

Personality Styles That Perpetuate Anxiety

People who are prone to anxiety disorders tend to share certain personality traits. Some of these traits are positive—such as creativity, intuitive ability, emotional sensitivity, empathy, and amiability. Such traits as these endear anxiety-prone people to their friends and relatives. Other common traits tend to aggravate anxiety and interfere with the self-confidence of people with anxiety disorders. This chapter focuses on four of these traits, all of which need to be addressed at some point in the process of recovery.

- Perfectionism
- Excessive need for approval
- Tendency to ignore physical and psychological signs of stress
- Excessive need for control

You may not possess all four of these traits. But if panic, phobias, or generalized anxiety have been part of your life for any length of time, you probably identify with at least two or three of them.

Origins of Anxiety-Provoking Traits

What's the origin of these traits that perpetuate anxiety? Such traits as creativity and emotional sensitivity may well be part of the hereditary component of anxiety disorders. On the other hand, perfectionism and excessive need for approval or control most likely have their origin in early childhood experiences. There are various ways in which you can acquire such traits. If your parents have these traits, you may learn them directly by following their example. If your mother and father are high achievers and demand perfection of themselves, you may have internalized their values and behave in a similar way. Alternatively, such traits may develop out of your *response* to the ways in which you were treated by one or both of your parents. If, for example, you were frequently criticized or reprimanded, you may have decided early on that nothing you could do was good enough. As a result, you strive to do everything perfectly. Or you might constantly seek reassurance and approval. In the process, you may have also learned to deny your feelings and ignore signs of stress.

If you would like to obtain more insight about how you developed any of the traits considered in this chapter, you can start by referring to the *Family Background Questionnaire* in

chapter 2. Reflecting on your answers to the questions will help you better understand your past.

Below you'll find guidelines to help you identify, work with, and change each of the four traits that perpetuate anxiety: perfectionism, excessive need for approval, the tendency to ignore physical and psychological signs of stress, and the excessive need for control.*

Perfectionism

Perfectionism has two aspects. First, you have a tendency to have expectations about yourself, others, and life that are unrealistically high. When anything falls short, you become disappointed and/or critical. Second, you tend to be overconcerned with small flaws and mistakes in yourself or your accomplishments. In focusing on what's wrong, you tend to discount and ignore what's right.

Perfectionism is a common cause of low self-esteem. It is critical of every effort and convinces you that nothing is ever good enough. It can also cause you to drive yourself to the point of chronic stress, exhaustion, and burnout. Every time perfectionism counsels you that you "should," "have to," or "must," you tend to push yourself forward out of anxiety, rather than from natural desire and inclination. The more perfectionistic you are, the more often you're likely to feel anxious.

Overcoming perfectionism requires a fundamental shift in your attitude toward yourself and how you approach life in general. The following seven guidelines are intended as a starting point for making such a shift.

Let Go of the Idea That Your Worth Is Determined by Your Achievements and Accomplishments

Outer accomplishment may be how society measures a person's "worth" or social status. But are you going to allow society to have the last word on your value as a person? Work on reinforcing the idea that your worth is a given. People ascribe inherent worth to pets and plants just by virtue of their existence. You as a human being have the same inherent worth just because you're here. Be willing to recognize and affirm that you're lovable and acceptable as you are, apart from your outer accomplishments. When self-reflective people are near death, there are usually only two things that seem to have been important to them about their lives: learning how to love others and growing in wisdom. If you need to measure yourself against any standard, try these rather than society's definitions of value.

* Outlines of the sections on perfectionism and the excessive need for approval in this chapter were adapted with permission from chapters 6 and 8 of *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic: Taking Charge and Conquering Fear* by Reneau Z. Peurifoy, MA, MFCC. See this useful book for more detailed discussions of these issues.

Recognize and Overcome Perfectionistic Thinking Styles

Perfectionism is expressed in the way you talk to yourself. "Should/must thinking," "all-or-nothing thinking," and "overgeneralization" characterize a perfectionist attitude. Below are examples of self-statements associated with each thinking style and corresponding, more realistic counterstatements.

