



“The Ring of Fire”

Learning to live with anxiety is a lot different than conquering it. Avoiding negative thought patterns will only increase them. This was clearly shown in the “White Bears” study that demonstrated how suppressing your thoughts make them stronger. (1)

If you are reading this piece and don’t think you have anxiety, think again. There are an infinite number of ways to disguise and disconnect from it. You can’t survive without anxiety. Disconnecting from this innate emotion has significant mental and physical health implications.

Compassion-Focused Therapy

Many years ago, I was attending a conference on compassion in Louisville, KY. I was introduced to the concept of Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) popularized by Paul Gilbert. The speaker was Dr. Chris Irons, a London psychologist. He pointed out that there are three core categories of emotions that allow us to function as humans:

- **Threat and self-protection**
- **Doing and achieving**
- **Contentment and feeling safe**

He presented a slide that presented a triangle showing how people go back and forth between these three states. It made a lot of sense. I was excited about the conceptual model and showed it to my daughter who was about 21 at the time. She has always been wise beyond her years. She looked at it for a while and said, “These should be in circles.” After some thought, I saw her point. Here is what it looks like:



We spend most of our time going back and forth between “doing and achieving” (blue) and “self-protection” (red) trying to avoid feeling anxious and vulnerable. I call the red circle the “ring of fire.” Eventually, you’ll wear yourself out and find it impossible to feel content. As a coping mechanism, your life will be spent

developing and maintaining a façade (identity) to present to the world while trying to deal with your progressive feelings of anxiety.

Personally, I was raised in a difficult family situation filled with a lot of anger and dysfunctional behaviors. As I was the oldest of four children, I spent an inordinate amount of my childhood trying to create some calm, but to no avail. Finally, at age 15, I quietly shut the door on that part of my life and “moved on” – except I didn’t. With the perspective of time and awareness, I now know that I disassociated. I completely suppressed the craziness of my childhood and created a life and persona that I wanted and pursued my dreams. Sounds pretty reasonable – right?

My new life

I became athletic, social, smart, and developed leadership skills. I took extra college credits in addition to working 10 to 20 hours a week. I was having a great time experiencing this new life. I also internally developed an identity of being stable as a rock and “cool.” Nothing phased me or stopped me. I never got angry and thought it was a waste of time. I was somewhat legendary with regards to how much stress I could take and for how long. When I entered medical school, I developed another identity of being “compassionate, wise, and a good listener.”

It worked great, until it didn’t. It unraveled in 1990 when I began experiencing panic attacks out of the blue and I didn’t even know what anxiety was. It marked the beginning of a 13-year burnout and descent into hell. By 1997, I had a full-blown Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which is characterized by intense and unrelenting intrusive thoughts. I had the internal version of OCD with no outward behaviors. I had an endless string of intense negative intrusive thoughts that I would counter with positive thoughts. OCD is the ultimate anxiety disorder.

I didn’t become a major spine surgeon by having anxiety. I achieved it by suppressing my anxiety. My modes of suppression included positive thinking, determination, not complaining, and pushing through any obstacle that might be holding me back.

Avoiding the ring of fire

None of us enjoy the feeling of being anxious and vulnerable, so we avoid it. We suppress it, stay away from stressful situations, control ourselves and others around us, and mask it with anger. The “ring of fire” is not the place that we want to live. I also did what most of us do – I worked hard to stay in the blue by creating a life that was enjoyable, busy, interesting, and stimulating. Additionally, I became so enmeshed in this process that my identity became the blue zone. For many years I was successful, or at least it felt like I was. The energy of my youth kept me hovering to the point that I didn’t even know what the word anxiety meant.

“Bring it on”

I was moving so fast that I was fearless – except I didn’t have a clue that my speed was because I was running so scared. I remember sitting in my office late one evening in 1990, thinking about my day. I had a patient who I had just surgically drained for a huge deep wound infection, another patient, who weighed over 300 pounds, had just gotten into an altercation with the hospital security guards, I didn’t get a paycheck that month because of high office overhead, and I had a malpractice lawsuit notice sitting on my desk. My thought was, “This is a bad day, but bring it on.” I thought I could deal with almost anything. Two weeks later, I had my first panic attack driving across a bridge over Lake Washington at 10 o’clock at night.



It takes a lot of energy staying out of the “ring of fire” and I ran out of fuel. By 2002, I didn’t have a shred of hope after trying every possible means to pull myself out of it. I didn’t realize that by spending so much effort trying to both treat and avoid anxiety, that I was actually just fueling it.

The Center

The obstacle that was stopping me from getting to the center is that I had to pass through the “ring of fire.” I learned that it’s critical that to live with anxiety. Anxiety isn’t going to disappear, it’s what helps keep us safe. The paradox is that the more you fight it or try to fix it, the more powerful it will become. Also, as you age, anxiety will increase with repetition. For my generation (baby boomers), the age that I observed it becoming troublesome is in patients’ mid to late 30’s. My own problems began at age 37.

This upcoming generation is in trouble. The incidence of chronic pain has risen over 800% in seven years in adolescents between ages 12 to 18. I witnessed this trend in my office and saw many patients in their 20’s with widespread chronic pain and crippling anxiety.

I now live much of my life in the center and quickly am aware when I am in the red. However, I don’t think that it’s necessary to endure the extreme suffering I experienced to find it. I was in chronic pain for 15 years with the last seven being intolerable. I wasn’t connected to the core of who I am, which is the green circle in the center. How could I have gotten there, when I was moving at 1000 miles an hour?

I ended up in the center by completely being stripped clean. Every link to the identity that I had created for me was broken and there was nothing left. Living in the red for many years was intolerable. I lost the capacity to enter the blue zone. During the worst part of my ordeal, I was was trying to survive the next 10 minutes.

Though it hopefully will feel much less extreme for you, it essential to go through the “ring of fire” to get to the center – and also from the center to the blue. It is a learned skill, but once anxiety becomes assimilated into your life, it becomes somewhat of a non-issue. You don’t have to go down in flames to enter the green zone.

Living in center

You have to pass through the “ring of fire” to take on new projects, challenges, and relationships. It is bi-directional.

It doesn’t require effort to be in the green center and spend time there. I’m not in a constant mental frenzy. I’m aware when I’m not there and use the tools that I learned to return to whatever state that I choose. I have almost an endless amount of emotional energy and am limited just by the hours in the day and getting physically tired. Interestingly, as you become more skilled in passing back and forth through the ring, it becomes much narrower.

Freedom is being able to be fully immersed in the entire circle of life. Welcome to your whole life!