

Pushing the **panic** button

Sandra Kimball looks at the causes and symptoms of anxiety

Being able to withstand the emotional storms that come our way is one hallmark of a noble and accomplished life. A life where emotions are appropriate and proportionate to the situations in which we find ourselves is a balanced one. When emotions are muted, life seems dull and lacks passion. When they are out of control, too extreme or persistent, they can become immobilizing, as in severe depression or overwhelming anxiety.

To be entirely free of anxiety is an illusion and unrealistic. A certain amount of anxiety is useful. A small dose, for example, can improve one's acting skills or performance in passing an exam. If you were totally relaxed, you wouldn't give it your best. And for a bigger challenge, a higher level of anxiety is called for. I, for one, hope that the pilot flying the plane on which I'm a passenger has an anxiety level that is appropriate to the demands of flying and landing an aircraft. I also aspire to return to normal functioning after the stress of being on the airplane resolves.

The specific role anxiety plays in our life story depends on the indiscriminate events and conditions life tosses our way and our reactions to them based on our intrinsic nature and character. But what happens if you find yourself too anxious, too often? Stress caused by anxiety over the long term is of no use to you or anybody around you. It becomes important to manage your worry and anxiety by learning to change the way you think and the way you react to your thinking.

Everybody worries or gets anxious at some time in their lives. Anxiety is a mental and physical response to prepare the body's emergency resources in an adverse situation. There is an arousal mechanism, commonly called the fight/flight system, which kicks in when one needs to

respond quickly, like jumping out of the way of a speeding car.

Another emergency response is immobilizing, much like what a deer does when it is caught in the headlights. We humans encounter it as the breath – holding suspense we experience right before something big is about to happen while watching a movie. The body is flooded with hormones and chemicals that arouse it to meet the challenge, and our thinking and behavior changes to enable us to deal with the perceived threat or danger. A lesser version of this occurs every time we are trying hard to take in information about the world.

Anxiety can occur when there is no real danger to our physical survival. Survival in modern culture can mean the persistent maintenance of our personality, status and likeability. The only part of these emergency defense systems that is of real use to us today when handling most stresses is the increased mental alertness that it provides.

And finally there is the existential angst we all carry. It is the anticipatory dread of knowing that we are born into life with death sitting on our shoulder and there is limited time to find the meaning and purpose of why we are here, what we are meant to be doing. Philo of Alexandria is reported to have said, "Be kind. Everyone you meet is carrying a big problem".

When we are overcome with anxiety, it's not the best time to ask "why me, why now", but to know what to do to lower it to a manageable level. It is helpful to take an active approach by finding and challenging the fear that lies at the root of the anxiety. To see into the fog of anxiety and confront the fear is to break its tyranny.

We can be plagued with longstanding

patterns of thinking and reacting that keep the hungry beast of anxiety well-fed, especially if we have personalities that are at home with worrying. But changing these deeply entrenched patterns is indeed possible by taking responsibility for change and by learning new skills.

The stress of anxiety is often found when there is a lot of significant change in a short period of time. It isn't always experienced when there is a major shift in our lives, but sometimes it comes in the way of losing something during the day or getting too many telephone calls – all the little things in life that accumulate. A poet once said it is not the major changes in life, like people dying, that will drive one mad, it is a shoelace that breaks when there is too little time. There is no getting rid of anxiety. It is an inevitable part of human existence. A realistic alternative is to better manage it. **KTO**

For counselling services, contact Sandra Kimball, Counselling Services Kyoto 075-762-6322 / www.internationalcounselling.com or check the website of International Mental Health Professionals Japan for foreign therapists in your area at www.imhpi.co.jp

INFORMATION

There are numerous websites with information on anxiety and panic attacks. Beware of advertisements for quick-fix programs or taking pharmaceuticals without supervision from a medical specialist. There are many excellent books and workbooks in print about this subject. Check on-line or at your local bookseller.