Thinking Style	Counterstatements
<i>Should/Must Thinking</i>	
"I should be able to do this right."	"I'll do the best I can."
"I must not make mistakes."	"It's okay to make mistakes."
<i>All-or-Nothing Thinking</i>	
"This is all wrong."	"This is not <i>all</i> wrong. There are some parts of it that are okay and some that need attention."
"I just can't do it at all."	"If I break this down into small enough steps, I can do it."
<i>Overgeneralization</i>	
"I'll <i>always</i> foul things up."	"It's simply untrue that I <i>always</i> foul things up. In this particular case, I'll go back and make the necessary corrections."
"I'll <i>never</i> be able to do this."	"If I take small steps and keep making an effort, over time I'll accomplish what I set out to do."

Spend one week noticing all the instances when you get involved in should/must thinking, all-or-nothing thinking, or overgeneralization. Keep a notebook with you so that you can write down thoughts as they occur to you. Examine what you're telling yourself at times when you feel particularly anxious or stressed. Pay special attention to your use of the words "should," "must," "have to," "always," "never," "all," or "none." After you've spent a week writing down your perfectionist self-statements, compose counterstatements for each one. In subsequent weeks, read over your list of counterstatements frequently to encourage yourself to develop a less perfectionist approach to life. See chapter 8 for further information on how to develop and work with counterstatements.

Stop Magnifying the Importance of Small Errors

One of the most problematic aspects of perfectionism is its mandate to focus on small flaws or errors. Perfectionists are prone to come down very hard on themselves for a single, minute mistake that has few or no immediate consequences, let alone any long-term effects. When you really think about it, how important is a mistake you make today going to be one month from now? Or one year from now? In 99.9 percent of cases, the mistake will be

forgotten within a short period of time. There is no real learning without mistakes or setbacks. No great success was ever attained without many failures and mistakes along the way.

Focus on Positives

In dwelling on small errors or mistakes, perfectionists tend to discount their positive accomplishments. They selectively ignore anything positive they've done. A way to counter this tendency is to take inventory near the end of each day of positive things you've accomplished. Think about what ways, small or large, you've been helpful or pleasant to people during the day. Think of any small steps you've taken toward achieving your goals. What other things got done? What insights did you have?

Pay attention to whether you disqualify something positive with a "but"—for example, "I had a good practice session, but I became anxious near the end." Learn to leave off the "but" in the assessments of your attitudes and behavior.

Work on Goals That Are Realistic

Are your goals realistically attainable, or have you set them too high? Would you expect of anyone else the goals you set for yourself? Sometimes it's difficult to recognize the overly lofty nature of certain goals. It can be helpful to do a "reality check" with a friend or counselor to determine whether any given goal is realistically attainable or even reasonable to strive for. Are you expecting too much of yourself and the world? You may need to adjust some of your goals a bit in line with the limiting factors of time, energy, and resources. If your determination of self-worth truly comes from within rather than from what you achieve, you will be able to do this. Acceptance of personal limitations is the ultimate act of self-love.

Cultivate More Pleasure and Recreation in Your Life

Perfectionism has a tendency to make people rigid and self-denying. Your own human needs get sacrificed in favor of the pursuit of external goals. Ultimately, this tendency can lead to a stifling of vitality and creativity. Pleasure—finding the enjoyment in life—reverses this trend.

The Sioux have a wise saying: "The first thing people say after their death is—'Why was I so serious?'" Are you taking yourself too seriously and not allowing yourself time for fun, recreation, play, and rest? How can you make more time for leisure and pleasure? You can change by taking time every day to do at least one thing you enjoy.

Develop a Process Orientation

If you engage in sports, do you play to win or just to enjoy the activity of playing? In your life in general, are you "playing to win"—channeling your energies into excelling at all costs—or are you enjoying the process of living day by day as you go along?

Most people find, especially as they get older, that to get the most enjoyment out of life, it works best to place value on the *process* of doing things—not just on the product or accomplishment. Popular expressions of this idea include "The journey is more important than the destination" and "Stop and smell the roses."

Excessive Need for Approval

All human beings need approval. Yet for many people struggling with anxiety and phobias, the need for approval can be excessive. Being overly concerned with approval often arises from an inner sense of being flawed or unworthy. This leads to the mistaken belief that you are unacceptable just the way you are ("If people really saw who I am, they wouldn't accept me"). Individuals with an excessive need for approval are always looking for validation from other people. In trying to be generally pleasing, they may conform so well to others' expectations that they often ignore their own needs and feelings. Frequently, they have a difficult time setting boundaries or saying no.

