

# Anticipating Anticipatory Anxiety

by

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You're going to the dentist – and you feel anxious. You're about to go take a test, and you feel anxious. You've been asked to have a meeting with your supervisor, and you feel anxious. You might just be anxious anticipating another day! Anticipatory anxiety is a common discomfort for millions of people. Some people can even get anxious anticipating the arrival of the anticipatory anxiety! Anticipatory anxiety is the physical symptoms of increased heart rate, increased pulse, shallow rapid breathing and increased tension which can cause upset stomachs and headaches and perhaps increased sweatiness, all of which arise when **thinking about** an upcoming event.

General anxiety is also often caused by thinking; however, the thinking may be about anything: a past relationship, ongoing financial issues, problems on the job.... Anticipatory anxiety is specifically about some particular event about to occur. What we think **might happen** can cause great anxiety. If we magnify the potential problems of the event to such an extent that in our mind it becomes a catastrophe, our anxiety could reach such levels that we become dizzy and may even pass out. If we imagine the upcoming event as being uncomfortable or embarrassing, then our anxiety will be less severe, though still quite noticeable. The difference between anticipatory anxiety that is incapacitating and merely moderately uncomfortable is entirely rooted in what we are thinking about the upcoming event.

Truly, any thinking about an upcoming event is conjecture. We really don't know what will occur. We guess, we fabricate, we imagine and yet we don't know, which in itself can be a cause of anxiety – especially if we think not knowing somehow equates to instability. Nevertheless, we do fabricate outcomes of upcoming events and those outcomes are generally negative which causes the anxiety. If we were to imagine positive outcomes we would be much less anxious, maybe even excited. Also note that anxiety and excitement can share the same kinds of symptoms: elevated heart rate and pulse, shortened and shallow breathing, tension....Before a person diagnoses themselves with anxiety, they might want to explore the possibility that they are actually excited.

The key to lowering and perhaps even reducing anticipatory anxiety is an awareness of thinking. If we can capture those fleeing internal sentences and/or internal images which we have created about an unknown future, we can analyze them. More often than not, these internal fabrications are not realistic. We may see ourselves at the dentist and in excruciating pain. We may imagine ourselves taking a test and totally unable to answer any question. We foresee the meeting with our supervisor as ending up in being reprimanded or even fired. All of these scenarios take place in our mind often without a shred of evidence. Yet, the mind reacts as if it's a fact and the body reacts accordingly.

So, how do we combat anticipatory anxiety? First, be aware of the physical symptoms and then take a moment to relax. You can do this by taking a few deep inhalations and exhalations. Then examine the content of your thinking, your internal dialogue and your mental pictures, which occurred at the onset of the anxiety. Counter the unrealistic and irrational thoughts with more realistic and evidence based thoughts. For example, if you see yourself in excruciating pain at the dentist, counter that with the knowledge that you will actually be feeling no pain due to the Novocain or other pain inhibitor you will receive. Test anxiety can be countered with envisioning yourself answering the questions rather than not – it's purely a matter of imagining something negative vs. imagining something positive. And, if you have studied for the test and know the material, then it's far more realistic to have a positive outcome than a negative one. If you find that the holiday's when family gatherings are common cause anxiety, examine what mental pictures you are holding that might generate that anxiety. Sure, maybe you are recalling past holiday's that were terrible, but that does not necessarily mean that the upcoming holidays must be that way. You can envision and imagine alternatives which are more pleasant and that will reduce the anticipatory anxiety.

Why the mind tends towards the negative rather than the positive is a mystery. Yet, there is no doubt that anticipatory anxiety is purely a mind game. You can win the game if you are aware of your thinking and able to challenge the irrational, unrealistic thinking and replace it with more realistic thinking. Realistic thinking is not necessarily positive thinking, it is more objective thinking sometimes called scientific thinking because it is based on evidence, not conjecture. So, next time you start to feel anxious, become a scientific thinker and examine the evidence. You may find yourself pleasantly surprised to find the source of your anxiety vanish like a clouds dispersing after a storm.