

## To Ease Anxiety, Retake Control

Stress assails us in many different forms and affects each of us in a wide variety of ways. Unfortunately, stress is an unavoidable part of life, experienced by all regardless of title, education, social status, or income level. Yet while no one escapes its presence, have you ever noticed how some people seem immune to stress's *effects*?

Why is it that some people handle pressure so well while others experience enormous anxiety as a result of life's stressors?

To start, it's important to understand the distinction between stress and anxiety. Stress is an external force that is exerted upon us. Anxiety is our internal reaction *to* that stress. It is key to recognize that you do not always have the means to change the existence of a stressor. You *do*, however, always have the means to control your reaction to that stressor.

In my article on ABC thinking, I discuss the ways in which a person's thought process influences his or her reaction to all manner of daily occurrence. To summarize here: the manner in which we *think* about any given issue holds enormous sway over the way we *feel* about the issue, as well as the resulting behaviors we will adopt as we act to confront (or avoid) that issue.

This is especially significant when we are experiencing a stressful situation. To put it succinctly, we will either handle the situation, or it will handle us. *Which* will occur is something we can control.

To my clinical perspective, there are two essential components to the effective handling of anxiety. One is to understand that anxiety in *any* form is, at its essence, a reaction to a belief that a potentially harmful situation is totally out of our control. When stress occurs, the natural response for many people is to focus on the ways in which that stressor is beyond our capacity to influence. Invariably, anxiety is the result.

I see this often in couples' counseling, in which one partner routinely points to the other and says something like, "If she would just act differently, all our problems would be gone. But she refuses to change, so we're stuck in this mess!" This principle can be adopted to fit practically any stressor in life. "If my financial situation would only improve..." "If my boss weren't such a jerk..." "If my kids would only listen better..." The list goes on and on, but the theme remains constant: the focus is on something external that is perceived to be beyond our control. And once we lose our ability to control a stressful situation, we are susceptible to feeling anxious about that situation.

Once we understand this dynamic, we can implement step two, which is to focus on - and then *act* upon - those aspects of the stressor that we do have control over... and there is *always*

something about a stressful situation that we can control. It may be possible for us, with careful deliberation, to find a way that we can exert change on the external source of our stress. And if it is not, it is *absolutely* possible that we can control our response to that stress. There are many techniques for doing so; a quick Yahoo search for "anxiety reducing techniques" will yield a long list.

While some techniques may be more effective with certain stressors than others, the reduction in anxiety stems less from the technique itself than from the feeling that we are regaining mastery over some aspect of the stressor - even if that which we are controlling is our own self.

When you're feeling anxious, try it and see. There is enormous therapeutic benefit to taking action and regaining control. The stressor may not disappear, but your anxiety likely will!

- Lance Miller, Psy.D.