

A Guide to the Basic Anxiety of Life

Underlying much of what we do is an uncertainty, an anxiety, a fear, doubts, dissatisfaction ...

And we react to these anxieties, dissatisfaction and uncertainty in so many unhelpful ways: we seek distraction, we eat unhealthy food, we procrastinate, we get caught in a cycle of anxiety and unhappiness, we lash out at others, we dwell in our loneliness, and then we get in denial about it all.

If we could learn to deal with the basic anxiety of life, we would have much more ease and less struggle.

The Anxiety Underneath Our Problems

On Twitter, I asked people to share a problem they'd like me to write about ... the problems were all very difficult, but the basic anxiety of life was the undercurrent to all of them.

Each one has an external problem, with the undercurrent of anxiety, fears or uncertainty underneath the external problem. Let's take a look at a few:

- **Feeling of being left out, lack of belonging:** We can all relate to this feeling of not belonging. Externally, the problem is not finding people you connect with, not having that connection in your daily life. But on top of that, we add the anxiety/dissatisfaction of feeling like we're left out and don't belong. This is normal, but it's good to notice.
- **Finding your passion, optimizing potential:** The external problem is that you are in a job you're not passionate about. On top of that is the anxiety/dissatisfaction of not finding that passion, of feeling like we're not optimizing our potential. We can all relate to this too!
- **Headaches cyclicly prevent me building a career and paying my way properly, affects my self worth hugely:** The external problem (bad headaches, leading to career and financial problems) is very real, and not easy to deal with. But on top of that, we have anxiety about it all, and we add self-criticism (most of us do this, right?), self-doubt, and a downgrading of our self-image.
- **That phase of anxiety before big changes occur:** The external issue is that we're facing a big change, and then because it's a situation filled with great uncertainty, we feel anxiety about it.
- **Beginning/purchasing self improvement books/classes/plans and not using them:** The external problem is not finding the time or energy to use materials you've bought, but we add to that an anxiety about ourselves not living up to our potential, not taking advantage of opportunities, not doing what we hoped we'd do. I think we can all

relate to this.

- **Addiction to social media, videos and cell phone:** The external problem is the distractions that keep pulling our attention. But the anxiety is that we feel addicted and feel something is wrong with us for not being less distracted. In addition, the addiction is probably a coping mechanism for dissatisfaction with the moment in front of us, or anxieties in other parts of life.
- **PTSD — Post Trump Stress Disorder:** A lot of people are coping from dissatisfaction with the political scene right now, no matter what your views on the president might be. There's the external situation of what's going on, and then we add our dissatisfaction, anxieties about uncertainty, frustration and anger.
- **Sometimes feel helpless & empty for a reason I can't identify. Only time makes that go away but I feel that time was wasted:** There's probably an external situation that's causing a feeling of uncertainty, anxiety, dissatisfaction and/or helplessness. But the real problem is the feelings about it all, the uncertainty and anxiety about it all, and the anxiety about wasting the time it takes to get over it.
- **Getting over breakups:** The external problem (end of a relationship) is overshadowed by the pain, dissatisfaction, anxiety that follow the breakup. We might have frustration and anxiety about wanting it not to have ended, about not wanting to be alone, about how we feel about ourselves after being dumped, about how the other person acted.

I think we can all relate to these problems, to not only the external situation but the reactions that we have.

There's a fundamental anxiety and dissatisfaction that runs through the human condition, about whatever we're experiencing in life, about other people and about ourselves.

So how do we deal with it all?

Where Does Basic Anxiety Come From?

It's good to start by recognizing why we have this basic anxiety. It's caused by:

- Uncertainty about life, about the current situation, about people
- Wanting certainty, stability when life isn't stable or certain
- Dissatisfaction with the above facts — which is also dissatisfaction with our situation, ourselves, and others

If you sit right now for 5-10 minutes and just pay attention to your breath, you'll likely notice the fundamental anxiety ... it results in wanting to stop paying attention to the breath, wanting the meditation to be over, wanting to get on with the tasks of life, wanting distraction, thinking that the exercise is stupid, wanting to think about problems you have.

But instead of running from this anxiety, instead of getting away from it into thinking about problems or getting out of the meditation ... what if we just stayed with it and paid attention to it?

If we can get in touch with this fundamental anxiety that we suffer through in life ... we can start to work with it.

Learning to Deal with This Basic Anxiety

Instead of running from the anxiety, instead of trying to cope by using distractions, food, shopping, alcohol, drugs ... we're going to find the courage to face it, with a smile.

Here's how to work with it:

1. **Face the physical feeling.** Drop out of the story that's spinning around in your head, that's causing the anxiety. Instead, just be mindful of how your body feels. What does the anxiety feel like, and where in your body is it located?
2. **Stay with it & be curious about it.** Don't run, just stay with the physical feeling. Instead of rejecting it and wanting it to stop, just open up to it and see it with curiosity. What does it feel like? Does it change? What kind of reaction does your mind have to the feeling?
3. **Smile at it.** Develop a feeling of friendliness towards the physical sensation of this anxiety. See it as one of the fundamental realities of your existence, and learn to be friends with it. See this as a chance to work with something that will be with you for your entire life, an opportunity to get comfortable with this discomfort. If you can do that, you'll need your coping mechanisms a lot less.
4. **Open to a bigger space.** Our normal way of relating to this feeling is wanting to reject it, because we're stuck in a small-minded, self-centered way of seeing it (I say this without judgment, it's just something we do). Instead, we can start to touch the wide-open space of our minds, like a big blue sky, not a small space but expansive. In this open space, we can hold the anxiety like a cloud against the backdrop of the blue sky, but not be lost *in* the cloud. We can see the anxiety but also see that like a cloud, it's temporary, it's not that solid, it's not all-encompassing, and it's just floating by. This wide-open space of our mind is always available to us.

It's that simple, and yet it's not always easy. Sometimes the anxiety we feel is small, just a bit of tightness in our chest once we investigate it. But sometimes it's quite big, a looming depression or a manic energy that we just can't tolerate. So face it in small doses, just for a minute, just for a moment. Then let yourself run. Continue to work with it in small, tolerable doses until you start to trust that you'll be OK if you face it and smile at it.

Once we start to touch on this anxiety, face it with courage, stay with it like a good friend

would ... we start to realize it's not so bad. It's just something that comes up, like a ripple in a pond, like a breeze in a field, and it will go away. We don't need to panic, we don't need to run, we can relax, invite it to tea, and see that nothing else is required. Instead, we stay, we give it love, and see that this place of uncertainty we're in is absolutely perfect as it is.