

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Nervousness Is Okay... Anxiety Not So Good

from the American Counseling Association

Everybody gets nervous. It's a natural reaction when we expect, or imagine, that something negative is about to happen. That's why an upcoming doctor's visit might have you feeling nervous, while going to your favorite restaurant simply has you feeling hungry.

Nervousness and anxiety, while both emotions that are a bit scary, are, however, quite different in character and how they affect us.

Being nervous is usually a short-term feeling. Part of what causes such a feeling is that while our bodies are locked in the present, our minds are free to wander into the past and the future.

Usually, thinking about things past and future is a pleasant thing. Past memories can be of good times and bring us comfort. Thinking about the future allows us to plan successfully.

But thinking about past things sometimes brings nervousness. What is about to happen, like that doctor's visit, may remind us of a past negative experience. When we imagine the future, we may find ourselves imagining all the possible catastrophes that could occur.

Nervous feelings are actually fairly easy to overcome, or at least to limit. We can start to do that by realizing we are responsible for our own thoughts. If remembering past negative events is making us nervous, we can intentionally focus instead on happier, healthier, more comfortable thoughts.

To do that you have to get your mind and body in the same time zone. Remind yourself that this is now, not back then. Pay attention to what you're seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling. Take a deep breath. Think about now and you lessen the negative, nervousness-producing thoughts about the past or future.

At times, however, nervousness can be more serious. When someone focuses excessively on negative past events, or bad future outcomes, simple, short-term nervousness can become real anxiety. Generally, being anxious is usually longer in duration and occurs with more intensity or frequency than nervousness.

Being severely anxious can have a crippling, negative effect on your life. You may find you are almost constantly remembering the past and negative events, or anticipating future problems. Such severe anxiety can limit your ability to act and hinder relationships with family and friends.

If severe nervousness or anxiety occurs on a regular basis and is causing you problems, seek help. A professional counselor can assist in getting anxiety under control and helping you to a happier, more relaxed life.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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