

Oh No! The Thought That Triggers Anxiety

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In my 20-plus years of practice I have found that successful treatment for anxiety comes from the combination of helping develop effective coping strategies as well as provide a working knowledge of the origins of anxiety. Learning to manage anxiety is a common goal of my clients. Figuring out the *origin* of their anxiety is a less common yet equally worthwhile goal. Knowing how to cope with anxiety is extremely beneficial, as the skills we utilize to cope with anxiety are quite similar to those we use to cope with stress – and stress is a practically universal phenomenon. But understanding *why* we experience anxiety can help us navigate so much better in terms of either minimizing the anxiety we face, or avoiding it altogether. Hence, it makes good sense to develop both coping mechanisms and also to create insight into our anxieties. Learning to cope with anxiety and stress will be the topic of other articles; from here, we will uncover the origins of anxiety.

Earlier in my career, I found it necessary to explain the cause of anxiety to a young client of mine. This seven year-old child, whom I'll call Danielle, was experiencing tremendous anxiety but was having great difficulty articulating what might be causing or contributing to her intensely problematic emotion. Why did she develop such powerful, crippling anxiety at certain moments? In searching for elementary terminology, I explained to her that she was basically saying 'Oh no!' to herself when she found herself in uncomfortable settings such as around unfamiliar people or new places. Since nearly all of us perceive danger, the use of the 'Oh No Thought' has practically universal utility. What happens, then, when our minds perceive danger?

Beyond conscious awareness, our minds have a deeper level of thought. Among other things we contemplate beyond awareness, we assess for danger. In the simplest terms, we examine what is happening to us and a thought develops as we behold challenge and danger. This realization results in such thoughts as, "Oh no! I didn't know we have a test today, and I'm not prepared." Or, "Oh no! My boss is looking for the report I didn't finish," or "Oh no! I need to speak in front of a large group and that overwhelms me." Basically, the 'Oh No Thought' occurs to us when we feel we are in danger, threatened, unprepared, unsure, or in some other way, inadequate.

When our minds detect danger, we connect with our previous experiences of danger, and we develop heightened awareness. Oh, no, there is danger! This perception causes arousal of the sympathetic nervous system, which ignites activity in the amygdala and hypothalamus. These parts of the brain create a flow of epinephrine (more commonly known as adrenalin). And adrenalin spurs

the liver to produce cortisol that then spreads through the bloodstream throughout the body. The 'Oh No Thought' causes a chain reaction in which our bodies prepare to face the danger we perceive.

These changes in the brain cause changes in the body. With anxiety and the rush of adrenalin, we experience what psychologists refer to as 'the fight or flight response,' whereby the body is charged to either fight with maximum intensity, or run with the greatest energy. This hard wiring serves us well when we experience a true threat; however, the adrenalin and cortisol surges can wreak havoc on the reactive bodies of nervous people. The 'Oh No Thought' triggers the assault of adrenalin and cortisol that in turn causes muscle tension, dry mouth, queasy or upset stomach, increases in heart rate and blood pressure, and changes in breathing patterns. We also may experience difficulty concentrating, cold and clammy skin, and/or perspiration, stiff neck, or headaches. The more the anxiety, the greater we experience physical symptoms. These bodily changes most definitely derive from our thoughts, confirming the not just the reality but the magnitude of the *mind/body connection*. And what's worse, these changes can have negative, cumulative effects such as heart disease, difficulty sleeping, panic attacks, diminished energy, acid reflux, bloating, ulcers, chronic skin conditions such as eczema, changes in metabolism and even weakened immune system. All of these ailments can originate from the simple, but highly problematic thought, 'Oh no!'

Indeed, the mind possesses incredible power. Mental tasks such as reasoning, will power, empathy, creativity, insight, intuition, and hope are all examples of what magnificent aptitude exists in the mind. Along with these is the mind's keen capacity to react to danger and by so doing, create the 'Oh No Thought.' Such thoughts connect the mind to the body and real physiological effects can and do result from our thoughts. By using some mental resources such as hope, will power, and creativity, as well as developing some positive coping strategies, we can learn to combat anxiety. We can replace the maladaptive 'Oh No Thought' with more positive, adaptive thoughts such as 'I can' or 'I am learning to' or 'I hope to.' In addition, other behavioral interventions including relaxation training and building other skills can defeat the 'Oh No Thought.' It is all a matter of the mind.

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