

Anxiety: The Loss of Control

Some people seem to exaggerate the importance of control. Without being aware of it, they spend an excessive amount of time and energy trying to control their children, their spouses, their employees, and every relationship in their lives. Other people aren't so up-tight. They seem to be more easy going, and they seem carefree and get more done. How do we account for the difference between those who seek to plan, prevent and those who trust their judgment to solve problems as they unfold?

Some individuals learned the importance of control very early on in their childhoods. As a result, they accept that security, predictability and control are all interrelated. They have strong memories associated with the loss of control and its painful consequences. These lessons became the motives they live by. As an adult, they never questioned the validity of these lessons:

- o "Life is unpredictable."
- o "Spontaneity is dangerous."
- o "When I fail to predict or plan successfully, something scary and painful happens."
- o "To prevent bad things from happening, I have to make life more predictable."
- o "If I can keep my life under control; I can prevent bad things from happening."
- o "Security lies in making my life predictable and thereby preventing scary and unexpected things from happening."
- o "Security comes from knowing what is going to happen and knowing what people are thinking so I can take preventative action in advance. When I do not know the future, I feel vulnerable, scared, out of control, anxious."
- o "Since I am not a mind reader or a fortune teller, I can never feel secure in the present."
- o "I cannot trust my judgment. What I thought was safe turned out to be scary and painful. I have to take extra precautions. One can't be too careful."
- o "My judgment isn't good enough. I must depend on the judgment of others."
- o "I must control in order to prevent the humiliating exposure of my inadequacy to cope."
- o "It doesn't pay to take a risk. It might hurt too much if I am wrong. I must have control to prevent disaster."
- o "It is my responsibility to protect others from disaster."
- o "I know what's best for people."
- o "It makes me angry when people don't appreciate how hard I work at keep them out of harm's way."

Underlying these anxious, obsessive thoughts is desire to predict the future. We are trying to solve a problem in the present, to prevent disaster in the future. We are trying to come up with a plan to feel secure about some problem that may or may not happen tomorrow. In the meantime our life is on hold until we find an acceptable solution to this potential problem.

Why is it a mistake to strive for security by controlling and making life predictable?

o It is a mistake to require ourselves to predict that something bad is going to happen. We are not fortune tellers.

o It is a mistake to require ourselves to know what we cannot know. It is a set up for a lifetime of frustration, anxiety and failure. We have created an unsolvable problem for ourselves. We cannot have a happy life in the present under these absurd circumstances.

o It is a mistake to exaggerate the importance of preventing bad things from happening, even if we could do so. What was excruciatingly painful and scary as a child is more tolerable now that we are adults. We are more competent to take life as it comes.

o It is a mistake to define security in terms of predicting the future. Our inability to do so only sets us up for inevitable failure and insecurity. This failure contributes to our pessimism and despair, and it confirms our feeling that we are inadequate.

o It is a mistake to spend our lives trying to control potential disasters. While we are on “guard duty,” it is impossible for us to enjoy the delights that life has to offer us. We cannot let our guard down for a moment. So life passes us by.

o Our desire to prevent bad things from happening is an illusion. We can take reasonable precautions, but beyond a certain point, our good intention to ‘prevent’ becomes counter-productive. It has nothing to do with the real problems of life; it only serves as a cloak to conceal our irrational fears.

How can we solve the problem of the unpredictability of life? How can we keep bad things from happening to us? How can we control our destiny?

o We do not really have to make life predictable before we can live our life.

o We can trust our judgment as good enough to solve problems as they unfold. We would prefer to predict the future accurately and prevent disaster. Of course, who wouldn't? However, we are not guilty of failure when we are unable to forecast with 100% accuracy.

o We cannot control the future. We can only live in the present.

o We can choose to trust our judgment to tell us what is best based on what we know in a present situation. If we find out later that our judgment was mistaken, we can make another decision.

o We can catch ourselves trying to predict the future. Instead, we can choose to focus on the reality (not the potential) of the situation, and take life as it comes.

o We can trust our judgment to tell us which decisions must be resolved immediately, which can wait, and which do not need to be resolved at all.

o We can trust our judgment to tell her how much planning is too much and how much is enough.

Our judgment is not perfect; perfection is not a human trait. Our judgment is good enough to get the job done. Accepting our judgment as good enough is not based on external acknowledgement for our outcomes, but internal validation for our efforts. It is based on unconditional self-respect, which is to say that regardless of our good or bad choices, we are equally worthwhile and lovable. This doesn't go up or down depending on our decisions. If the tidal wave of anxiety starts to pull us under, we can remind ourselves that:

o This experience is a disappointment and inconvenience and not a reflection on our self-worth

o I am not guilty of a crime, just imperfect.

o I cannot prevent things from happening by predicting the future. I can take life as it comes.

o Doing badly never makes me a bad person — only imperfect. I have a right to be wrong.