

Living in a chaotic world: how to keep anxiety at bay

July 22 2016, by David Chesire



Family time can help ease anxiety. Credit: MoreGoodFoundation/flickr, CC BY-NC

Ella Fitzgerald sang that "[into each life some rain must fall](#)," but it has felt like torrents of grief have fallen upon us in recent months. We all experience hardships and stress, and we are all very well-acquainted with that pit that forms in our stomach when nervousness takes hold. Many of us are feeling that pit as we process world and national news.

Demands from our personal and professional lives compete for our

attention, and all too often the pressures of the day require more than we have to give.

Recent violence and tragedies such as police shootings in [Dallas and Baton Rouge](#), the [Nice truck killings](#) and the attempted [coup in Turkey](#) seem to keep mounting. How do we deal with the resulting fear and [anxiety](#)? As a psychologist who has spent a great deal of my professional career studying the effects of trauma and grief, I have some knowledge of how to help people deal with the resulting anxiety.

Anxiety can turn debilitating

When the general public discusses the term "anxiety," the usual meaning is one of unpleasantness related to having some arduous task that will require our resources at the expense of doing something that would bring us more enjoyment, such as sleeping late on the weekend, taking in a movie, or spending time with loved ones.

When the mental health community talks about [anxiety](#), they are generally referring to a more disabling condition where a person's individual ability to cope with stress becomes overwhelmed, leaving a person paralyzed and incapable of functioning effectively with life's demands.

Where does this sense of anxiety come from? Is it more prevalent now, in the wake of so many tragedies before our eyes? Though the questions seem so simple, the answers may be extraordinarily difficult to uncover.

Growing tension

Major events, such as a terrorist attack, domestic shootings or natural disaster can exceed our [psychological resources](#) and lead to mental

health fallout in the form of [post-traumatic stress](#). It is also common for anxiety to be more insidious, with daily stressors slowly mounting over time, gradually becoming so cumbersome and convoluted, that no single episode can account for where the anxiety is originating. Such is also the case with repeated violent events shown in the media; with tragedy after tragedy, [cumulative stress](#) builds up incrementally over time, eroding our sense of safety.

In each case, the individual experience of anxiety can range from mildly inconvenient to completely debilitating. The experience of anxiety is an [individual phenomenon](#), based on a multitude of factors, including coping skills, social resources and personality variables.

For people who are working to manage anxiety, [additional life stress](#) can be particularly problematic. Imagine a family that is struggling to make ends meet, but each month somehow they are capable of just barely paying all of the bills. Then one day the family car stops working, and the family must weigh the options of putting money into fixing the car at the expense of paying some other bill, or risk not being able to drive to work and risk losing their source of income.

For a family with means, paying for an auto repair may be nothing more than an inconvenience; for a family without means, it may be the difference in being able to stay out of home foreclosure.

In similar fashion, the experience of anxiety is particular to the resources an [individual](#) is able to bring forward to cope with distress. For people with adequate coping strategies to meet a demand, which may come in the form of family, friends, spiritual resources, financial resources, etc., the effects of anxiety will likely be much more mitigating versus a person who has few coping resources.

Nonstop news, with much of it bad

Certainly our world has changed with regard to the number of stressful situations to which we are exposed. With a 24-hour news cycle and a public that is hungry for graphic and sensational stories, it is increasingly difficult to shelter ourselves from disturbing news and images.

After 9/11, for example, it simply was not possible to escape the [onslaught of information](#) about the terrible events. For people who had little room left in their psychological resources to cope with hardship, 9/11 may very likely have placed them at risk for a full-blown anxiety attack.

The specific symptoms of anxiety vary from one person to the next, but the general pattern is a feeling of unease and worry, an inability to relax often accompanied by sleep disturbance, irritability and edginess. In more extreme examples of anxiety, panic attacks may result, characterized by feelings of racing heartbeat, shallow breathing, cold sweats and terror.

A pivotal [study](#) deepened our understanding of protective factors when it comes to life events and our ability to cope with anxiety.

The researchers identified [three protective factors](#) for individuals facing life adversity: individual factors, [family factors](#) and community factors. Individual factors include such things as personality variables, such as cheerfulness and friendliness. Family factors included having a close bond with at least one caregiver, as well as emotionally healthy environments that provided emotional encouragement and independence.

Community variables included things like supportive schools, churches and neighbors.

The [research](#) also found that even when youths are affected adversely by [life events](#), most are able to right the proverbial ship by adulthood and

live healthy, productive lives.

Weathering the storm

What then can individuals do to ward off the ill effects associated with anxiety? There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Consider the following ideas to get started with developing a stress-reduction plan:

- Give yourself a break. It is actually okay not to be plugged in on the latest atrocity that has happened. If you find yourself reacting negatively to what you see on the news, give yourself permission to turn the television off.
- Plan ahead and keep things realistic. So much of anxiety has to do with ambiguity and uncertainty. Alleviate this by developing a game plan. For example, if your particular brand of anxiety seems to stem when considering finances, actually write down a household budget. You might surprise yourself by being able to come up with creative solutions when everything is laid out in front of you. Remind yourself that the world is generally a safe and friendly place, and don't isolate yourself from connecting with family, friends and loved ones.
- Stay connected to others. Negative feelings can foster isolation, and isolated people lose the [protective factors](#) associated with community. Reach out to others and accept their help if they are willing and able to provide it.
- Keep things simple. Remember, one step at a time. When things get too big and unwieldy, they become unmanageable and seemingly impossible. Any progress is good progress, and focus on your successes when you have them.
- Plan for something fun. Give yourself permission to feel good and enjoy the things in life that make life worth living.
- Consult an expert. There may be people out there who can guide you even if things seem out of control right now. This includes

[mental health](#) professionals who can help you to build coping resources and learn to relax and let go of the burdens of anxiety.

Unfortunately for all of us in today's modern world, there's no shortage of reasons to feel stressed or anxious. But at least there are some simple steps, founded in research, to help us.

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