

Neurodiverse Self-Care: Managing anxiety through connection

This piece has been written by neurodiverse individuals *for* neurodiverse individuals. We uniquely understand the challenges of self-care and how anxiety can impact or impede this process.

Anxiety is defined as a state of worry. Clinically, the group of mental health issues characterized by feelings of anxiety and fear are known as: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms can range from mild to severe. The duration of symptoms typically experienced by people with anxiety disorders makes it more a chronic than episodic disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Anxiety is best understood as being a *felt sense* linked to the sympathetic nervous system, which is known for its role in activating the ‘fight or flight’ response (Harvard Medical School, 2018). This response system evolved in our pre-human ancestors to help keep us safe from threats, such as predators in the wild. In today’s environment, the threats are not necessarily a hungry lion approaching on the savannah; they can be a range of other things. Modern-day immediate stressors include public speaking, preparing

for exams or going for a job interview. Minor stressors can also build up over time to create a feeling of anxiety. This includes activities such as negotiating peak hour traffic or managing your monthly expenses, especially if you are struggling to make ends meet (see more: Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Past traumatic incidents (where no care was adequately given) can also grow into fearful expectations and anxieties covering the same themes or topic. A problem with today's world is that though our body still releases the stress hormones when we feel a threat or concern, we do not tend to react to these threats with fight or flight. We mask, we remain 'polite' or otherwise hide our true feelings. This unexpressed buildup of anxiety can cause us more harm than good.

While anxiety is challenging, evidence indicates that anxiety, in the right dose, may be *helpful* for motivating us to meet these modern demands (Cheng et al., 2014). Psychologists refer to this type of anxiety as 'eustress' (Selye, 1975) and argue that a small amount is positive and essential in a well-balanced life that is both challenging and rewarding (O'Sullivan, 2011).



Anxiety can make life difficult, but it is also possible to manage with self-help and professional help. A big part of self-help (i.e. to support your own mental health) is self-care. We can self-care in a range of ways. Self-care is formally defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: “The practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health”. The definition adds, “self-care is the practice of taking an *active role* in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress.”

To better self-care and manage stress, we have created a list of activities and actions to better support fellow neurodiverse individuals going about their daily lives. In the same way we all have basic physical needs, all humans have certain, basic psychological needs. We need to feel connected, that we belong, that we are valued, are good at something, have a purpose, and have a secure future. Johann Hari (2018) argues that the epidemic of depression and anxiety is due to a culture which is disconnecting all of us from the things we really need. Where we can, we need to restore that connection, and work on any internal barriers stopping us from being connected. There are various methods to reconnect including grounding, reclaiming emotions, getting into nature, creative arts and talking to someone.

Grounding

The act of grounding involves a conscious act of mindful practice to connect your mind, body and (if you believe in it) spirit. Grounding strategies are some of the simplest and most effective ways to bypass anxious and catastrophic thinking, even if only momentarily.



These strategies can be divided into two areas:

- 1) to bring your attention into your body;
- 2) to orient you in the present moment.

Bringing your attention into your body is the act of focusing on your physical self. To get started with mindfulness in this manner, you can ask yourself: What does my body feel like *right now*? Are there any sensations in my body: Any hotness or cold? Do I notice any tingling, or itching? When I concentrate my attention on my body, do I feel soreness in places, or aches, or discomfort?

“Your body often ‘knows’ things before you do”

By bringing your attention inwards in this way, you can get to understand the way you experience your world in a deeply somatic manner. Your body often ‘knows’ things

before you do. It provides feedback to you, showing that you are overwhelmed, or developing the flu, or that you cannot trust someone, or that you're falling in love; the body reacts immediately to input in the environment. It shows us what's happening *from inside*. We just need to stop for a moment and tune in.

Some common techniques for orienting your attention *outwards* and connecting to the present moment include listing facts such as your name, age, the day of the week, the season and the year (Blue Knot Foundation, 2019). You may also like to describe the colours, textures and objects around you to reclaim a sense of connectedness to time and place (Altman, 2014; Forsyth & Eifert, 2018). These techniques work well to help ground you during a panic attack or in a moment of autistic overwhelm.

Many sources also emphasize the importance of stopping what you are doing to breathe deeply and consciously, which is a technique that both grounds us into our body *and* into the present moment (Edwards, 2005). Another method for grounding is getting barefoot and trying some yoga poses, walking in nature, or stamping your feet and feeling the sensations through your lower body (Garland, 2014; Living Well, 2019).

