How Do You Describe Anxiety to Others?

by ANNA JACKSON

What Does Anxiety Feel Like?

What does anxiety feel like? Let me tell you.

Living with anxiety is a vortex of emotions, worries, and fears swirling rapidly towards you and backing you into a corner.

Anxiety is sitting alone at 2 a.m. trying desperately to not let all the negative moments that have happened in your life keep you from sleeping or your heart feeling like Thor's hammer is slamming against your chest while trying to hold the simplest of conversations with someone and hoping they do not notice how much your hands are shaking.

It’s a constant state of unease; it is the overwhelming feeling that something is wrong but not always knowing what that something is. It is debilitating, overwhelming, absorbs you in fear and leaves you feeling on edge.

If you suffer from anxiety, one of the most frustrating things can be trying to explain to others how you feel.

How Do You Describe What Anxiety Feels Like?

When I was asked to write about "What does anxiety feel like?" I immediately became anxious. Why? I write about anxiety regularly, but this particular topic had me doubting myself before I even started writing.

I have anxiety, I have battled it since my teens (I am 31), and I know exactly what anxiety feels like. So, why on earth am I letting myself think that I am not capable?

That is what anxiety does; it makes you hesitate, it makes you doubt yourself, and it makes you question how you could possibly be good enough. It’s a constant battle of fight or flight.

When we are experiencing anxiety, the brain releases stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline. This causes us to feel the same symptoms we experience when our brain tells us we are in danger, such as a rapid heart rate, hyperventilation, sweating, and panic.

We want to fight it, we want to stand our ground and face our fears, but the symptoms of anxiety fill us with an overwhelming desire to flee.

Describing How Anxiety Feels Like to Others

Anxiety comes in different shapes and forms, and sometimes with different symptoms.

We can experience anxiety in social settings, we feel anxiety the instant we make a mistake, and our anxiety

affects self-esteem issues, causing us to self-doubt ourselves. However, we are trying our very best to cope with our anxiety.

This is how I can best answer the question of, "What does anxiety feel like?" to you.

Socializing Can be a Nightmare for Us

Socializing can be an anxiety sufferer's worst nightmare. The amount of negative thoughts and feelings that enter our heads when speaking to others, particularly new people, can be suffocating.

We worry about what other people think about us, in excruciating detail. Things like how we look, our clothes, our opinions, how we talk, how we move.

Imagine being in a crowded room, full of people pointing at you, laughing at you, and judging you. We think that is what is happening every time we socialize.

Of course, it is not, but that does not stop us thinking it.

Anxiety creeps in whenever I open my mouth to speak. I hesitate, I become painfully nervous and stutter and stumble over my words. I walk away from conversations feeling defeated and embarrassed.

In most cases, I probably came across fine, made some good points, and I was probably received well, but my anxiety tells me the opposite.

I will pick apart every word that came out of my mouth; the tone, the annunciation, my hand gestures, the way I stood or sat, the way I looked as I said it:

- Did I come across as genuine?
- Do they understand what I was trying to say?
- Did I sound stupid?

All those doubts will eat away at me; they will make me feel so bad about myself that it will feel unbearable.

I will have trouble sleeping because my brain will not stop taking me back to go over every second of that conversation and pick out all the things that I think I did wrong.

Moving Past Mistakes Feels Impossible

We all make mistakes, it comes with the course of life, and when we make them, we learn from them and move on. When you have anxiety, your mistakes haunt you.

You can be going about your day, feeling relaxed, feeling positive and then you are caught off guard by a mistake you made 10 years ago. And anxiety will tell you that it is 10 times worse than it is.

Anxiety makes you feel like the negatives in your past are still present. It will occupy your mind in making you agonize over all the things you have ever done wrong.

We're Full of Self-Doubt

I doubt myself every day.

When I look at my peers, friends, and family, my anxiety tells me that I pale in comparison when it comes to achievements, talent, skill, and personality. I shy away from sharing those things with those people due to fear that they will be unimpressed or disinterested.

I obviously have a desire to have these things acknowledged but I do not give people a chance to acknowledge them to start with. It's a struggle between wanting to share important moments with your loved ones and then retreating once anxiety points out how insignificant it is.

By not sharing these things with these people, it leaves you feeling deflated and defeated.

As time goes on you are filled with regret, you wish you could go back in time and have the courage to do and say the things you wanted to. You think that maybe you could try again, but anxiety creeps in and tells you that it is too late and that the moment has passed.

We Are Doing Our Best

I struggle with my anxiety every day, but I also fight it. I am very aware that most of the things my anxiety tells me are lies, yet I struggle not to listen to them.

Anxiety is like having a voice in your head that continually points out all of your flaws. There have been moments where my anxiety feels like this epic battle inside my head to see which version of me is going to come out on top.

Will it be the anxious side, the one who just knows that the easiest way out is to weaken my grip and let myself fall into a heap, where I will inevitably find myself full of regret?

Or will it be the little warrior, the one who has it in her to fight, the underdog who has the strength to conquer if she just believes in herself that little fraction more?

I like that warrior, she surprises me when I least expect it, she inspires me, and she is the shadow with a powerful stance just waiting to click into place.

- Every day when my anxiety tries to control me, I think of her. I am capable of being her.
- We are not who our anxiety tells us we are. We may struggle, we may turn down invitations, and we may seem closed off or withdrawn but just give us time.
- Encourage us instead of pushing us. Give us patience instead of pressuring us.
- We are fighting a battle that you cannot see, and we are always doing our best.

#ThisIsWhatAnxietyFeelsLike

I came across Sarah Fader while reading some stories about anxiety.

Sarah Fader is the CEO and Founder of Stigma Fighters, a non-profit organization that encourages individuals with mental illness to share their personal stories. Her twitter feed is full of open and honest tweets about her own experiences with anxiety.

One night several months ago, I was scrolling through my Twitter timeline, and I noticed many of the tweets had the hashtag #ThisIsWhatAnxietyFeelsLike. Hundreds of people around the world were responding to Sarah's tweet about how she felt anxious when people took too long to respond to a text message.

Something I think many of us can relate to, I know I do.

I clicked on the hashtag and started reading all the tweets, from people all over the globe who were living with anxiety. I related to so many.

There was this whole community, coming together, sharing their feelings and relating to each other about the topic what does anxiety feel like. It gave you a great sense of comfort and a realization that you are not alone.

If there is one place that I can suggest to anyone who wants to learn and understand more about what it is like to live with not only anxiety but also many other mental illnesses, it is Sarah Fader's twitter feed and the Stigma

Fighters website.