

Mindfulness and Anxiety

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool for changing habitual reactions of anxiety or fear that hijack our ability to think clearly, act skillfully and live meaningfully. Like many other healthy habits, mindfulness becomes stronger and more effective as we repeatedly apply it to our lives.

In working with anxiety and fear through the practice of mindfulness, the task is not to eliminate them from our lives (which is impossible), but to change our relationship to them. The following key insights support and strengthen our mindfulness practice.

1. Anxiety and fear are facts life. They are a part of the brain's warning system designed to keep us safe. The triggering of anxiety or fear by this warning system is unavoidable.
2. We cannot precisely control what we feel and think. The brain's warning system often triggers anxiety and fear before we are consciously aware of them.
3. Trying to avoid our experience is futile. Often the effort to avoid a difficult emotional reaction just makes it worse.
4. The brain makes mistakes. The brain's warning system reacts very quickly to give us the best chance to avoid danger, but it is also sloppy. Often the brain evaluates a sensory perception as being dangerous when the situation is not really dangerous.
5. Problems occur when we believe in the body's reaction to a false alarm by the brain's warning system. When this happens, our anxiety or fear is based on an illusion.
6. Anxiety, fear and panic are never permanent. They have a beginning, a middle and an end.
7. Mindfulness practice involves the gradual process of redirecting the attention to the anxiety or fear, exploring it in detail as it arises – and eventually even befriending it.
8. Our progress is measured not by whether we experience anxiety or fear, but by how well we can be present and accept our anxious or fearful reaction. Acceptance in this sense means that we are not judging or resisting the fact that we are having an anxious reaction. By accepting the fact of the reaction, we are more able to work skillfully with the nervous or fearful energy, remember important insights and maintain our balance.
9. Transformation involves becoming dis-identified or disillusioned with our anxieties and fears – and holding them in a more spacious and open awareness. As we nurture our ability to do this, our anxieties and fears become ordinary mental events occurring in the brain that have lost most of their power over us.

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