

Mental Health Matters

December 2022



Why Stress and Anxiety Aren't Always Bad

People generally think of stress and anxiety as negative concepts, but while both stress and anxiety can reach unhealthy levels, psychologists have long known that both are unavoidable — and that they often play a helpful, not harmful, role in our daily lives, according to a presentation at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

“Many Americans now feel stressed about being stressed and anxious about being anxious. Unfortunately, by the time someone reaches out to a professional for help, stress and anxiety have already built to unhealthy levels,” said Lisa Damour, PhD, a private-practice psychologist who presented at the meeting. Damour also writes a regular column for *The New York Times* and is author of the book “Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls.”

Stress usually occurs when people operate at the edge of their abilities — when they push themselves or are forced by circumstances to stretch beyond their familiar limits, according to Damour. It’s also important to understand that stress can result from both bad and good events. For instance, being fired is stressful but so is bringing a baby home for the first time.

“It’s important for psychologists to share our knowledge about stress with broad audiences: that stress is a given in daily life, that working at the edge of our abilities often builds those capacities and that moderate levels of stress can have an inoculating function, which leads to higher than average resilience when we are faced with new difficulties,” she said.

Anxiety, too, gets an unnecessarily bad rap, according to Damour.

“As all psychologists know, anxiety is an internal alarm system, likely handed down by evolution, that alerts us to threats both external — such as a driver swerving in a nearby lane — and internal — such as when we’ve procrastinated too long and it’s time to get started on our work,” said Damour.

Viewing anxiety as sometimes helpful and protective allows people to make good use of it. For example, Damour said she often tells the teenagers she works with in her practice to pay attention if they start to feel anxious at a party because their nerves may be alerting them to a problem.

“Similarly, if a client shares that she’s worried about an upcoming test for which she has yet to study, I am quick to reassure her that she is having the right reaction and that she’ll feel better as soon as she hits the books,” she said.

That doesn’t mean that stress and anxiety can’t be harmful, said Damour. Stress can become unhealthy if it is chronic (allowing for no possibility of recovery) or if it is traumatic (psychologically catastrophic).

Full article found at <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/08/stress-anxiety>



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Anxiety in Grief

Think of something that scares you. Perhaps it's the thought of giving a speech in front of a crowd, taking a test, asking your crush out on a date, or jumping out of an airplane. Even if you're mostly fearless, everyone's got something.

Now think about the thoughts and sensations you typically experience right before doing this thing that scares you; this is your fear and anxiety at work. Maybe your stomach starts doing cartwheels, your heart begins to race, or your breathing becomes rapid. Perhaps your thoughts start running through all the worst potential outcomes and you think to yourself...

"There's still time. I could still run from this situation."

I know you know what I'm talking about. Even the bravest people feel fear and anxiety, they just know how to navigate the experience more exquisitely than most.

Are you still with me? Okay good, now take a second and think backwards to a time when you experienced the thoughts and sensations of fear and anxiety in your grief. Maybe this isn't one particularly traumatic moment, but a prolonged period of time when you experienced ongoing apprehension and worry, upon worry, upon worry.

Using a personal example, I remember feeling panic-like anxiety when my father told me of my mother's terminal cancer diagnosis, and then the slow hum of persistent anxiety in the weeks and months afterwards as my family frantically searched for treatments and clinical trials. For one year I held my breath and prepared for the worst, knowing that my mother's death was not a possibility but a probability.

People experience anxiety after the death of a loved one for a number of reasons and, you guessed it, we'd like to discuss a few of them here today.

After the death of a loved one, you may experience anxiety because...

...you are trying to avoid unpleasant thoughts, memories, and emotions.

I want to start by discussing avoidance because the act of avoidance is involved in perpetuating all of the scenarios to follow. When we talk about avoidance in grief we are usually referring to experiential avoidance. As we noted in a previous article about avoidance...

"Experiential avoidance is an attempt to block out, reduce or change unpleasant thoughts, emotions or bodily sensations. These are internal experiences that are perceived to be painful or threatening and might include fears of losing control, being embarrassed, or physical harm and thoughts and feelings including shame, guilt, hopelessness, meaninglessness, separation, isolation, etc. Now please note I say "perceive to be painful or threatening," these judgements are often subjective and what is perceived as threatening to one may seem totally irrational to another."

Although grief is always unpleasant and uncomfortable, for some there are aspects that actually seem threatening and these perceptions can lead to attempts to control or avoid frightening feelings and reactions. Although avoidance can be useful in certain scenarios, for many it can become a harmful cycle that persists to the detriment of personal healing.

Full article found at <https://whatsyourgrief.com/anxiety-in-grief/>