

What Anxiety And Depression Are Trying To Tell You

People misunderstand anxiety and depression. When you don't want to get out of bed in the morning, or life doesn't feel worth living, you think there is something wrong with you. If you panic, can't think straight and feel overwhelmed, you think you are losing your mind.

If you can recognize those reactions as evidence of anxiety or depression, you are ahead of the game. However, many people do not recognize the symptoms. They simply feel something is really wrong and wrong with them. They believe the problem lies in their emotions, and therefore with them. They are the problem because they are acting differently than they normally do, and can't control their emotions.

I am not surprised that people misunderstand their own emotional worlds. As professionals, I think we have done a poor job of educating the public about human emotion. Most mental health professionals have followed the medical profession in treating emotional distress like a physical disease. They believe that depression and anxiety are forms of mental illness. You go to the doctor's, get some medication, and hope to feel better.

Even the use of alternative medicine is based on treating the symptom with some technique to fix the problem. If you use mindfulness, deep breathing methods or some behavioral techniques for the same reason, you are making the same mistake. You are treating the symptom without understanding the root cause. You are still approaching the anxiety or depression as the symptom of an illness that needs to be eliminated.

Here's a different way to understand anxiety and depression.

They both are signals that there are problems in the person's relationships, either past or present. They echo the impact of those relationships.

Both anxiety and depression originate in relationships but are experienced alone, so the connection to the relationship is not obvious. Follow me while I draw the line from the emotional reactions to the relationship problem.

Freud many years ago was the first to explain depression as anger turned against the self. It was turned inward because it could not be taken outward to a person or problem in some

relationship. In the past, they may have been raised to defer to others and not allowed a voice. In their adult life, the person may have been discounted or ran smack into denial when they tried to give voice to some problem. When they surrendered their voice, they opened the door to blaming themselves for not speaking up. The end result was a hopelessness and helplessness that was their fault, a recipe for depression.

The internalizing of anger is a relationship issue coming from the past. It is a vestige of a developmental problem originating in the parent-child relationship. Most children want to please their parents, so they learn very early to suppress their anger to get acceptance. If they continued to hide their anger as an adult, they will not be able to mobilize their anger. They will get angry at themselves for not being able to speak up or solve the problem.

Internalizing your anger as an adult continues the impact of your experience with your parents. While your parents may appear to no longer run your life, you continue to be influenced by the experiences with them. You internalize because you were not encouraged initially by your parents to use your anger. You played out that role with other parent surrogates in your life, like other authority figures or in love relationships. The depression that results from suppressed anger as an adult is the scar of what you learned from your parents.

The same is true for anxiety. Most anxiety is a signal that deeper emotion is being felt below the surface. It's the tremor of an earthquake before the earth splits open. Unresolved relationship problems lead to resentments and suppressed anger. Acting out the anger only results in more guilt and shame. Running away from the problem using sex, alcohol or drugs, helps in the short run, but the problem doesn't get solved and reappears somewhere down the road. Anxiety is that signal that there is a problem waiting to be solved.

Many people resolve anxiety by doing what they have been told to do. They rely on the family role to reduce anxiety and restore comfort. They avoid the guilt and shame of being different than they have been taught. They deny their natural reactions and become ruled by the avoidance of behaviors that would evoke negative emotions that have been trained into them over years of child rearing.

The emotional suppression that leads to anxiety and depression also results in a self-identity problem. In a prior article, I discussed identity confusion (see [5 Ways To Recognize Your Real Self](#)). You get confused about who you are. You sacrifice your real reactions for the sake of pleasing

others. You become dependent on the reactions of others, rather than doing what you know is right. You even convince yourself that you are being true to your real self, confusing who you are with the way you were raised.

This is what I mean by identity confusion. You merge who you are with what you have been told to be, thinking you are being true to yourself. When this occurs, you are suffering from identity confusion. Its symptoms are anxiety and depression.

A confused self is a prescription for emotional distress. Although it causes suffering, it is very normal. You need to grow out of trying to please others and replace it with learning to stand up for yourself. In prior articles, I discussed that you have two selves, the self for others and the authentic self. As a child, your self for others is strong and your authentic self is weak. Adult growth and development requires a change in the self-system. The authentic self needs practice to grow stronger than the self for others. Anxiety and depression are signals that there is emotional work to be done in your relationships to develop your authentic self.

Does every incidence of anxiety or depression come from identity confusion? The answer is no, as some people have biological problems that exacerbate their levels of anxiety or depression. I believe this is true for 20% of the population that suffer from either of these conditions. However, all people are born dependent and need to manage their emotions to learn and grow. That means that 100% of the cases of anxiety or depression contain identity confusion as part of the problem. 20% have the complication of biology as an additional layer, and the remaining 80% are solely cases of delayed development of the self.

10 Benefits Of An Authentic Self

So what do you gain from growing a stronger, more independent self? Is being authentic just a new buzzword, or is it really something important? I've already said that the first benefit is that you spend less time being either anxious or depressed. Here are 10 additional benefits directly attributable to growing your authentic self:

Benefit #1: Better management of your emotions

As I described in that same article about your real self, the emotional core of your authentic self is based on natural emotions like happy, sad, mad, etc. To have a strong self, you must learn to recognize those emotions within yourself and share them with others. In contrast, you must also learn to ignore the learned emotions to free yourself from the family role that is the core of the self for others. As you educate yourself about these two sets of emotions, it becomes easier to identify those emotions to follow and those emotions to ignore.

