How to Harness Your Anxiety

Research shows that we can tame anxiety to use it as a resource.

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Anxiety has long been one of the most feared enemies in our emotional canon. We fear its arrival, feel helpless and trapped under its spell, and grant it power to overtake us in new, exciting and challenging situations. But what if we’ve been going about it all wrong?

Research shows that anxiety can actually be a pathway to our best selves. A range of new neuroscience, along with ideas from ancient philosophy, Charles Darwin, early social scientists and positive psychology, have all pointed in this direction.

To be sure, severe anxiety can be debilitating. But for many people who experience it at more moderate levels it can be helpful, if we are open enough to embrace and reframe it.

For example, if anxiety is holding you back from applying for a new job, tell yourself that the feeling of your heart racing, which you thought was the discomfort of anxiety, is actually a crackle of excitement. This can help motivate you to apply for the job rather than shrinking from the opportunity.

Anxiety has often been linked to the “primitive” part of our brain, an “irrational” remnant left over from our time in the savanna dodging wild animals. This framing can make anxiety doubly problematic: it is seen as both destructive and useless.
Most coping strategies based in cognitive behavior therapy likewise assume this view of anxiety and strive to eradicate, or at least quiet, it. And we have learned to fear it.

For a variety of reasons, we are engaged in a feedback loop with anxiety. Fearing it, and in response, trying to avoid it or push it down, is part of what can make it such a problem for us. It feels like an obstacle because we have been treating it as such. But the less we fear anxiety and can embrace it, the more useful and helpful it can be.

A large-scale study from the University of Wisconsin in 2012 demonstrated that how we think about anxiety and stress can change how those feelings impact us. Regardless of actual stress levels, the less harmful you believe the feeling is, the less harmful it will be. “Our minds aren’t passive observers simply perceiving reality,” the Stanford research scientist Alia Crum explained in a speech at, of all places, the World Economic Forum. “Our minds actually change reality. In other words the reality we will experience tomorrow is in part a product of the mind-sets we hold today.”

Here are three ways to tap into anxiety as a resource.

1. Think of anxiety as a signal

You don’t have to like the experience of anxiety to use it effectively. It’s designed to be uncomfortable so you pay attention and do what you need to make it stop. Much like a baby’s cry, anxiety lets you know there is an issue that needs addressing. Just
as you try to figure out why the baby is in distress and resolve it, you must work to
determine what your anxiety is trying to tell you. Once you determine that and start
executing solutions, you’ll notice the anxiety begins to dissipate.

2. Label the feeling to steer your experience

Naming anxiety — and then renaming it — allows you to process its message rather
than just react to its discomfort. This reduces distress and activates better emotional
regulation, problem solving and planning.

Nervous you may have upset someone? Reframe worry into care about a person who
matters.

Terrified about going out on that first date? Consider that your heart is beating fast at
the possibility of it going well.

How you label your experience is 100 percent in your control. You can then channel
anxiety into a resource you can use to your advantage.

A study published in July from the University of Illinois on brain personality traits
and brain volume confirmed that a positive attitude can boost our brain’s ability to
manage discomfort. When you start to see how anxiety can work for you, you open
up more possibilities for how you can channel it.

3. Aim for the sweet spot

While an overload of anxiety can be detrimental, it is also problematic to have none
(sociopaths, for example, tend not to have any). A moderate amount of anxiety
promotes optimal functioning, even if the unexpected energy might throw you off. If
you understand what anxiety is trying to do, you don’t have to view — and treat — it
as an enemy. Anxiety about meeting a deadline, for example, can fuel the focus and
energy we need to meet it, especially when tired and prone to distraction. Anxiety keeps us on our toes and focused. In our noisy, busy lives, it is often simply a call to pay attention to the thing that needs our attention.

Understanding anxiety’s inherent motivation, and being clear about your feelings, can help us thrive, according to a German study published last year. Deciding you can handle your anxiety, even if it’s unwelcome, is one of the most effective things you can do to limit its escalation. Just as fearing anxiety increases it, embracing anxiety dissipates it to a point where it’s useful.

What this new research and approach offers is something we could all use a bit more of when it comes to anxiety: hope. The hope rises from the realization that we are in control. Instead of being overtaken by our anxiety, we can partner with it. Not only can we control how we think about anxiety, we can actually change how we experience it. Taking charge of your mind-set, your emotional labeling and your behavior is how you partner with anxiety and reclaim control.

*Dr. Alicia Clark is a psychologist and author of “Hack Your Anxiety: How to Make Anxiety Work for You in Life, Love, and All That You Do.”*