



“Moving Beyond Fear and Anxiety” in Health & Wellness Coaching

This is not about eliminating fear altogether or trying to slap a *happy face* sticker over an extremely challenging and fearful situation. It is about helping clients who are caught in the grip of fear, so much that it is interfering in a significant way with their health and wellness (i.e., day-to-day quality of life, decision making regarding their health care/wellness needs, or healthy living choices) to manage their fear more effectively.

Fear and anxiety may be caused by numerous sources. In health and wellness coaching, it is not uncommon to work with clients who are experiencing serious medical concerns or may have just received a new and frightening medical diagnosis or when they don't feel they can trust their bodies and become overwhelmed with fear of falling, becoming dependent or living in pain. People can get stuck in a “what might happen” state of mind. A constant focus on fear-based possibilities can become so overwhelming that it leads to feeling ‘frozen’ and unable to take action. That fear can override any willingness to comply with their *lifestyle prescription*. It can get in the way of reclaiming their new 100% and lead to settling for 50% or less.

Fear and anxiety can show up in other areas of one's life such as work, relationships, and finances/money, food security, etc. In whatever way it shows up, we know that fear and anxiety trigger a physiological stress (sympathetic nervous system *fight, flight, freeze*) response. A prolonged stress experience, where there is not adequate opportunity for the body to rest and repair (allow the parasympathetic nervous system to restore and return to normal physiological equilibrium) can interfere with the body's ability to heal and can actually create opportunities for diabetes, cardiovascular events/disease, chronic fatigue, auto-immune and other serious health issues.

Fear and anxiety may interfere with:

- Getting adequate sleep or the quality of sleep on a consistent basis
- Decision-making and/or planning around health care, work or important family/relationship concerns
- Ability to concentrate or focus at work

It may lead to:

- Loss of appetite or stress eating
- Digestive/alimentary system issues, colitis, IBS
- Headaches
- Anxiety attacks
- Frequent uncontrollable crying
- Suppressed immune system
- Elevated blood pressure

When there is a prolonged stress response:

“The consistent and ongoing increase in heart rate, and the elevated levels of stress hormones and of blood pressure, can take a toll on the body. This long-term ongoing stress can increase the risk for hypertension, heart attack, or stroke.”¹

Furthermore, stress hormones can actually interfere with the brain’s ability to create new neural pathways required to change behaviors. In biological research you can see that neurons that are resting in a solution like cortisol or adrenaline inhibit neural connections, whereas neurons that are resting and is solution like dopamine and acetylcholine will make connections much more rapidly and start to generate new synapses much more rapidly.

Therefore, NOT addressing a client’s fear and anxiety can actually contribute to a decrease in overall quality of life and wellness, an increase in health risks and interfere with the client’s ability to effectively change behavior.

Using Body-Centered Coaching to Address Fear & Anxiety

This process helps the client to explore the triggers for fear and anxiety. It integrates self-compassion as a means for soothing the emotion and provides a structure to offset the fear and facilitate a more empowered state of mind.

A powerful example of how a client’s fear of his diagnosis was interfering with his whole life

This client had received a recent diagnosis of heart disease. He was experiencing some fatigue. He was in compliance with his physician’s treatment plan. However, he was also experiencing a significant amount of anxiety about activities that could trigger a heart event or even lead to death. He and his family lived in a rural area next to a state park. They all like to spend a good deal of time outdoors hiking, cycling and camping. His physician was truly clear on his lifestyle prescription, which did not include curtailing his outdoor activities. He found that he was ruminating on his ‘worst case’ fear continuously and fearful of sharing his anxiety with his family. He was concerned that they would become as anxious as he was. This constant state of anxiety was interfering with his sleep, getting enough nourishment and his work. He was preoccupied and feeling more and more disconnected to his family. By giving the fear *a place to be* with this strategy, he was able to maintain his concern without feeling overwhelmed. He shared his concerns with his wife and his cardiologist. Together they worked out a plan that felt safe for him including a schedule for rest and a self-care regiment. He was able to get back to spending time outdoors with his family, sleep well and focus on his work.

¹ American Psychological Association, "Stress on the Body", November 1, 2018, <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-body#:~:text=The%20consistent%20and%20ongoing%20increase,%2C%20heart%20attack%2C%20or%20stroke.>

An example of becoming overcome with fear related to loss of a client's job and income

This client had moved from her longtime home in New York to a southern state for a new job. She had settled into her new home and was connecting with her new community. After just six weeks she was terminated from the job, which she described as very different than what she had been led to expect. She agreed that it was not a good fit for her. And she was completely overcome with fear about losing her savings and not being able to support herself. She was getting 2 to 3 hours of sleep a night, eating significant amounts of "comfort food" and feeling paralyzed to take action to find a new job. This process gave her a sense of control over the fear without giving up a sense of urgency. This client was an experienced salesperson with an extensive network. Once she was able to reduce the grip of fear, she was able to tap into her network, create a plan for herself and redirect her energies into her job search.

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