

## **Anxiety: Our Paradoxical Companion**

If we revisit our earliest memories, it's there: maybe a vague agitation in the absence of any immediate awareness of what the big deal was or perhaps a mysteriously heart-thumping reaction to some scary fantasy unanchored in everyday reality. While fear is our hair trigger response to the threats right in front of our nose, anxiety is our early-warning system-- evolution's way of helping us navigate a complex environment whose perils aren't always obvious and close-at-hand. We learn early in life that, while fear is typically concrete and literal, anxiety is often a construct of the imagination, albeit one that rarely brings much creative satisfaction.

From as far back as most of us can remember, anxiety is one of our most intimate companions. And if we are temperamentally wired for vigilance and reactivity, it can become constant company, even when an outside observer might think we should be carefree. One of life's early discoveries is that, even when we're telling ourselves there's nothing to worry about, it's hard to "just say no" to anxiety- there's no obvious off-switch to that familiar roiling tumult that can so suddenly hijack our nervous system, however frantically we may search for one. In fact, that quest for a magical off-switch, more than any other human yearning, may be the primary reason that people seek out psychotherapists.

For most of us, our relationship with anxiety is clouded by a fundamental confusion. Evolution appears to have appointed anxiety to be our Guardian, a personal security system dedicated to keeping us out of harm's way, sometimes even in the absence of any real danger. The biological power and persistence of anxiety lies in this fundamentally benign function—at its root, whatever its tendency to send us false positives about the presence of danger, its intent is to keep us safe. But so much of the time, we experience our anxiety as a relentless Tormentor, a source of unnecessary suffering that we desperately try to ignore, avoid, wish away or, failing that, carpet bomb with medication. The failure of these customary remedies for anxiety has made it the leading presenting problem in therapists' caseloads around the world.

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