Benefit #2: Increased confidence

An authentic self enables you to stand up for your beliefs. Your confidence grows as you learn to rely on your own natural reason. You expect to be challenged for your beliefs and are prepared to be alone if others reject your values or opinions. The threat of distance in important relationships evokes less fear than the thought of hiding your real thoughts and ideas. You become important to yourself and move away from relationships where you are punished for being yourself.

Benefit #3: Mental toughness

An authentic self becomes a driving force. Your desire to be heard becomes stronger than the need to rely on others. You don't shy away from conflict because you realize that people have competing needs and those needs can be met through negotiation and compromise. You don't shy away from a fight, but see your way through to the end. You become mentally tough because your fighting spirit is fueled by your righteous anger that is now available to you within an authentic self. You have unleashed the dragon to protect your natural reactions.

Benefit #4: Distinguishing anger from rage

A strong authentic self is built around your natural emotions. The stronger it becomes, the easier it becomes to access your emotions. They occur spontaneously, without the screening of your defenses. The response time gets less and less. You react better in the moment, rather than retreat to figure out how you are feeling.

Anger is the natural emotion that often gets screened to excess. Hidden emotion emerges like popping the top off a shaken can of soda. It is impulsive, loud and damaging to relationships. This is rage, far different from anger. Anger comes out naturally and does not get stored. It is a strong internal reaction that tells you that something doesn't feel quite right. It is self-respecting and promotes win-win solutions in relationships.

Benefit #5: Increased independence and self-reliance

A strong authentic self is grounded in reliance on natural reason. Natural reason is the voice of the truth within you. It is simple and based on distinguishing what feels right from what feels wrong. You use your pragmatic reactions for decision-making. Some have called this basic sense, "street smarts" or "intuition".

Relying on your emotional intelligence requires you to know yourself, and to tell the difference between natural and learned emotions. This takes practice and is not as simple as just "trust how you feel". You have to make judgments about the meaning of what you feel and that is the tricky part in the equation. You must "trust how you feel, but not what you make of it" until you check out your assumptions with others. Once you have learned to make that distinction, you become more independent and self-reliant as you have developed an internal reference frame to trust yourself.

Benefit #6: Improved decision-making

A well-developed authentic self will enable you to make better decisions. You will be clearer about how you feel and what you think. You will experience less self-doubt and insecurity. You will now be able to manage the influence of others and balance your opinions against the opinions of others.

If others introduce an idea that rings true to you, you will be able to adopt their position for the right reason, e.g. because it makes sense to you and not because you feel pressured to avoid conflict and don't want to upset others. You will be looking for the truth, whether that be in your opinion, in other's opinions, or in some blend of the two. You will make better decisions because you will know how to find the truth and stand on it.

Benefit #7: Emotional integrity

If a strong natural self leads to better decision-making, it will also bring the additional benefit of emotional integrity. Emotional integrity is the ability to match your words with your actions. You won't be changing your mind each time there is some new challenge. If you do, it will be because there is some new information that brings new insights. You will be able to explain the change in a way that makes sense to others. It will not be frivolous or impulsive. The process, as well as the final decision, will both feel right.

Benefit #8: Develop strong relationships

Emotional integrity is honest and emotional honesty builds trust. As a result, people can rely on you. These concepts form the basis for lasting relationships.

Denial is the opposite of emotional honesty. Denial is the single biggest problem in human relationships. Denial kills the messenger and destroys the trust in a relationship. It makes people withdraw and maintain distance. Relationships become superficial rather than a shared experience where ideas are exchanged and learning takes place.

People with developed authentic selves forge good relationships. These are based on emotionally honest exchanges. Conflict is expected as needs often clash and managed effectively to create a win-win solution. People negotiate the differences and compromise to find a solution that they can live with both short and long-term.

Benefit #9: Better physical health

When people are clear about who they are and what they stand for, they value themselves more completely, including the physical body that houses their self. The care for the body reflects the increased value they assign to themselves. They monitor their health habits and lifestyle, watching how much they exercise, what they weigh, the amount of sleep they get, their alcohol

use, and the use of their time. They live a life in balance that promotes their health and well-being.

Benefit #10: Improved sexual functioning

Sex requires a healthy body and a healthy relationship for maximum enjoyment. A strong authentic self promotes both elements. Healthy relationships promote emotional intercourse that fosters physical intercourse. Sex becomes a shared experience rather than an experience of getting something at an emotional cost. Both partners feel rejuvenated by the experience and the relationship is enhanced.

In summary...

Anxiety and depression are not necessarily mental health problems. They may be symptoms of problems within the person and in their relationships. Depression can be thought of as anger turned against the self because the person has surrendered their right to have a voice in their relationships. Anxiety is a signal that suppressed emotions are knocking at the door of the mind.

Both anxiety and depression are indications of arrested emotional development. This psychological task requires the person to take risks to represent who they are, and not surrender to what they have been told. Failure to honor their natural reactions results in anxiety and depression.

The opposite occurs when the authentic self is developed and becomes stronger than the self created to please others. There are multiple psychological benefits to having a strong authentic self that improves personal well-being and the ability to develop and maintain meaningful and lasting relationships with others.