The long-term consequence of always accommodating and pleasing others at the expense of yourself is that you end up with a lot of withheld frustration and resentment over not having taken care of your own basic needs. Withheld frustration and resentment form the unconscious foundation for a lot of chronic anxiety and tension.

There are many ways to get over being excessively needy for approval. The following guidelines can help you start:

Develop a Realistic View of Other People's Approval

When people don't express approval toward you—or even act rude or critical—how do you receive it? Do you tend to take it personally, to see it as further evidence of your own ineptness or lack of worth? Below are some common attitudes characteristic of people who place excessive emphasis on always being liked. These might be called "people-pleasing" attitudes. Following each is an alternative view which represents, in most cases, a more realistic outlook.

Common Attitude: "If someone isn't friendly to me, it's because I did something wrong."

Alternative View: "People may be unable to express warmth or acceptance toward me for reasons having nothing to do with me. For example, their own problems, frustrations, or fatigue may get in the way of their being friendly and accepting."

Common Attitude: "Others' criticism only serves to underscore the fact that I really am unworthy."

Alternative View: "People who find fault with me may be projecting their own faults, which they can't admit to having, onto me. It's a human tendency to project unconscious flaws onto others."

Common Attitude: "I think I'm a nice person. Shouldn't everyone like me?"

Alternative View: "There will always be some people who just won't like me—no matter what I do. The process by which people are attracted to or repelled by others is often irrational."

Common Attitude: "Others' approval and acceptance of me is very important."

Alternative View: "It's not necessary to receive the approval of everyone I meet in order to live a happy and meaningful life—especially if I believe in and respect myself."

The next time you feel put off or rejected, take a moment to calm down and think about whether the person acting negatively is reacting to something you did or might simply be upset about something that has little or nothing to do with you. Ask yourself whether you might be taking the other person's inconsiderate remarks or behavior too personally.

Deal with Criticism in an Objective Fashion

An excessive need for approval is often accompanied by an inability to handle criticism. You can learn to change your attitude toward criticism, ignoring those critical remarks that are unfounded and accepting constructive criticism as a positive learning experience.

The following three guidelines may be helpful:

Evaluate the source of the criticism. If you find yourself criticized, it's important to ask *who* is making the criticism. Is this person qualified to criticize you? Does he or she know enough about you, your skills, or the subject involved to make a reasonable assessment? Does this person have a bias that would make it impossible for him or her to be objective? (The more emotionally charged the relationship, the more likely this is to be true.) Is this person speaking emotionally or rationally? You can often soothe the sting of criticism by exploring the answers to these questions.

Ask for details. This is especially important if you receive a blanket criticism, such as "That was a lousy job" or "I don't think you know what you're doing." Don't accept a global judgment. Ask the person offering the criticism to indicate specific behaviors or issues that seem to fall short. Ask that person's point of view about what actions you can take to improve your performance or correct the situation.

Decide whether the criticism has some validity. You've evaluated the source of criticism and also, in the case of a global criticism, asked for details. The next question to ask is whether the criticism has some merit. Usually when a criticism has some truth to it, it has a little more sting—you may feel somewhat pained or disturbed by it. If a criticism has no validity, you're likely to have little emotional reaction to it at all: you may dismiss it as irrelevant, absurd, or uninformed.

The best way to handle criticism that rings true is to view it as important feedback that can help you learn something about yourself. Also be sure to remind yourself that the criticism is—or should be—directed toward only one aspect of your behavior, not to you as a total person. Here are some good affirmations to help cultivate a positive response:

- This criticism is a good opportunity to learn something.
- This criticism concerns only a few of my actions, not my entire being.
- Although this criticism feels uncomfortable, it doesn't mean that I'm totally rejected or disapproved of.

Recognize and Let Go of Codependency

Check off any of the following statements that generally reflect your beliefs:

- If someone important to me expects me to do something, I should do it.
- I should not be irritable or unpleasant.
- I shouldn't do anything to make others angry at me.
- I should keep people I love happy.
- It's usually my fault if someone I care about is upset with me.
- My self-esteem comes from helping others solve their problems.
- I tend to overextend myself in taking care of others.
- If necessary, I'll put my own values or needs aside in order to preserve my relationship with my significant other.
- Giving is the most important way I have to feel good about myself.
- Fear of someone else's anger has a lot of influence on what I say or do.

