

The DOC Journey Webinar #13

*“Anxiety: Bodyguard or Prison Guard -
Separate from It”*



11-18-20

General References:

Fred Luskin video on the aspects of Forgiveness:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKDM5QH_wlo

David Arndt video on insights about imprisonment (this links to a publically viewable video file):

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1AA7rAukm1NWBHN4tYqwIa6GJH4y_UwGG?usp=sharing

Dr. Hanscom Prison Paper:

Starts on the following page.

Q&A with David Hanscom:

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Creating a Safe Place

There is no reward for being vulnerable for any species of life from one-celled organisms to homo sapiens. Consequences are severe and often swift. On the other hand, it is necessary to create space to experience safety and regenerate. Creatures exposed to sustained threat do not thrive or live as long.

Sustained threat fires up multiple defense mechanisms of the body, including inflammation. These inflammatory cells sensitize the nervous system and physically destroy your tissues. There is a higher chance of developing serious diseases, especially in situations where there is little opportunity to find peace and safety

Compelled – humans call it anxiety

The sum total of all of these elevated stress hormones/ inflammatory markers is a strong unpleasant feeling that compels us to take action to resolve the threat. All animals experience this heightened state, but humans have language and consciousness. We can label it. This feeling of dread is what we call anxiety. It is so deep and uncomfortable that there is no choice but to take action. Once the threat is gone/resolved and the body is back in balance (homeostasis), and you can go on with your life.

Anxiety describes the cumulative sensation caused by threat. **It is not the cause of a threat. It is a symptom, not a diagnosis, disease, or disorder.** Therefore, it isn't treatable by addressing it as a primary psychological problem.

Anger

One solution to this sensation is control. After you evade, solve, or conquer the threat, your sympathetic nervous system response is lowered and you will return to a neutral or relaxed state and move on. But what happens if you are trapped and can't escape? Your body will increase the levels of these hormones and inflammatory cells in an effort to regain control. This sensation is what we call anger. It often works and even if it doesn't, you still feel powerful and the feeling of being vulnerable is masked. Anger keeps you safe or feeling safe. We don't want to give it up and we shouldn't. It is necessary for survival. It makes no sense to be passive if your survival is at stake; but only if the threat is real.

“The curse of consciousness”

The least safe place on this planet for every living person is their own mind. Regardless of what you have or don't have, you cannot outrun your mind. It has been well-documented that mental threats in the form of unpleasant thoughts and emotions are processed in a similar manner in your brain as physical threats. Repressed thoughts and emotions are even more problematic. It is the curse of consciousness that you cannot escape from your thoughts. The neurochemical survival reaction is sustained and causes ongoing damage to your body. It is tragic that much of our potential peace of mind is compromised by just having consciousness.



Anger and anxiety overview

There is an intense relationship between anxiety and anger. Understanding this interaction will have a major impact in calming down your nervous system and improving the quality of your life.

- They are, first of all, the same entity. Anxiety is the sensation generated by your autonomic nervous system's response to a threat. Stress hormones and inflammatory proteins are elevated and when a given situation doesn't resolve (chronic pain), more of these molecules are secreted in an effort to regain control. The result is anger, which is anxiety with a neurochemical chemical kick
- Anxiety and Anger are universal, powerful and necessary for life. You cannot and are not going to get rid of them.
- Anxiety represents a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness. The intention is to be so unpleasant that it compels us to take action to decrease it. So, we are hard-wired to avoid this emotion at all costs.
- Anger feels powerful and is often effective in regaining control. It is a rapid response that solves or masks anxiety. It also gives you the extra boost to resolve a threat.
- But what happens to your thinking when you are angry? The blood flow to the frontal lobes of your brain is diminished, the inflammatory proteins in your brain sensitize you to sensory input, and much of your reaction emanates from the more primitive centers of your brain. You are flooded with a barrage of angry, intense, and irrational thoughts. It is temporary insanity.
- Anger both masks the *feeling* of anxiety and also turbocharges the system, which created it.



Reasons to process and let go of anger

- The main one is that you simply cannot heal or thrive when you remain angry. The essence of healing is normalizing your body's neurochemical state to that of a safety profile, which is profoundly restorative. If your whole system is fired up and remains so, how can that happen? It can't and won't.
- Another core concept of solving pain is stimulating neuroplastic changes in your brain. You physically can cause your brain to change its structure based on where you place your attention (suppression doesn't work). That means you have to move towards your vision of what you would like your life to be like instead of continually trying to fix your prior life. You cannot move forward until you let go of the past, especially your deepest wounds. Most people in chronic pain remain angry at the situations or people who have harmed them. The more legitimate your gripe, the harder it is to move on. But how does holding onto the past make your life more enjoyable.
- Anger is destructive, as it is supposed to be. It is your body's last ditch effort to escape threat. It is destructive in every direction, including self-destructive. It is the reason why many people completely neglect every aspect of their health. It is tantamount to slow suicide.

