



Anxiety and the Art of Doing Nothing

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-the-anxious-mind/202108/anxiety-and-the-art-doing-nothing>

When you feel anxious, your brain is trying to tell you that you are in danger. In fact, it's trying to tell you that you are in danger right this very second and that you need to do something about it immediately to keep yourself safe.

Because anxiety is uncomfortable, that's exactly what most people do when they feel anxious: they do something to make themselves feel better right now. This is certainly understandable, because when you are anxious it feels urgent, important, necessary, safe, and responsible to do something about the perceived danger.

The problem is that even though this might work right now, it creates more anxiety later.

Short-term avoidance of anxiety leads to long-term maintenance of anxiety. To put it in simple terms, when you do something to resolve anxiety, your brain learns that the thing it thought was dangerous really was dangerous and that the only reason you survived was because your brain gave you anxiety and you did something about it.

So what's the best thing to do in response to anxiety? It's deceptively simple: nothing.

The best thing to do when you feel anxious is to do nothing at all about the anxiety or the perceived danger. Instead, move on with whatever you are actually doing with your time right now in this moment. Don't even give the anxiety the time of day. Be dismissive toward it.

This is of course very hard to do when your brain is screaming at you that there's a really big, important danger right in front of you. But the good news is that if you consistently do nothing, your brain is actually really good at starting to filter out the anxiety noise.

Think of it this way: imagine you are the CEO of a big company. Let's say your vice president of manufacturing comes to you and says, "Boss, we got a big problem down at the factory! A bunch of the machines are broken! We need your help, what do we do?!"

Let's say your response is, "Wow, that does sound like a big problem. That is really important, so I will cancel my plans for the day and I will come down to the factory with you personally to help solve this problem." The next time there's a problem at the factory, what is the vice president of manufacturing going to do? They're going to come to you with it again!

Now let's say that the same thing happens, but you have a different response. The vice president of manufacturing comes to you and says, "Boss, we've got a big problem down at the factory! A bunch of the machines are broken! We need your help, what do we do?!"





Now let's say your response is, "En, that's your job, I've got more important things to deal with right now. You can go figure that out yourself."



The next time there's a problem at the factory, what is the vice president of manufacturing going to do?

They're not going to bother you, they'll keep the problem to themselves and fix it on their own!

Your brain works the same way: when you attend to anxiety, it assumes the situation is really important and that you want it brought to your attention. So it brings it to your attention more in the future.

When you stop attending to it, it assumes the situation is not important and it stops bringing similar situations to your attention in the future.

That is the art of doing nothing when you feel anxious. Try it out for a while and see what happens: when your brain makes you anxious and insists that it's really important and you must do something about it right away ... see what happens if you just ignore it and get back to whatever you were actually doing in the present moment. Redirect your attention and mental effort towards that rather than the anxiety. Over time, if you do this consistently, your brain will start to filter the anxious content out.

Read the text and decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F)

1. The feeling of anxiety is a response of the brain to a perceived danger.

(T) (F)

2. Suppression of anxiety in the short term makes anxiety management easier in the future.

(T) (F)

3. The most effective coping mechanism when dealing with anxiety is simply ignoring it.

(T) (F)

4. Anxiety is not always a negative phenomenon.

(T) (F)

5. The main purpose of the text is to encourage the reader to always give in to anxiety.

(T) (F)





Answer key

1. True

4. True

2. False

5. False

3. True