If you checked three or more statements, codependency is likely to be one of the issues you need to deal with.

Codependency can be defined as the tendency to put others' needs before your own. You accommodate others to such a degree that you tend to discount or ignore your own feelings, desires, and basic needs. Your self-esteem depends largely on how well you please, take care of, and/or solve problems for someone else (or many others).

The consequence of maintaining a codependent approach to life is a lot of resentment, frustration, and unmet personal needs. When these feelings and needs remain unconscious, they often resurface as anxiety—especially *chronic, generalized anxiety*. The long-term effects of codependency are enduring stress, fatigue, burnout, and eventually serious physical illness.

Recovering from codependency in essence involves learning to love and take care of yourself. It means giving at least equal time to your own needs alongside the needs of others. It means setting limits on how much you will do or tolerate, and learning to say no when appropriate. The following list of affirmations will encourage you to develop a more self-nurturing attitude that can move you beyond codependency (see chapter 9 for suggestions on how to work with affirmations):

- I'm learning to take better care of myself.
- I recognize that my own needs are important.
- It's good for me to take time for myself.
- I'm finding a balance between my own needs and my concern for others.
- If I take good care of myself, I'll have more to offer others.

- It's okay to ask for what I want from others.
- I'm learning to accept myself just the way I am.
- It's okay to say no to others' demands when I need to.
- I don't have to be perfect to be accepted and loved.
- I can change myself, but I accept that I can't make another person change.
- I'm letting go of taking responsibility for other people's problems.
- I respect others enough to know that they can take responsibility for themselves.
- I'm letting go of guilt when I can't fulfill others' expectations.
- Compassion toward others is loving; feeling guilty about their feelings or reactions accomplishes nothing.
- I am learning to love myself more every day.

In order to work with your own codependency issues, you may want to read some of the classic books on the subject, such as *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie, *Facing Codependence* by Pia Melody, and *Women Who Love Too Much* by Robin Norwood. Also consider attending a local meeting of Codependents Anonymous, which offers a 12-step approach to overcoming codependent attitudes.

The above three guidelines are only a start in the direction of learning to be less concerned with others' approval. The chapters on assertiveness and self-esteem in this book will also help you learn to rely on yourself rather than others for a sense of your inherent worth and acceptability.

Tendency to Ignore Physical and Psychological Signs of Stress

People with anxiety disorders are often out of touch with their bodies. If you are anxious or preoccupied with worrying, you may, as the expression goes, be "living in your head"—not feeling strongly connected with the rest of your body, below the neck. Try checking in with yourself as you are reading right now. Do you feel as if most of your energy—your "center of gravity"—is situated from your neck up? Or do you feel solidly connected with the rest of your body, in touch with your chest, stomach, arms, and legs?

To the extent that you are out of touch with your body, you may ignore—often unconsciously—an entire range of physical symptoms that arise when you're under stress. Examples of physical symptoms that may signify stress are fatigue, headaches, nervous stomach, tight muscles, cold hands, and diarrhea, to mention a few. Unfortunately, when you're unaware that you're under stress, you're likely to keep pushing yourself without taking time out or slowing down. You may keep going until you reach a state of exhaustion or illness.

Many individuals with anxiety disorders have a long history of pushing themselves very hard and continually overextending themselves—trying to fit too much into too little time. Driven by perfectionist standards, they keep striving to do more and be more for everyone.

Often they may go for months at a time—even years—without noticing, or simply ignoring, that they are under high levels of stress.

One possible outcome of chronic, cumulative stress is that the neuroendocrine regulatory systems in the brain begin to malfunction, and you develop panic attacks, generalized anxiety, depression, mood swings, or some combination of these three (see chapter 2). You might also develop ulcers, hypertension, headaches, or other psychosomatic illnesses under conditions of chronic stress. If it is your neurotransmitter systems that happen to be vulnerable, the effects of chronic stress are likely to show up in the form of an anxiety or mood disorder. Although these disorders cause significant distress in themselves, *they are, in fact, warning signs*. The body has built-in mechanisms for preventing its self-destruction. Developing panic disorder or depression may be viewed as a way in which your body forces you to slow down and alter your lifestyle before you push yourself into catastrophic illness or death.

