

Changing Our Language Around Anxiety

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Understanding anxiety can influence how we perceive physiological signals of anxiety and how we respond to anxiety when it arises.

Understanding Anxiety

A recent article by Karen Young (2023), titled *We Have to Change the Way we Talk about Anxiety*, highlights a framework for discussing anxiety, that helps us learn to work with and respond to anxiety by asking '**is it scary-safe or is it scary-dangerous?**'.

SCARY-SAFE represents anxiety that arises in a situation where there is something brave or important that we need to do. Scary-safe presents an opportunity to be brave and grow from experiences.

SCARY-DANGEROUS represents anxiety that can mean true danger.

The issue is that Anxiety can't tell the difference between scary-safe and scary-dangerous; our body and mind will have the same reaction even though they require different responses. When anxiety arises sometimes getting safe is the right response (scary-dangerous), and other times moving forward with the anxiety is the right response (scary-safe). We need to learn when each response is appropriate.

A good way to comprehend why this happens is to understand the role of anxiety:

“Anxiety shows up to check that you're ok, not to tell you that you're not.”

Young

Anxiety acts as an internal alarm system in our bodies to let us detect potential threats. Since we were cave people, anxiety has been a way of helping us survive as a species by identifying potential dangers, signalling to us that we need to do something to survive.

As we have developed across time, this threat detecting system has become a bit confused with the fast developments of society, and sometimes the anxiety threat detecting system can't tell the difference between the smoke from burnt toast (where we are safe) and the smoke from a house fire (where there is danger). In this example our anxiety acts like a smoke alarm. While the smoke alarm goes off in both situations, it doesn't make it faulty, it is doing exactly what it needs to do. The problem here is not the alarm (or the anxiety) but the response to it.

Due to this confusion, anxiety can greatly influence our confidence and self-esteem, as anxieties tell us stories of disaster ('what if something bad happens') and stories of being not

good enough ('I can't cope'). These are impactful and can influence how we think, feel, and behave.

These negative stories can be driven through how we discuss anxiety as a society. It is important to recognise that as humans we can both feel anxious and do brave. A story of strength can be built, as long as we are safe. We can tell ourselves 100 times that we are enough, we are strong and we are brave. However, anxiety impacts our ability to see all perspectives, which makes hearing this hard to believe; therefore, we need to experience it to believe it. This is how we test our beliefs of ourselves and build resilience.

Our Role

When we feel anxious a normal human reaction is to avoid the thing that is making us feel anxious, as a way of reducing that anxiety. This works in the short term, but in the long term, it does not give us the opportunity to learn how to manage the anxiety and cope with the anxiety. We don't need to avoid things if we are safe. Our job is not to remove discomfort that comes from anxiety but to face experiences (when it is safe) to recognise we can handle the discomfort. Therefore, we can start seeing anxiety as a signal to be brave and grow, rather than a signal that we are broken and can't cope.

When we are safe, and the threat is likely relational (e.g., anything that comes with the chance of judgement, shame, humiliation, or exclusion), our job is not to remove the discomfort of anxiety. Our role is to lean into the experience to recognise that we can manage and handle the discomfort of anxiety. This process is not about the outcome but the process of handling the discomfort.



Wellbeing Support 24 hour: 6173 2873

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Model for Learning to Respond to Anxiety

ANXIETY

Is it Scary-Safe?

'DO BRAVE'

Sit with discomfort of feeling anxious and face the anxiety

REFLECT

Was it as bad as expected?
Were you able to cope even though it was scary?

Remember, anxiety is a sign that your brain is strong and healthy, and it is working hard to keep you alive. When you feel anxiety often it is not because something terrible is going to happen but because there is an opportunity to do something brave. This is important to differentiate as an emergency service worker, as there may be moments at work where you are potentially in danger, and you need to be anxious to give you the adrenaline needed to manage and respond to the situation. However, outside of these moments when you feel anxious, this is scary-safe.

Questions to ask yourself in situations where you feel anxious include:

- 'Do I feel like this because I am in danger, or because there's something brave or important, I need to do?'
- 'Is this scary-safe or scary-dangerous?'
- 'Is this a time for me to be safe (sometimes it might be), or is this a time for me to be brave?'

You can also tell yourself: **'yes, I feel anxious, and yes, I am brave'.**

When 'doing brave', coping skills to manage the discomfort can be helpful. These can include:

- **Deep belly breathing** (this sends signals to our brain that we are ok, and we can cope).
- **Use your senses** e.g., look for:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can touch
 - 3 things you can hear,
 - 2 things you can smell and
 - 1 thing you can taste.

Is it Scary-Dangerous?

REMOVE DANGER or INCREASE SAFETY

This brings our awareness away from our thoughts and body and back into the present moment to allow us to 'do brave'.

- Tell yourself **'I can feel anxious, and I can be brave'.**

In order to know if you need to follow the model to respond to anxiety, you need to know if you are experiencing anxiety. Anxiety can look different for everyone, however some common thoughts, body sensations and behaviours can occur when experiencing anxiety.

Elizabeth (Tasmanian emergency service responder for 25 years):

I have anxiety, and have done so for 45 years. It is not something that I am ashamed of. In fact I respect it and am proud of what I have been able to achieve. I have had great success in my career – I manage my anxiety. What works for me is:

- *Having trusted levellers – those who can be objective when I can't*
- *Having tools to break circular thinking; get into the gym*
- *Know the process of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT);*
 1. *What is the fear*
 2. *What are the facts*
 3. *What is the result*

Some indicators of anxiety

Unhelpful Thought Patterns

- Predicating the future 'what if...'
- Negative self-talk 'I can't do this', labelling 'I am stupid'
- Mind reading 'others will think I am...'
- Catastrophising 'the worst will happen'
- Emotional reasoning 'I feel anxious, so something bad will happen'

Physiological Reactions

- Increased heart rate • Butterflies
- Chest tightness/pressure
- Chills • Difficulty speaking
- Digestion difficulties • Shaky
- Increased breathing rate
- Lightheaded • Circular thinking
- Lack of sleep (ability to sleep)

Behaviours

- Avoiding situations, places or people that can trigger the anxiety
- Seeking frequent reassurance from others to reduce anxiety
- Safety behaviours e.g., only will go to a social event if certain people are there to cope with anxiety
- Use substances (e.g., alcohol) as coping mechanisms to reduce anxiety

If any of the signs above begin impacting your work, relationships, overall wellbeing, or daily functioning, it would be worthwhile contacting Wellbeing Support on 6173 2873.

Note. If you are experiencing similar symptoms to the above along with either nightmares or flashbacks, avoidance of situations from a traumatic incident or heightened emotional reactivity after witnessing or hearing of a traumatic incident, these can be indicators of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and seeking support is important for reducing the impact of these symptoms.



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