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Managing anxiety in a climate of uncertainty

We're living through a period of unusual upheaval in more than one area (economic slow-down, falling stock markets, etc.). Many of us are subject to pressures that make us tense and fearful. At times such as these, managing negative feelings efficiently requires us to focus our energy on the things we can change.

Uncertainty is a fact of life

Generally, people like to be in control of their lives; they like to have a certain amount of power over what happens to them. But not everything can be predicted. Now and then, we find ourselves in situations where we have no control, and that usually causes us to worry. Uncertain times are not unique to our era; they've been part of life from the beginning of time. What is different is the way the mood of insecurity and uncertainty dominates the media; extensive coverage of those kinds of stories makes people feel insecure about various aspects of their own lives...which causes anxiety...which in turn, can prevent us from taking any action at all.

What role does anxiety play?

Anxiety is a normal emotional reaction that usually manifests itself when we're worried about things (job loss, financial problems). Anxiety is connected to the anticipation of negative outcomes. Its purpose is to cause us to address the source of our worries, and to motivate us to find ways to deal with them. Insofar as its intensity remains tolerable, anxiety allows us to use our energy to face a situation. And as we adapt to the things that are upsetting us, our anxiety gradually dissipates and disappears.

Warning signs

Because of the frenetic pace of life, we sometimes don't see the changes anxiety causes to our normal physical and mental states (trouble sleeping, headaches, digestion problems, palpitations, difficulties concentrating, etc.).

It's important to recognize these changes for what they are; the early warning signs that we need to take the time to make adjustments in our lives.

The sooner we identify what's bothering us, the sooner we can find ways to deal with the situation, and therefore lessen our anxiety.

Strategies to consider

Ideas that will help you manage anxiety in uncertain times:

1. Be aware of your level of anxiety, and pinpoint the cause.

- How anxious am I?
- Is this "normal" anxiety (the kind I've experience before) or is this exaggerated or disproportionate anxiety (it's making me unhappy, it seems to last, it's affecting my ability to function)?

2. Identify events or aspects of your life that cause anxiety.

Anxiety is usually caused by fear of negative things that might happen. It helps to figure out the source of your anxiety as well as the things that are feeding it.

3. Be aware of your 'inner voice'; think of it in relative terms and de-dramatize it.

Our inner voices can create stories or scenarios that become very real to us. Remember, **you have the power to create scenarios that are either negative or positive.** If we're tired or stressed, we tend to create catastrophic scenarios that are sometimes out of touch with reality.

Once you've identified your fears, **question how real they are** compared to the actual situation and **ask yourself:**

- Am I making things up or is this a real concern?
- Is it possible that things are not actually the way I think they are?

It's also helpful to address the fear head-on, to **think about what you would do** if the worst were to happen. Again, ask yourself:

- Is it possible that the situation is not as dramatic as I think it is?
- If the worst happens, how would it impact me; would I be able to deal with it?
- How would I react, what would I do, what resources could I enlist?

Asking these kinds of questions helps to downplay the situation and put it in a more realistic context.

4. Use the power you have.

Once you have a realistic handle on the situation that's upsetting you, ask yourself what you can do about it.

Make the **distinction between situations over which you have control** (which can be changed) and

those over which you have no control (which cannot change).

Then, focus your energies in areas where you have the power to effect change, and look for activities and resources that can help.

For instance, if I have financial worries, I can put off a purchase, or rebook a trip for later, or make fewer credit card purchases. Or if I've experienced real financial losses in the stock market, I can ask a financial professional to help me outline the consequences, or adjust my portfolio or re-evaluate future projects.

5. Change the way you think about the things you cannot control.

Learning to manage the way you perceive things contributes to a sense of personal power and builds confidence in your abilities. It is important to be able to step back and change the way you see a situation: remember, the actual situation is not as important as the way we think about the situation.

Finally, it helps to know how to **let go of the things we can't change.**

In conclusion

Generally, people who use these strategies spend far less energy on the things that are simply not worth bothering about. As a result, they feel calmer and more in charge of their lives.

However, if you still feel anxious despite efforts to manage your worries, don't hesitate to talk to an EAP professional. He or she will help you to understand what is generating your anxiety, and to develop the skills to manage it better.

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