One of the themes of this workbook is that your recovery from anxiety disorders depends in great measure on your ability to manage and cope with stress. And this, in turn, requires that you learn to *recognize* your own symptoms of stress and then *do* something about them—to relieve your symptoms through deep relaxation, exercise, downtime, supportive social interaction, recreation, and so on—so that stress does not become cumulative.

Stress can manifest itself not only in the form of physical symptoms but as emotional and psychological symptoms as well. The psychological symptoms are a *direct* indication that your nervous system (and possibly endocrine system) is being overtaxed. As previously mentioned, being out of touch with your body may cause you to miss physical symptoms of stress. It is more difficult to be unconscious about psychological symptoms, however, because they are so much a part of your immediate experience. The problem is that if you are too busy, rushed, driven, or preoccupied, you may choose to ignore both types of symptoms.

The *Stress Symptom Checklist* that follows is designed to help you increase your awareness of both physical and psychological symptoms of stress. You may want to make a number of copies of the checklist and complete it periodically to get a reading of your own stress level.

The *Life Events Survey* in chapter 2 measured your level of cumulative stress over a period of two years. The *Stress Symptom Checklist* will enable you to determine the stress load on your body and psyche over the past month. Take some time to complete the checklist now.

Handling stress involves two steps. The first is to *recognize and identify* your own symptoms of stress. The second is to *decide not to ignore* them. If you would truly like to find relief from anxiety disorders, you need to *do* something to reduce and better manage your stress. Some of the stress management strategies described in this workbook include deep relaxation, regular exercise, downtime and time management, cultivating constructive self-talk and attitudes, expressing feelings, learning assertiveness and self-nurturing skills, and good nutrition.

Many other strategies for coping with stress are available. You will find them described in books on stress management such as *Guide to Stress Reduction* by L. John Mason and *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Eshelman, and Matthew McKay. A list of twenty-four positive coping skills for dealing with stress is presented following the *Stress Symptom Checklist*.

Stress Symptom Checklist

Instructions: Check each item that describes a symptom you have experienced to any significant degree during the last month; then total the number of items checked.

Physical Symptoms

- Headaches (migraine or tension)
- Backaches
- Tight muscles
- Neck and shoulder pain
- Jaw tension
- Muscle cramps, spasms
- Nervous stomach
- Other pain
- Nausea
- Insomnia (sleeping poorly)
- Fatigue, lack of energy
- Cold hands and/or feet
- Tightness or pressure in the head
- High blood pressure
- Diarrhea
- Skin condition (e.g., rash)
- Allergies
- Teeth grinding
- Digestive upsets (cramps, bloating)
- Stomach pain or ulcer
- Constipation
- Hypoglycemia
- Appetite change
- Colds
- Profuse perspiration
- Heart beats rapidly or pounds, even at rest
- When nervous, use of alcohol, cigarettes, or so-called recreational drugs

Psychological Symptoms

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Confusion or "spaciness"
- Irrational fears
- Compulsive behavior
- Forgetfulness
- Feeling "overloaded" or "overwhelmed"
- Hyperactivity—feeling you can't slow down
- Mood swings
- Loneliness
- Problems with relationships
- Dissatisfied/unhappy with work
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent irritability
- Restlessness
- Frequent boredom
- Frequent worrying or obsessing
- Frequent guilt
- Temper flare-ups
- Crying spells
- Nightmares
- Apathy
- Sexual problems
- Weight change
- Overeating

Evaluate your stress level as follows:

Number of Items Checked	Stress Level
0-7	<i>Low</i>
8-14	<i>Moderate</i>
15-21	<i>High</i>
22+	<i>Very High</i>

24 Positive Coping Strategies for Stress

Physical and Lifestyle Strategies

(see chapters 4 and 5)

1. Abdominal breathing and relaxation
2. Low-stress diet
3. Regular exercise
4. Downtime
(including "mental health days")
5. Mini-breaks (5–10-minute periods to relax during the day)
6. Time management
(appropriate pacing)
7. Sleep hygiene (see chapter 16)
8. Choosing a nontoxic environment
9. Material security

Emotional Strategies

(see chapters 12, 13, and 14)