- Anger is abusive and destroys relationships. The key element of successful human interactions is awareness of your needs and others' needs. How else can you constructively interact with those close to you. Anger completely blocks awareness at every level.
- Anger destroys families. We evolved language and the human consciousness through language and social interactions. It is ability to cooperate that took homo sapiens from the bottom to the top of the food chain. There is a deep need for human connection. Unfortunately, close family connections are also the strongest triggers. Why would you ever be unkind to someone you care for so much? Why is the incidence of domestic abuse so high? It is maybe the most disturbing paradox of our human existence.
- When you are angry, you are in the fight mode of the survival response of fight, flight, freeze, or faint. Your body's response is to mobilize every resource to survive. The blood supply to your gut, bladder, and the frontal lobes of your brain diminishes and is shunted to your heart, lungs, and skeletal muscles. You can't think clearly, although it might seem like you are. That is why it is so critical to, "take no action in a reaction."
- I often asked my patients that what is your day like when you are angry? Forget about your pain. It isn't a great day. So regardless whether you are in pain or not, anger will compromise your capacity to enjoy your day. You are in Hell and you may be so used to being there that you might not even know it. Take a deep breath and think about this scenario for a while.....

Why hold onto anger?

It keeps you safe. It protects you from both emotional and physical pain. There are few, if any, rewards in nature for being vulnerable and humans are part of this reality. In essence, you are being asked to give up your anger so you can experience anxiety. Raw anxiety is an unpleasant feeling. It is this interaction that may be the root cause of why it is commonly thought that you cannot really be open for change until you "hit bottom." In other words, the anxiety is so out of control that it can no longer be contained by either functional or dysfunctional means.



Getting to real change

I am well-aware I am writing this to you who are physically trapped and subjected to endless injustices. It would be surprising if you weren't angry. You should be. But there are many ways to lower the impact and potentially become focused in creating change. Anytime you are anxious or angry you are reacting and it is difficult to be creative in finding good solutions. Additionally, people in control want to keep you in this state because they do use to maintain this grip on you. What happens if you take the "C" out of the middle of the word, "reactive" and place it at the beginning?

Reactive

Creative

By being aware of the interaction between these two concepts throughout the day, you can quickly see that you are in a reaction and can switch into a creative mode. By “seeing” both your global and day-to-day reactions, you will have the power to create choices that will increase your odds of solving problems. The “C/see” must be first.

Understanding and processing anger is a learned skill and has little to do with the traditional concepts of forgiveness and acceptance. In fact, it is somewhat of a selfish and powerful act that someone you dislike or despise is no longer going to control your quality of life – no matter how hard they try. You will also learn to not be trapped by your mind.

Addressing Anger

There are three parts to processing anger.

- Lowering your levels of stress hormones and inflammatory markers.
- Learning to feel vulnerable – not being vulnerable
- Forgiveness

The first step is necessary to simply change the blood flow to the more rational thinking centers of your brain and is the only logical starting point. This has nothing to do with positive thinking, acceptance, or forgiveness.

There are many ways to lower these survival hormones and inflammatory markers. These are techniques that directly stimulate the Vagus nerve, which is the main part of the parasympathetic nervous system and is powerfully anti-inflammatory. Here is a short list of possibilities and each category has many variations.

- Slow breathing – between six to 10 breaths/ per minute
- Slow deep breaths through your nose
- Humming stimulates your seventh cranial nerve, which is in close proximity to the vagus nerve
- “Active meditation” – simply placing your attention on a specific sensation for 10-15 seconds.
- Meditation directly stimulates the vagus nerve
- Relaxing music – certain tones similar to a lullaby stimulate the muscles in your middle ear to tighten, again stimulating the vagus nerve.

Forgiveness/ Vulnerability

On the surface, the other two aspects of processing anger in the confines of a prison seem impossible, even ridiculous. But not only are they possible, they are the only ways to be able to create possibilities of a better life both in and out of prison. Becoming vulnerable while remaining safe and learning the skills of forgiveness deserve deep discussions.

Forgiveness is the most powerful and definitive move that you can make to take charge of your life. It is actually a selfish and bold act. You are no longer allowing someone you dislike (despise) continue to be in your head and run your life. You don't have to like this person—ever. You are just breaking the link between the past and present.

Being vulnerable is even a deeper topic. You can only be vulnerable with someone you trust. That involves taking some level of risk but not to a degree that can cause damage. It is challenging for everyone in every arena of life.

But the first step is to learn to clear your head by learning the tools to lower your stress response. With awareness, you have choices and then it is game on.

Direct your Own Care

