

Depression, Anxiety

by **Richard Peterson, MD**

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight....

Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi

1207-1273. Excerpted from "The Guesthouse"

You've probably noticed that "change" is in the air. While many economic commentators believe we're in an economic "depression," and some refer to pervasive "economic anxiety," what they often fail to mention – perhaps because it's part of the painful recovery process - is that such periods as also provide one of the greatest opportunities for positive change and growth. The use of a psychological metaphor for the state of the economy is apt – collective economic activity appears to parallel the collective mood. At the same time, depression and anxiety are not ends in themselves – as we navigate through

these times we must stretch and grow, because the alternative is to remain fixed in habits that no longer serve us. It is the process of growth that is often the most painful aspect of the change, for even as we adapt for a positive future, we must slough off the past habits and beliefs that no longer serve us. Letting go can feel painful, but it is an essential part of moving from depression or anxiety into a process of learning, curiosity, and growth. Depression often arises when we are struggling to make a change in our lives – when our past habits are no longer adaptive for the future that confronts us. Depression is the psychological (and biological) process of regrouping in order to regain strength to move forward. Unfortunately, sometimes we aren't able to build the necessary strength on our own, and the challenges that face us mount by the day.

Anxiety is an “anticipatory” emotion, focused on threats and dangers that might affect us in the future. Because anxiety is not based on the present, it can be challenging to overcome. There are always more negative events that the anxious mind can conjure (and there are real dangers that we will confront in the future). The challenge with anxiety is developing the perspective to know which dangers are real, and which we are exaggerating. For this reason, one of the most common psychological treatments of anxiety is cognitive therapy, in which one is instructed to list their probability estimates of

future dangers (quantifying them) and then checking these beliefs against empirical data.

Both anxiety and depression have strong biological components. When one's underlying neurochemistry becomes sufficiently primed by stressful events, states of anxiety and depression can be very difficult to relieve. Stressful events are more likely to lead to chronic depression if they are unexpected, repeatedly occur, and require a major change in one's way of life. Job loss, bankruptcy, divorce, major illness, a move in one's workplace or home are such events. Interestingly, even "good" events that are stressful can provoke depression, including marriage and promotions at work.

Stressful (and especially disappointing) events cause a reduction in dopamine in the brain's reward system. Dopamine is commonly referred to as the brain's "pleasure chemical," but in fact it underlies much more than our experience of pleasure. Dopamine is a motivational neurotransmitter. Dopamine release from neurons in the reward system creates a sense of confidence, desire, and optimism. So a reduction in dopamine release is de-motivating and contributes to a sense of pessimism. Some anti-depressant medications, such as bupropion and venlafaxine, and the neurotransmitter precursor SAME work (in part) by increasing dopamine secretion in the brain's reward system.

Anxiety is a state of heightening vigilance to potential threats. Anxiety is usually triggered by major stressful life events, such as workplace injuries or other unexpected setbacks. Anxiety is often ameliorated by reassurance of family or social support, involvement in a spiritual practice or faith tradition, or the cultivation of psychological resilience.

There are different types of depression. Typical depression is characterized by decreased appetite, insomnia, and loss of interest. Melancholia (or atypical depression) is characterized by fatigue, low energy, increased appetite, and excessive sleepiness. Confusing the matter somewhat, depression is often mixed with anxiety. Typical symptoms of anxiety include rumination, hyper-vigilance, excessive worry, and physical symptoms such as palpitations and hyperventilation.

The biological causes of depression lies in reduced neurotransmitter activity in the brain's motivational circuits. Therefore most treatments are designed to increase motivation and interest.

Studies show that non-chemical treatments for depression alone are often more effective than medications or herbs alone. Exercise is extremely beneficial for depression, in part because it requires motivation. Exercise requires the working through of discomfort (often psychic), which teaches the mind to persist even when the body doesn't "feel up to it." Furthermore, exercise releases growth hormones that speed resilience and

neural adaptation to the stressful event which prompted the initial depression.

Anxiety is rooted in hyperactivity of the brain's glutamate system and decreased activity in serotonin transmission. The neurotransmitter GABA inhibits glutamate activity, thus reducing anxiety. Benzodiazepines (including Valium, Xanax, Ativan, and Klonopin) and alcohol reduce anxiety by stimulating GABA receptors. Unfortunately, these chemicals do not provide sustainable anxiety relief, and over months of use they typically cause dependence and may worsen anxiety. Serotonergic medications such as Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro and herbs such as St. John's Wort provide anxiety relief by increasing serotonin sensitivity in the brain. With higher sensitivity to serotonin, symptoms of anxiety such as obsessiveness, distractability, and impulsivity decrease. Non-chemical techniques for anxiety relief are as (or more) successful in symptom reduction than conventional medications. Non-chemical anxiety relief can be achieved through the practice of meditative techniques (e.g., mindfulness meditation) or involvement in a spiritual practice or faith tradition. For both depression and anxiety, psychotherapy is an excellent and very successful treatment.

One of the most potent forces for overcoming anxiety and depression is gratitude. Rumi recognizes this in the last two stanzas of his poem:

“The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.”

Remember that anxiety and depression are guides on the path of change and growth. Many people and techniques will help you along your path. As you open up to your unique path, and maintain curiosity both about yourself and who you might become, you will notice a gradual return of lightness. At Akasha we are available to help you design a path that fits you.

Dr. Richard Peterson is a board Certified Psychiatrist. In addition to his psychiatry practice, Dr. Peterson has a keen interest in the psychology of finances and integrates both expertise in his practice

Please check our website - akashacenter.com for more information or contact us at (310) 451-880 to make an appointment with Dr. Peterson .