

# Jon Dillow Counseling

Counseling, Coaching, and Seminars

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## Facing Anxiety:

Examine most anxiety and you'll find some fear, or collection of fears at its root. For someone phobic of dogs, the driving fear might be that of physical harm. A person gripped with anxiety around public speaking, may dread the pain of humiliation if her presentation implodes.

Anxiety tells us the catastrophic will occur, our worst fears will be realized.

It accomplishes two things in the process. First, it exaggerates the probability of the "bad thing" occurring. Anxiety wins by turning it from a remote possibility to an almost certain outcome.. Then it goes a step further, saying that if the worst occurs we won't be able to handle it.

Much effort in mitigating anxiety is focused on the first effect. People are encouraged to challenge the way their "catastrophic thinking" is amplifying the possibility of their root fears being realized. In challenging their thinking they may "reframe" their thoughts in productive ways. Something along the lines of, "It is possible that I could be attacked by the dog but it's very unlikely" This is true. Most dogs don't bite. This reframing of the anxious thought can provide some relief.

Yet our minds cling to that unlikely possibility that this may be the one dog out of 10000 that is a vicious beast. Anxiety whispers, "Yes, most dogs are safe, but if you encounter the exception there's no chance you'll survive."

The person is then left to quell their fear with logic. But silencing fear with logic alone is like falling in love based on a dispassionate list of your beau's strengths and weaknesses. Something more than logic is needed to overcome fear. This is where courage comes in.

We develop courage in relation to our anxiety not by analysis but through action. We take courageous steps and courage grows.

One of the more powerful ways to do this is to boldly face the root fear beneath the anxiety. Rather than trying to convince yourself of how unlikely it is to occur, confront the reality of what it would be like for this to happen.

How could we do that short of actually experiencing the worst case scenario? The

following steps offer one approach to doing so:

1. **Clearly Identify the worst case scenario you fear:** The fear that drives our anxieties can be so strong that we are almost intentionally blind to it. Anxiety is the symptom, the underlying fear is the cause. Our first step is to look beneath the symptoms and clearly identify the fear. A simple way to do this is to ask a series of “why” questions starting with, “Why am I anxious about \_\_\_\_\_?”

For example:

“Why am I anxious to speak publically?”

“Because I may freeze up, stutter, lose my place in the speech”

“Why are you afraid of that?”

“Because I’ll look foolish in front of people”

“Why are you afraid of that?”

“Because people will think less of me.”

“Why are you afraid of that?”

“Because I don’t want people to have a low opinion of me.”

“Why are you afraid of that?”

“Because I don’t have a very solid opinion of myself.”

2. **Vividly imagine the fear coming true:** Our imaginations are powerful. By imagining the fear beneath the anxiety coming true we will respond in physical and emotional ways similar to if it actually were to happen. Repeatedly confronting the anxiety/fear in your imagination will reduce both your physical and emotional response.
3. **Decide how you would respond if this happened.** After repeatedly facing the fear, ask yourself, “How would I like to respond if that happend?” You can then create a plan of what you will do if the worst case scenario were to happen. Knowing you have a plan in place reduces the fear.
4. **Acknowledge the pain that would result:** Now you have some plan but no plan can mitigate all the consequences, many of which will be emotional. Validating to yourself that this would hurt rather than denying the pain embraces suffering as a human reality. We can then ask, “Would I be able to survive this pain?” and “Is this a pain worth facing?”

5. **List what value you find in not being controlled by the fear.** Anxiety and the fear at its root, can start to control aspects of our lives. Being free of this control is wonderful. List out specifically what value you would find in not being controlled by your anxiety.

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