

Anxiety and the Art of Saying “No”

by Maurice Tomkinson

Anxiety is a condition that can affect us all at any time. A modest amount of it does no harm, in fact it can serve to keep us out of trouble. But too much anxiety can lead to symptoms such as panic attacks, phobias such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia, stage fright, and so on. In extreme forms it can become paralysing, making it impossible to carry on the normal activities of living, working and relating to people.

Anxiety is not confined to those of a “nervous disposition”. In fact it can affect anyone, including those who are apparently confident, outgoing individuals. Having an active and responsible job is no protection, in fact anxiety can be one of the symptoms of the “burnout” that afflicts so many professional people.

When working with anxious clients I am particularly interested in how they go about saying “no”. The reason for this may not seem obvious at first, but an analogy may help to illustrate this. If living is compared to driving a car, then our ability to say “no” can be likened to using the brake. Who among us wouldn’t feel anxious to find ourselves driving a car with no brakes? We would literally be out of control.

To take the analogy a bit further, we can see that there are good and bad ways of using the brake on a car. As any competent driving instructor will tell you, the brake should be applied in good time, anticipating any difficulties on the road ahead. It should be used smoothly and appropriately,

applying just the right amount of pressure to keep the vehicle under control at a suitable speed. What this suggests is that to remain in control of our lives (and anxiety levels) we need to have a “no” that is flexible and can be adapted to circumstances - everything from a gentle slowing down to a full-blown emergency stop. We also need to become good at anticipating situations, and if necessary slowing down to give ourselves time to respond.

Put this way, saying “no” seems sensible and reasonable, but the problem is that many of us have not learned to do it effectively. We may have been conditioned to believe that saying “no” is bad, that we should “think positive” and “eliminate the negative”, to quote a couple of management slogans. We may have a belief that if we refuse someone they will not like us, possibly reject us or abandon us. This leaves us with a problem, because we still need to limit the demands that life and others place on us. We therefore find alternative ways of blocking or obstructing life’s obligations. The following list gives some of the patterns we may use, some of which you might recognise in yourself or people you know!

Incompetence. The classic example is breaking the dishes to avoid being asked to wash up. The message goes, “I’d love to help you, but I’m really too hopeless”. Although this can work, the problem is that others come to believe we are hopeless, and eventually so do we, and our self-esteem gets destroyed.

Ignorance. This is very similar to incompetence - the message here is “I’d like to do as you ask, but I don’t know how”. Unfortunately for this ploy to work we have kept ourselves in ignorance - we learn not to

learn. This can drain the meaning and purpose out of life.

Incapacity. Sometimes described as “enjoying ill health”, the message goes: “Certainly I’d help you, if it wasn’t for my bad back (or leg, or head...)”. Of course for it to continue to work, we have to stay unwell...

Avoidance. This technique just avoids any situation where demands might be placed on us. Avoiding responsibility, avoiding relationships, avoiding going out. Like having a car and keeping it permanently locked in the garage.

Procrastination. We agree to do something, and of course we will do it “sometime”, we just “never get round to it”. This method has its price too, such as having to avoid the people we promised to help, or having to keep thinking of new excuses.

Passing the buck. “Of course I would do it, if only it wasn’t for my boss / the government / my parents / the children / the neighbours / the cost of living / the weather”. Here lies bitterness and cynicism.

Exploding. Sometimes called “having a long fuse”, we tolerate all manner of demands and impositions without a murmur of protest, until one day someone pushes us too far. Then there is an almighty and highly destructive explosion, as our bottled-up rage and resentment finally comes bursting out. Scary for all concerned.

There are no doubt many other examples that I could give, but these are enough to make the point. All these patterns have drawbacks of one sort or another, and in the final analysis they diminish us as individuals. In some circumstances they can have their uses, but once we allow them to become habits we give away our power, our self-worth, and ultimately our reasons for living.

Is there anything that can be done to change these patterns? Fortunately there is, although there is no

set “formula” that will work for everyone. The following are some of the techniques I use to help clients develop more effective ways of saying “no”.

Developing awareness. Sometimes just becoming aware of a pattern of behaviour is enough to enable us to change. However, we need more than just intellectual knowledge - we really need to feel the impact of the behaviour and how it is affecting us. For this role play can be useful. For example, if someone is having trouble saying “no” to their boss, I might play the role of the boss and let the client act out a typical interaction. This really brings the behaviour alive, and allows us to look at it more closely. Sometimes I might turn it round and suggest that client plays the role of the boss - this may reveal useful insights into how the boss can circumvent the client’s “no”.

Practising and coaching. When a pattern is deeply ingrained, it may be necessary to spend some time practising the new behaviour, and some coaching may be involved. In real life it may be useful to start with the easier issues first, before tackling more difficult ones. When we feel our resolve crumbling it can often be useful to buy time - it is rarely necessary to decide immediately, and deferring a decision till later gives us time to plan our approach.

Sometimes we find ourselves up against very powerful persuaders - bullies, flatterers, manipulators, game-players, salesmen, con-artists, cult members, to name but a few. If a client is forced to deal with such people, it may be helpful to work with their therapist in devising some appropriate techniques to help them resist such pressures.

Unifying the personality. An anxious person may often feel themselves to be divided - experiencing themselves as having both an anxious part and a confident part, for example. Perhaps the confident part despises the anxious part for its weakness, whereas the anxious part may see the confident side as brash and shallow. The best way to resolve such conflicts is through dialogue, helping the parts of the personality to communicate with one another, understand each side’s needs, and develop compassion.

Uncovering past events. For some of us, for whatever reason, our past experience may have left us with a real fear of saying “no”, and in this situation deeper work in counselling or psychotherapy may be needed to uncover and heal the old wounds.

These are just a few of the methods that can be used to help develop an effective “no”. While I do not claim that the inability to effectively say “no” explains all forms of anxiety, my experiences as a counsellor have shown me that a high proportion of anxious clients do have this problem. One word of warning. I am not advocating an indiscriminate use of “no”, the sort of negativity that blocks everything that is offered to us. This would be equivalent to driving around with the handbrake full on. There are times when we need to embrace what life offers us with a resounding “YES!”, but we can’t do this if our vehicles, our selves, are burned out or running out of control.

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