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Little-Known Secrets to Conquering your Fears and Worries

If you avoid something that makes you afraid, would that not take care of the problem? On the contrary, avoidance *fuels* anxiety and obsessions. That's because when you avoid something you fear, you do not give yourself the chance to verify if the fear is justified or unwarranted. And yet, in the moment, avoiding or escaping from the fear is just so much easier. This is the first and most important secret to know: Avoidance fuels a vicious cycle of anxiety or fear.

In order to overcome your fear, you must face your fear. If you want to break the vicious cycle of anxiety, you must expose yourself to your fears.

Exposure

Exposure refers to being exposed to or facing fears to test their reality. It involves purposeful and conscious confrontation of fears. Exposure allows people to discover that their fears are usually false alarms. When the expected disastrous consequences do not materialize, the person's belief about the fear begins to change. It is important to note the difference between *facing* fears and *fighting* fears; facing involves confronting, whereas fighting implies combat and resistance. Children may be confused when they are told to "fight" anxiety because it suggests that they should resist it with all their might. The emotional energy consumed in fighting and resisting may actually intensify anxiety. In a paradoxical way, one has to stop struggling with fears to make them go away. To understand how exposure works, one must first understand *habituation*.

Habituation: Natural and Automatic

Exposure has a lot in common with jumping into a cold swimming pool, turning off the lights at night or walking into a noisy train station. Sounds a bit far-fetched? Not really, because what they have in common is a process known as *habituation*, which is the body's way of accommodating to new sensations. When we initially encounter a sound, heat or cold, light or dark, we experience it in all its magnitude. Over time, the sensation

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becomes imperceptible as our body adapts to it. We experience habituation numerous times every day without so much as a second thought. We get used to cold water, bright lights, the roar of jet planes and the rumble of trains with little conscious effort.

Contrary to popular knowledge, *our bodies can habituate to anxiety*, in much the same way as they do to smell, light, heat, cold or noise. We can get used to anxiety until it fades from our awareness. Habituation is a natural biological phenomenon that takes place automatically because our bodies are designed to return to equilibrium. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for preparing the body to react to threat and danger and the parasympathetic system subsequently restores it to normal resting state. In other words, anxiety simply cannot continue forever, although it may feel that way. If we did not have a built-in mechanism for resetting to equilibrium, how could we handle the cumulative effects of thousands of new threats over time?

We routinely experience habituation to anxiety, although we might not be aware of it. For example, any of us can relate to the anxiety that precedes an important meeting that is potentially unpleasant. We have experienced the desire to avoid it, because it made us uneasy, nervous or tense. Yet, the uneasiness subsided once the meeting was underway. Anxiety habituates rapidly when we confront the anxiety-provoking situation.

Eight Little-known Secrets to Conquering your Fears

- Avoidance strengthens fear
- Exposure weakens fear
- To overcome your fear, you must face your fear
- Anxiety is not fatal and can be lived through
- Anxiety is transient and passes away
- Habituation is natural and automatic
- Exposure is necessary for habituation
- Anxiety in *anticipation* of exposure may be higher than anxiety during *actual* exposure