Get into Nature

Being in nature is an additional source of grounding, serving to reconnect us with the basic processes of life. Underneath all the noise, the tension and stress, a connection with nature serves to remind us of our fundamental existence as a 'human animals' (see Dubois, 1968). Nature offers much in terms of finding peace and calm; studies show young children indicate a strong desire to connect with their environment (Levin & Unsworth, 2013). The emerging field of environmental psychology substantiates this inherent desire, showing that simply spending time in nature is associated with decreased anxiety, depression, and physical illness (Mayer et al., 2009). The benefits of getting into nature are even greater when paired with physical activity. Rather than simply going to the gym, researchers are advocating the benefits of 'green exercise', as this is associated with significant improvements in mood and self-esteem (Barton et al., 2016). The positive effect is even more pronounced when you exercise near a body of water such as the ocean, a river or lake (Barton & Pretty, 2010). In addition to releasing vital endorphins which leave you feeling happier in the short term (Craft & Penra, 2004), you will also be forming a new habit, investing in your long-term psychological health and vitality (DiLorenzo et al., 1999).



Another way to get your dose of 'green exercise' could be to sign up for a farm stay. For example, WWOOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) is a recognized network with a thriving international community. 'WWOOFing' involves working 4-6 hours per day in exchange for meals and lodgings. It may be the perfect way to 'reset', to reconnect with your food source and to meet likeminded travelers and new friends.

Reclaiming emotions

Sometimes chronic anxiety or depression are the result of suppressed emotions like anger. This is a theory put forth by Heller and LaPierre (2012) in their book “Healing Developmental Trauma” and provides another angle in which we can tackle depression and anxiety.



Feelings of anger are an important milestone on the pathway towards acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). It is important for us to recognise that it is ok, and even healthy, to be angry. This isn't necessarily the message that we receive as children, or from society in general (see Brown, 1999). However, it is the human condition to experience a range of emotions, and it is also our responsibility to learn to express these emotions adaptively and healthily (see Modcrin-McCarthy et al., 1998).

Rather than suppressing anger, disappointment, betrayal or even missed opportunities, allow yourself to feel and to grieve these losses. Feel secure in your decision to explore every part of you, and don't be afraid to be loud or to take up space. You will be better able to integrate your life, perhaps even emerging with a sense of empowerment for how personal tragedy has shaped you as a strong and resilient individual (Wineman, 2003; Slade & Longden, 2012).

Evidence-based treatments

If you are considering treatment for anxiety or depression, it pays to know what resonates with you personally, as well as what works. One common approach to treating anxiety and depression is cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). This involves examining thoughts and behaviours to identify those which are creating and maintaining a negative state of mind (Beck, 2011). While CBT has a longstanding tradition in the West, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction combine Eastern and Western approaches. These focus on attuning to body, breath, sensations and perceptions as they arise in the present moment (Crane et al., 2017). There is also an emerging evidence-base which supports the effectiveness of creative and arts-based therapies (Fernández-Aguayo & Pino-Juste, 2018; Ritter & Low, 1996; Slayton, D'Archer & Kaplan, 2010), as well as culturally diverse approaches to healing (Griner & Smith, 2006). These may allow an exploration of emotion and meaning through different talking therapies, drawing, painting, movement, song and dance. As these approaches grow in recognition, they grant greater access to being able to work within your personal preferences. They validate the diverse needs of our global community and nurture the capacity to heal in ways which are both meaningful and empowering (see Akomolafe, 2012).



Many people find medication to be helpful in the initial stages of recovery from mental health difficulties, however they often report that medication does not resolve the root cause of their symptoms (Longden, 2010). There is no shame in asking for help, or in taking medication that will assist you to cope. With guidance and a variety of approaches, trust yourself to make whatever steps necessary to make a full recovery.

Creative arts

Creativity has been described as the essence of life (Cameron, 1994) and essential for mental health and overall happiness (Barron & Barron, 2013).



For neurodivergents in particular, the pathway towards a strong and stable sense of identity often lies in the expression of our creative skills and talents (Cook & Garnett, 2018; Davis & Braun, 2011). This may look like reviving those creative callings which occupied you as a child (Altucher & Azula-Altucher, 2014), or nurturing your passions and prioritising the time to explore and express them.

Whether you choose to express yourself through writing, painting, cooking, sculpting or performance, creativity provides a symbolic language through which you can explore the many sides of yourself, including your struggles. The abstract and language of art may allow you to voice what lies at the root of anxiety or depression – that which may be too complicated to describe in ordinary terms (see Liebmann, 1990; Rosen 2002). Creativity requires a degree of playfulness and a willingness to take risks (Gilbert, 2016).

The mere act of engaging creatively can be enough to engage a mild meditative state, interrupting the spiral of negative thoughts and encouraging your mind in a new direction (Curry & Kasser, 2005).

Talk to someone

Sometimes our situation isn't as hopeless as we think, and other people can help us see that. At the very least, it often helps to get out our pain with someone who can hold a safe space for us.



The key is finding someone who has your best interests at heart. They can act as a sounding board and help you to unravel any anxieties while reminding you of your strengths. While it may be tempting to go it alone, we are all inherently social creatures (Maslow, 1987; Cook & Garnett, 2018). You will ultimately flourish for having reached out for human connection.

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