

Collective Anxiety or Collective Hope?

Collective anxiety. That's the term I've been using to identify the widespread increase in anxiety that I've seen among my family, friends, and clients over the last couple of months. Drastic lifestyle changes, loss of income, grief over lost opportunities and possibilities, along with fear and uncertainty about what the future holds has us all floundering and searching for something solid; something we can control in all the chaos. No one is unaffected. Even our children have had their lives turned upside down. Just the other day my son (who struggles with anxiety) said to me, "It's just so stressful. Every day is the same. Nothing ever changes and it's not fun anymore." This virus has affected Every. Single. One of us. Only time will tell us how much.

So, no wonder we're anxious. Anxiety, in overly simplistic terms, is a normal response by the brain and body alerting us to the fact that something's not right. It serves as a signal that lets us know that we may be in danger or that there is a threat that we may need to react to. Normal levels of anxiety can actually be helpful and useful for many situations in life. It becomes problematic, however, when it begins to affect our well-being, level of functioning, or overall quality of life. I know this from my own personal experiences and journey with anxiety. I also know, definitively, that there is hope and that there are things that help. I'd like to share a few of the simplest and most helpful tips and techniques that I've used personally, and that I've taught my clients, to help manage and relieve stress and anxiety.

#1. Mindful Breathing-It's super simple but so powerful. Here's an easy exercise. Take one giant inhale and exhale. Then, inhale slowly for a count of 5, hold this breath for a count of 5, exhale slowly for a count of 7. Repeat this pattern 5 to 10 times or until you notice a relaxation response. If it feels safe and comfortable, you can also close your eyes to minimize distractions. The more you practice mindful breathing the quicker your body and mind will begin to respond to the relaxation cues. Start by practicing it throughout the day until it becomes a habit.

#2. Establish Your Anchors and Practice Staying Connected-An anchor is something that represents strength, stability, and grounding. There can be many kinds of anchors. For some, it may be religious faith or spirituality. For others, maybe it's family or the love you have for someone or that someone has for you. It could also be a personal trait or characteristic that you have that helps you overcome difficult times or a physical item that has significant meaning for you. It doesn't matter what it is. What matters is that, when you think about it or connect with it, it helps you feel stable, secure, and grounded. Come up with a few things that resonate with you and practice bringing these to mind and connecting with the strength and stability that they convey.

#3. Practice Gratefulness-When I say "practice gratefulness" I don't just mean to jot down a few things you are grateful for. I mean to actually practice FEELING grateful. There's a difference. It's easy to make a list of the things we know we should be grateful for, but it's different when we allow ourselves to experience the feeling of gratefulness. When we actually FEEL grateful it's much harder to despair and we are less stressed and anxious because we are focusing on what we have, not what we lack. So, go ahead, make a list, but don't stop there. Take some time to allow your body to load up on all those wonderful feelings of gratitude.

#4. Get Outside-The environment is perhaps one of the only things that has benefited from the corona virus and is a constant reminder that nature has the amazing power to heal. Being in nature has been proven to have tremendous benefits to our overall health and well-being. The sunlight and fresh air can do wonders to restore a sense of hope and continuity in our lives, and now, with longer days and beautiful greenery we don't have an excuse not to get outside. Try to enjoy nature for a little bit every day.

#5. Get Professional Help-Lastly, but certainly not least, if stress and anxiety have started to undermine your well-being, you need a little help managing it, or you just need someone to talk to, please reach out to a professional. There are coaches, counselors, therapists, and doctors trained to help you. I know that they have been invaluable to me during particularly difficult times in my life. Anxiety is a response of our brain and body to certain stimuli and nothing to be ashamed of or feared.

I choose to believe that there is hope for all of us who struggle with anxiety and even more, there is hope for our world to recover from this pandemic and be stronger and more connected than ever. Hope is just as powerful, if not more, than anxiety. So, let's all choose hope. Maybe we can shift out of our Collective Anxiety into Collective Hope...

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