

A Daily Experiment that will Change Your Panic Attacks

Most likely if you are reading this article, it is because you've read "Let Go of Anxiety," and wish to learn additional skills to change your relationship with your panic attacks. Remember the amazing alarm system that is built into your body. When your brain perceives danger, the alarm will go off and alert the rest of your body to protect itself by fighting or escaping danger. When this occurs, essential hormones are released to help you in this endeavor.

Your mind and body will respond accordingly and that's when your amazing mind will start providing comments and advice to solve your internal dilemma. After all, "You shouldn't feel that way!" The struggle then begins and it's easy to forget that it is how we respond to our natural internal events (i.e., thoughts, memories, judgments, feelings, sensations, and urges) that makes all the difference.

Below is an experiment you can engage in every day to help you change your relationship with panic attacks. You will only need five minutes, a pen, paper, and willingness.

Your mind may say five minutes is too long. That's okay. How long are you willing to do this exercise? If you are only willing to do it one minute, start there and gradually increase the time to five minutes.

Remember your "why"

Before starting, take a few minutes to list the things that matter most to you in life—your values. What is it that you want your life to be about? Your values light up your way when you happen upon the anxiety trap. Your values can increase your motivation to let go of the fight with the internal events, so you can do what really matters in life.

Recalling your values during this experiment and other difficult times will be essential.

The Experiment:

Read the instructions a few times before doing this practice or record them on your smart phone. Take a few minutes to think back on the last time you had a panic attack and the feelings you wanted to reject. Maybe it is a future event your mind has been worrying about. Yes. Bring it on! Recreate that memory to experience this dire event for a few minutes. This experiment is what's called an imaginary exposure when doing ERP (exposure and response prevention) for the treatment of anxiety and other emotional challenges.

Your mind may say "No way!" As you hear this, what is your reaction? Make a note of that. What is the mind predicting will happen when you travel to the past or to the future? Write it down.

Notice how willing you are to experience those feelings and sensations just this moment. On a scale of one to ten. Write down your willingness level.

Now go ahead and allow your mind to take you to that event. Go ahead and immerse yourself in it so your alarm system comes to the rescue.

Begin to take slow deep breaths. Do so for a few seconds. Then, as you slowly breathe in, imagine inhaling anxiety. Hold your breath for two seconds, then as you breathe out, imagine exhaling calmness—the thing you want most in this moment. Give it a try. Be curious as you do this. Inhale anxiety again, let it be there for as long as it needs to be there; exhale calmness.

Continue inhaling anxiety and exhaling calmness for a few more seconds. As you do, your mind may provide unhelpful advice (e.g., “Stop doing this practice. It’ll only get worse if you do it.”) Acknowledge the mind and continue with this experiment.

Now imagine doing something that you very much like to do. Imagine doing it with gusto. See yourself engaging in that activity eagerly for a few more seconds. Then gently come back to your breath to inhale anxiety with that same passion. Watch for your mind’s comments, acknowledge them, and come back to the exercise.

Can you imitate that willingness you exhibit when doing something you love as you breathe anxiety and welcome it into your body? Notice what happens when you breathe it in with enthusiasm—just a few more moments. Breathe in anxiety bravely...breathe out calmness.

Remember, this is an experiment. Notice what happens. Maintain a curious stance. When you reach the time you decided to finish this experiment, see if you are willing to inhale anxiety a little longer.

After your practice, take a minute to write what you learned. What can you do more of next time?

Practice being open to anxiety and other unpleasant emotions as often as you can with gusto as mentioned above. You can also carry on with this experiment when a panic storm appears on the horizon. Be consistent and proactive. Gradually, you’ll notice how your relationship with panic attacks begin to change.

Give this practice and yourself a chance for more emotional and mental flexibility. You can do this!