Positive Aspects of Anxiety

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Anxiety's Silver Linings

You don't like anxiety. Why would you? The constant worry, the jumping to negative conclusions and the fear weigh heavily in your life. And those are only the cognitive symptoms. The physical symptoms can be even worse. There is the profuse sweating, being lightheaded, having shaky hands and never being able to sit still that always seems to alert those around you that you are uneasy.

In some forms, anxiety only mildly impacts your life. If you have generalized anxiety disorder, you may be able to function quite well at home, work and in the community. Some people may be surprised to know that you even have an anxiety disorder.

In other forms, anxiety influences every thought you have and every behavior you perform. It causes panic attacks that make you feel like you are dying and fearful to even leave your house. Anxiety is problematic and dangerous.

What if someone said that there are benefits to anxiety? Would that be hard to believe? Believe it or not, it's true.

Over the years, research, studies, practical experience and common sense have discovered situations and scenarios where anxiety actually helps lead to better outcomes.

By finding a more balanced view of the disorder, you can begin accepting positive aspects of anxiety. This will lead to better acceptance of yourself, and with luck, decreased symptoms over time.

Survival

The first benefit is likely the most important: survival. From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety was a bonus; our ancestors who had a bit of anxiety lived longer. You have probably heard of the "fight or flight" response. The response occurs when you are faced with a real or perceived threat. You can respond by running away from the danger as quickly as possible to ensure your safety, or you can stay and fight the menace.

People with some anxiety tend to be more vigilant in assessing their environment for risks. If your anxious ancestor was in lying down to sleep at night and heard an odd noise, he would be more likely to respond and investigate. The less anxious ancestor would have assumed that everything was fine, only to be stepped on by a wooly mammoth.

Along the same lines, recent studies show that teenage drivers that have higher levels of anxiety are safer drivers than their non-anxious counterparts. They are less likely to be involved in fatal car crashes that are more common in new drivers. There are a number of explanations for this statistic, but the fact remains, anxious people do well to survive.

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Academic Performance

The next aspect of life that improves with mild to moderate levels of anxiety is academic performance. Obviously, if someone is a nervous wreck going into a test, their performance will suffer. Interestingly though, students with very low levels of anxiety will not perform well either. It turns out that there is a “sweet spot” of anxiety that motivates the anxious person to study and take the task seriously without being self-defeating.

It is easy to see how you can apply the same ideas to the work place. If you have an important assignment that needs to be completed, who are you going to give it to? Someone with very low levels of anxiety may let it sit on his desk for a few weeks before getting around to it. On the other hand, someone with a mild level of anxiety will want to please her superiors, start work early on the project and display a high level of conscientiousness. In this case, the task will be done quickly and completely. It’s a win for anxiety.

Physical Performance

Performance advantages extend beyond the classroom and office. Any physical or athletic task is improved with mild anxiety as well.

As mentioned earlier, there is a link between anxiety and the “fight or flight” response. Part of what makes this response work is adrenaline, which is the hormone released in stressful situations. It can increase your heart rate and blood pressure, while expanding the air passages of the lungs, enlarging your pupils and redistributing blood to the muscles. This means that you can see better and have a better muscular response during times that adrenaline is present.

Athletes become very skilled at exploiting their anxiety to boost performance and hand-eye coordination.

Cleanliness

Commonly, people with anxiety are particular about their surroundings. They like their pencils to be on the left and their pens on the right. Their paper towels are always well-stocked, and you can eat off of their kitchen floor. Another benefit of mild to moderate anxiety is a high level of cleanliness.

Of course, there is a fine line between being really clean and being obsessively clean, but people with anxiety do well to stay on the right side of the line. If you have anxiety, there is a good chance that you are clean, organized and in control of your surroundings. This allows you an opportunity to burn off some of your anxious energy in appropriate ways. Being clean and organized helps you focus on more important things.

Planning Ahead

Are you planning a family trip soon? Are you organizing a surprise party for a loved one? If so, your anxiety is going to be a needed attribute. People with anxiety are familiar with anticipating a number of situations and scenarios that could occur. Because of this, they do well to plan for numerous contingencies.

If an anxious person is planning the party, you won’t run out of ice or forget the little forks, and the cake will always have the right number of candles in it. If the anxious person is planning a trip, you will always know when in-check is at the hotel. You will never get lost, and you will know the best route around the amusement park.

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Memory and Focus

Another benefit of anxiety is improved memory and ability to focus. When someone is speaking to you, you are inclined to focus and really concentrate on what they are saying. In that moment, the other person has your complete attention.

The advantages of this are numerous, but consider this in social situations. Other people will appreciate your attention and your ability to recall the content of previous discussions. Would you rather be friends with someone who really paid attention and remembered what you talked about or someone who always seemed distracted and forgetful? Turns out anxiety can make you a better friend.

More Fun

The final benefit of anxiety might be a surprise. People with anxiety have more fun. Think about the last time you were forced into a social event. You probably spent time with anticipatory anxiety as you worried about what you were going to wear, who was going to be there and how long you would have to stay.

The anxiety lowered your expectations so much that you thought you would have a miserable time. By the time you actually attended the event, you were pleasantly surprised by how much fun you had. None of the negative aspects you imagined actually came true. Since your anxiety set the bar so low, the reality of the situation was much better than expected, which yields a high perception of fun. Another victory for anxiety!

Knowing the Difference

The negatives of anxiety and anxiety disorders are mostly extensions of the positive aspects. Any positive taken to an extreme becomes a negative. The way to accurately assess the situation is to look at the overall impact on your daily life and functioning.

If you are able to perform well at school or work, maintain healthy relationships and take care of yourself, your anxiety is likely manageable.

Problems arise when your anxiety keeps you from being happy, doing the things you enjoy and being a functional member of society. If the influence of anxiety becomes overtly negative and progressively more intrusive, seek professional services. Therapists and psychiatrists are logical starting points to help your recovery.

Are you confused by your symptoms? A primary care physician may be a good step in identifying and evaluate your state.

Conclusion

All things being equal, you would rather have no anxiety at all. But since it seems that anxiety is going to be a part of your life, you might as well embrace it.

While doing so, stop to remember the good that comes along with the bad. Use the positive aspects of anxiety to your advantage so that you can exploit anxiety rather than anxiety exploit you.