not be as emotionally open as you thought, or you may not have people around you to dialogue with.

Now work out what you're feeling

I'm going to give you some homework, for when self-recovery is in order. This is my top tip for managing and thinking about what is going on. First, sit down and put your feet on the floor. Put your open palm on top of your head and close your eyes. Leave it there for a few seconds, then remove your hand. You can probably still feel it is there as a residual memory. Imagine drawing the warmth of your hand down through your mind and body, to sit somewhere near your diaphragm – it takes practice to feel it. Now touch your chin, then put your hands on your lap. Breathe in through your nose as deeply as you can. Now breathe out through tiny pursed lips to your last breath – only do this once. Then think about getting in touch with your unconscious internal world. This is a journey over several weeks' of practice. Try and answer the question, "What am I feeling?" Work hard to find the right word for each of those feelings – you would be surprised by how we are often conditioned to misname those feelings when we are young. Bad habits need to be unlearned in this. Are you happy, frightened? These are conflicting emotions and we often try to streamline them rather than hold both at the same time. We don't work that way, because we can have these feelings co-exist without conflict. Think about the small and personal things in your life which cause you happiness, annoyance, sadness. Reach for what is *beyond* anxiety. Does the noise of the kettle boiling irritate you? Does doing the washing up make you feel like a skivvy, taken advantage of? Do you feel relief when you get up early that you have the place all to yourself? Do you feel abandoned if no-one else wants to go out for a walk when you do? Does looking out of the window make you feel isolated or cocooned – or both at the same time?

Step by step, with understanding, anxiety can dissipate and the processing of real emotions takes over instead of always dealing with the effects of adrenalin.

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30 March 2020