10. Social support and relatedness
11. Self-nurturing
12. Good communication
13. Assertiveness
14. Recreational activities ("playtime")
15. Emotional release
16. Sense of humor—ability to see things in perspective

Cognitive Strategies

(see chapters 8 and 9)

17. Constructive thinking—ability to counter negative thinking
18. Distraction—ability to distract yourself from negative preoccupations (see appendix 4)
19. Task-oriented (vs. reactive) approach to problems
20. Acceptance (ability to accept/cope with setbacks)
21. Tolerance for ambiguity—ability to see shades of gray

Philosophical/Spiritual Strategies

(see chapter 19)

22. Consistent goals or purposes to work toward
23. Positive philosophy of life
24. Religious/spiritual life and commitment

Excessive Need for Control

The excessive need for control makes you want to have everything in life be predictable. It's a kind of vigilance that requires all the bases to be covered—the opposite of letting go and trusting in the process of life.

Often an excessive need for control has its origins in a traumatic personal history. After living through experiences in which you felt frightened, vulnerable, or violated and powerless, it's easy to grow up feeling defensive and vigilant. You may go through life this way, ready to put up your defenses in response to any situation that seems to challenge your sense of security (whether it actually does or not). Survivors of severe trauma often develop highly controlled and/or controlling personalities; or else they may have been so distressed that they decided to give up, feeling depressed and discouraged about maintaining any control of their lives (the latter outcome has been referred to as "learned helplessness").

Overcoming the excessive need for control takes time and persistence. Four strategies that have been helpful to many people are described in the sections below.

Acceptance

Acceptance entails learning to live a little more comfortably with the unpredictability of life—with the unexpected changes that occur daily on a small scale and, less often, on a large scale. It's inevitable that you'll encounter changes in your environment, in the way others choose to behave, and in your own physical health that you are simply unable to predict or control. You may have resources to cope with these changes, but you are not always going to be prepared for them. There will be times when your personal life situation may seem relatively chaotic, disordered, or out of control. Developing acceptance means acquiring a willingness to take life as it comes. Rather than fearing and struggling with those occasions when circumstances don't obey your expectations, you can learn to go with the change. Popular expressions for this are "go with the flow" and "take things in stride." In a word, acceptance implies *nonresistance*.

There are numerous ways in which to cultivate greater acceptance. Certainly letting go of perfectionism, as described earlier in this chapter, will provide a good start. A willingness to let go of unrealistic expectations can save you a lot of disappointment. Relaxation is also an important key. The more relaxed you remain, the less likely you are to be fearful and defensive when circumstances suddenly change and don't go your way. When you're relaxed, you slow down, and it's easier to go with rather than balk against the unexpected.

Finally, a sense of humor toward life can be very helpful. Humor enables you to step back from those times when everything appears to be in disarray and to get some perspective. If you can remain relaxed and laugh a little at situations that appear out of control, your response begins to change from "Oh my God!" to "Oh well—that's the way it goes." Acceptance ensures that you will be able to cope better and sooner. You are likely to say, "Now what do I need to do?" a lot sooner after "Oh well ..." than after "Oh my God!"

Affirmations that can help you develop acceptance include

- "I'm learning to take life as it comes."

- “It’s okay to let go and trust that things will work out.”
- “I can relax and tolerate a little disorder and ambiguity.”
- “I’m learning not to take myself or life so seriously.”

Cultivating Patience

People who have an overcontrolled approach to life’s problems want to have them all figured out by tomorrow. Yet it’s often true that difficult situations cannot be worked out immediately. All the pieces that contribute to a solution come together gradually over a period of time. Developing patience means allowing yourself to tolerate temporary muddles and ambiguity while you wait for all the necessary steps of the solution to unfold. As you develop patience, you learn to let go and wait for a resolution or an answer to emerge.

Trusting That Most Problems Eventually Work Out

Developing trust goes along with cultivating patience. You may not see the solution to a particular difficulty easily or quickly. But if you always need to see in advance how something is going to work out, you can end up making yourself very anxious. There is an old saying, “Life is a river—you can’t always see what’s coming around the bend.” Developing trust means believing that just about everything *eventually does work out*. Either you find a solution, or, if the problem can’t be changed externally, you learn to alter your attitude toward it so that coping becomes easier. When you look back over the problems you’ve encountered in your life, you’ll find that in most, if not all cases, the problem eventually worked itself out.

