



# Anxiety – Bodyguard or Prison Guard

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Imagine yourself on the fourth day of your Hawaiian vacation, lying on a tropical beach in the sun. You are full of oxytocin, dopamine, and a few other chemicals that make you feel relaxed. Now imagine you are on the same beach and suddenly, you recall how your new boss walked in and began yelling at you. Your heart starts to race, your skin becomes clammy, and your breathing speeds up because of an elevation in your stress chemicals. Even though you're on the same beach and in the same sun for both of these scenarios, in the second situation you feel anxious, and maybe even upset.



Would you call relaxed a diagnosis, or a disorder? No!! Relaxed is simply a description of the state of your body's neurochemical condition. So why would you call anxiety a diagnosis, or a disorder? While most of us feel that anxiety is a part of our identity and a mental health issue, that is not the case. Anxiety is a term that describes the powerful neurochemical survival reaction that exists within every living creature.

The unconscious brain processes 20 million bits of information per second, while the conscious brain deals with only 40 bits per second. Your conscious brain has no capacity to stop this reaction, nor would you want to – you couldn't survive.

Anxiety is your bodyguard. It is how we evolved and what keeps us alive. You are able to navigate the planet, avoid physical threats, and can take on new challenges by being and remaining aware of the potential pitfalls. The species of creatures who ignored threatening environmental cues did not survive. It is not only survival of the fittest, but also survival of the most anxious.



The only species of living creatures that has to deal with thoughts are human because we have language and consciousness. Other animals and organisms escape the threat – or not and move on – or not. Problem solved. But threatening and unpleasant thoughts are processed in the same region of the brain as physical threats, but you can't escape your thoughts. I call it the "curse of consciousness." Negative thoughts are met with neurochemical reactions that are often sustained, regardless of how we try to deal with them.

However, when this powerful reaction becomes a part of your identity, anxiety shifts from being your bodyguard to your prison guard. It does feel like part of who we are, but it is only the survival response of your body. When your view of yourself becomes wrapped up in this reaction, you are trapped. Your life is now defined by your fears. This reaction is intended to be so uncomfortable that you are forced to take evasive action. It is also amoral. So many of the impulses feel "morally wrong" and in light of human consciousness, they are. That is why it is so critical to understand the nature of anxiety and separate from it. It is what you have, not who you are. It is universal and there is no shame in experiencing and feeling your basic urges to exist.

Psychology can play an important role in dealing with your anxiety. It is a tool to help you become aware of and change your sensory input in order to decrease your stress response. However, relying solely on psychological methods can and will trap you in old behaviors. If you are trying to talk your way out of anxiety, it is where your attention is and you will only reinforce these neurological circuits. Again, it is also a 20 million to 40 bits/second mismatch.



### **What do you do?**

Consider a high-performance dragster. It can accelerate from 0 to 60 in .8 seconds with an 11,000 horsepower engine. It can't be stopped with just brakes alone and requires a parachute to slow down. Trying to control your anxiety could be likened to stopping this massive machine with bicycle handbrakes. It can't happen, but we keep trying.

So, if anxiety is the feeling generated by these hormones and inflammatory markers, how can you decrease your anxiety, especially since you can't consciously control it? The core answer is that you have to use tools to decrease the levels of stress hormones and inflammation.

What consciousness does give us is the driver's seat and the steering wheel. We can make choices of learning tools that direct us how to use this power.

There are three aspects of lowering the impact of anxiety on your capacity to enjoy your life.

- Separate your identity from anxiety
- Directly lower the stress hormones/ inflammation
- Dampen the survival response by stimulating neuroplastic changes in your brain

## Separate Your Identity from Your Survival Response

It is critical to understand that anxiety is a state that you experience, but it is not who you are. Without it, you couldn't survive more than few minutes from lack of air, your body's chemistry spiraling out balance, your heart rate not matching what a situation requires, etc. Anxiety is the essence of sustaining life and you can't (and shouldn't) want to completely eradicate it.

As previously discussed, it is so powerful that you cannot control your anxiety with rational means alone. Therefore, the initial and necessary step in dealing with anxiety is to separate from it. One suggestion is to remove the word, "anxiety," from your vocabulary. Instead use the term, "elevated stress chemicals," whenever you feel nervous, agitated or afraid.



Another approach is to visualize a large thermometer. When you are anxious or upset, imagine how high the red line in your thermometer is going. This visualization will help you understand the most critical step – your anxiety is simply a universal stress response. It is not your identity. When your identity gets wrapped up with this reaction, you will not only suffer, you'll waste a lot of energy in your effort to control it.

Let your bodyguard do his or her job. You can go about your business of living your life. When you separate your anxiety from your identity, you will have the freedom to evolve your consciousness in an infinite number of ways – and thrive.