Developing a Spiritual Approach to Life

Developing a spiritual approach to life can mean many things (for further discussion of this topic, see chapter 20). In essence, it means believing in a Higher Power, Force, or Intelligence that transcends the world as you ordinarily perceive and know it. Very often it also implies having a personal relationship—in your inner experience—with that Power, Force, or Intelligence.

Developing your spirituality offers at least two ways in which to reduce an excessive need for control. First, it gives you the option to “turn over” or let go of any problem that seems insoluble, overwhelming, or just plain worrisome to the care of your Higher Power. This possibility is expressed in the third step of all 12-step programs: “[We] made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a Higher Power as we understood that Power.” This does *not* mean that you relinquish responsibility for handling the problems that come up in life. It does mean that there is a higher resource (higher in the sense of being beyond your own capabilities) that can be of support and assistance when you’ve reached the point where a problem appears insoluble, despite your best efforts. Faith in such a resource enables you to let go of the idea that you have to fully control everything. Some of my clients find that they can approach a phobic situation more easily by “turning over” their worry and anxiety to a Higher Power.

The second way in which developing your spirituality can reduce your need for control is in nurturing your belief that *there is a larger purpose in life beyond the overt appearance of what happens from day to day*. If you believe that there is no spiritual foundation to reality, then the unpredictable and unforeseen events of life can seem both random and capricious. You can feel distressed because there is no explanation for why this bad event happened or that apparent unfair situation occurred. Most forms of spirituality offer the alternative view that the universe is not random. Events that may appear meaningless and brutal from a human perspective have some meaning or purpose in a broader scheme of things.

A popular phrase that expresses this idea is "Everything happens for some purpose." Often hindsight provides us with clearer vision. When you reflect deeply on some of the unforeseen mishaps in your life, you may see in retrospect how they served you—either in an obvious way or simply in promoting your growth and development as a human being.

The four traits described in this chapter—perfectionism, excessive need for approval, tendency to ignore physical and psychological signs of stress, and excessive need for control—are shared by many people who deal with anxiety on a day-to-day basis. I hope by this point you've become more aware of which of these traits might be a problem for you. Actually changing traits such as perfectionism or the excessive need for control will take time and commitment on your part. Part of the process involves changing particular mistaken beliefs you may hold, as was described in chapter 9. Ultimately, though, you may need to reevaluate and shift certain basic values and priorities in your life.

Summary of Things to Do

1. What are you willing to do today—and each day—to relax your quest for perfection? Can you let go of some of the demands you put on yourself in order to make time for your anxiety recovery program—or simply for rest and relaxation? Each day, find something you would ordinarily do that doesn't *have to* get done (such as work or household chores) and defer it to another day.
2. If excessive need for approval is an important issue, be sure to spend extra time with the chapters on assertiveness and self-esteem in this book. It's important to work on developing 1) greater self-respect, 2) an ability to nurture yourself, 3) knowledge of your basic rights, and 4) a willingness to ask for what you want. If you suspect that codependency is an issue for you, consult the references on that subject below, or attend a Codependents Anonymous meeting in your area.
3. Complete the *Stress Symptom Checklist* to get an idea of your level of stress over the past month. If stress is a real problem, focus on the chapters on relaxation, exercise, and nutrition in this book to get started with a program of stress management. Working on mistaken beliefs (chapter 9) and perfectionism is also important. Consult the references on the subject of stress reduction below.

4. Learning to let go of the excessive need for control can be a challenge for people who are prone to anxiety. Cultivating a sense of humor and an ability to laugh at life's limitations is one way to get started. You tend to loosen up as you learn how to laugh and have more fun with your life. Another way to proceed, if you feel so inclined, is to develop your spirituality and trust in a Higher Power (see chapter 20).

Further Reading

- Beattie, Melody. *Codependent No More*. San Francisco: Harper/Hazelden, 1987.
- Davis, Martha, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay. *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. Sixth edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2008.
- Mason, John. *Guide to Stress Reduction*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1985.
- Mellody, Pia. *Facing Codependence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Norwood, Robin. *Women Who Love Too Much*. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.
- Peurifoy, Reneau. *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic: Taking Charge and Conquering Fear*. Citrus Heights, CA: Lifeskills, 1988.