

Welcoming the Gifts of Anxiety by Karla McLaren

There are gifts in anxiety?

Yes! People are often very surprised to learn that anxiety contains specific gifts, because anxiety is usually described only in terms of disorder or disease. However, at its most subtle level, anxiety (which is related to fear) helps you plan for the future and complete important tasks. Really!

When I look at the problem of nuance, I see that so many of us are taught to identify emotions only when they're in a heightened state. This means that when we think of anger, we tend to think of rage rather than the calm boundary-setting skills that nuanced anger brings to us. Or when we think of fear, we tend to think of extreme alarm rather than the grounded instincts and awareness that nuanced fear brings to us.

It's the same with anxiety: when we think of it, we tend to think of intense, gut-wrenching anxiety rather than the focused, task-completion abilities that nuanced anxiety brings to us. So let's bring nuance to this important emotion, and let's approach anxiety empathically so that we can uncover its gifts.

ANXIETY (or Worry): Focus & Completion

GIFTS: Foresight ~ Focus ~ Conscience ~ Task-completion ~ Procrastination alert!

ACTION REQUIRED: Anxiety helps you organize, plan for, and complete your tasks - it's related to fear, but it helps you orient to the future rather than to the present only. Anxiety is your task-completion superhero.

THE INTERNAL QUESTIONS: What brought this feeling forward? What truly needs to get done?

In my Emotional Vocabulary List (you can download it for free), I give you many vocabulary words for specific emotions at three different levels of intensity. In the list, I refer to the subtle, gift-level presentation of emotions as their soft states. I call their more obvious presentations medium states, and when they're highly activated, I call that their intense states.

Just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that emotions exist in only three levels of intensity, because that's silly — I'm just trying to bring a sense of ease and clarity to a subject that can be very confusing.

To help you understand these different intensities of emotion, I'll put anxiety into the mix and run it through the three states.

Understanding the different intensities of anxiety

In its soft state, anxiety will simply help you be aware of (for instance) what you need to bring for an upcoming trip. You won't feel obviously anxious; you'll just be connected to anxiety's capacity to help you prepare yourself for the future and intelligently complete your tasks.

In its medium state, your anxiety will be more insistent. You'll feel more of a sense of a time-crunch, and you might feel some intense focus and energy. You might orient toward the future and bring a great deal of laser focus to what you need to do - you might even ignore things in the room that are not related to the tasks you need to complete. You'll feel more activated in this state, and you might be a bit snappy if anyone gets in your way.

Anxiety is a task-oriented emotion, and it has things to do! In the medium state of anxiety, you'll feel a little bit riled up, but not uncomfortably so - and you'll be able to identify that you're working with the gifts of anxiety. In their mood states, your emotions are usually obvious to you and others.

In its intense state, your anxiety may be in a kind of feedback loop, which could be initiated by many things. Internally, it could be generated by an increase in adrenaline, cortisol, heart rate, or other physical conditions unrelated to task completion, but you'd feel those ramped-up intensities and think: "Oh, I've got a ton of work to do - on a tight deadline!!" Externally, this intense level of anxiety could be initiated by a sudden and overwhelmingly close deadline, or by a flurry of things that need to be handled, but are actually impossible for one person to do.

In situations like these, your anxiety might set itself into a tizzy of activation. It might spin out and take you from room to room completing three tasks badly and four not at all. You may orient so strongly to one thing that you miss other things in the room, and trip, or walk into a wall. Or your focus may get so overwhelmed that you can't see or find that check that you just put down on the table, gah!!

At this point, the empathic skill called Conscious Questioning (below) will be invaluable.

Notice that all three levels of activation involve the exact same emotion - anxiety - but also notice that when we talk about anxiety, we usually only talk about its intense state (or we confuse it with panic), and we usually categorize anxiety as a thoroughly negative emotion (even though there are no negative emotions).

This mistake is understandable, however, because if you only identify anxiety in its intense form, then your confusion about it is actually sort of logical: An emotion that walks you into walls and makes you lose checks - that's not helpful! It's negative! But that's not all that anxiety does, and it's important to remember this:

All emotions exist at many different levels of activation and nuance, and all emotions are necessary.

The necessity of anxiety

Though being an author is pretty awesome, one of the less awesome things about writing a book is that it sort of freezes you in time. It stands as a testament to what you knew the

year you wrote it, even though you keep learning and growing long after it's published. Luckily, I've been able to use this website to update my work in *The Language of Emotions* (which I wrote in 2009) and share the new things I've learned about emotions and empathy. This following piece on anxiety is from 2011.

I continually study emotions and empathy in social science, neurology, and related fields to stay updated, and in January of 2011, on the San Francisco-based radio show *Forum* with Michael Krasny, I heard an interview with Dr. Mary Lamia, who is a psychoanalyst and psychologist. She wrote a book called *Understanding Myself: A Kid's Guide to Intense Emotions and Strong Feelings*. It's a very good book for kids, and Dr. Lamia has some very surprising things to say.

In the latter part of the interview, Dr. Lamia spoke about anxiety in a way I hadn't heard before, and I mulled it over a great deal. She sees anxiety as the emotion that helps us take action and get things done. I knew that about fear (the question for fear is: What action must be taken?), and in my work, I focus on the very useful and necessary aspects of fear.

However, in my book, I sort of pushed anxiety off to the side because, honestly, it bothered me when people ran around being anxious. I just wanted them to calm down and focus themselves already, sheesh!

When I wrote my book, I didn't see anxiety as a purposeful emotion (I valenced it!), because I made the common mistake of identifying it only in its mood state and intense state; therefore, I completely overlooked its gifts and its importance. I also overlooked the ways that I have relied upon the gifts of anxiety in my own life. Whoops.

Putting it off versus doing it ahead of time

Dr. Lamia contrasts procrastinators, who put tasks off until their anxiety kicks in and makes them do their work with do-it-aheaders, who do their work ahead of time.

I'm a do-it-aheader, and we've got a joke in our family about thanking Karla from the past. We'll find some job I finished weeks ago, or unearth finished pieces to a project that's crucial, or we'll find important papers in my filing system, and we'll say, "Thanks, Karla from the past, for making things easy!" Clearly, this thankfulness is a great motivator, because in each day, I think of all kinds of cool projects and jobs to do for the future happiness of my friends, my family, and myself. It's a total win-win. It's time travel that works!

Before I heard Dr. Lamia, I would have said that I didn't have anxiety, but I realized with a thud that, "Ooohhhh, I've got plenty of anxiety, but I somehow learned to respond to it at very early points in its appearance, so that it almost never gets to an obvious level."

I realized that I've always paid close attention to subtle levels of anxiety and responded at very early points in its life cycle, which meant that I rarely experienced an identifiable state of anxiety.

Consequently, I developed a valenced and non-nuanced empathic obliviousness to anxiety!

Because I almost never moved into an obvious state of anxiety, and usually responded to it in its soft and free-flowing state, I mistakenly identified my very subtle level of

do-it-ahead anxiety as foresight, conscientiousness, or perhaps just being organized. I completely missed the fact that I was working with an emotion that was trying to prepare me for the future.

Lifting the veil of ignorance

We live and learn, so I finally learned to identify the nuances of anxiety, and I've welcomed anxiety fully into my emotional toolkit. When I lifted my veil of ignorance about anxiety, I realized that my behavior only appeared to be anxiety-free because I wasn't in an anxious mood; however, I was using my anxiety about not having completed things as a way to help myself out of future troubles. Does that make sense?

We've all experienced what it's like to look for a specific shirt that turns out to need washing (disappointment, frustration), or how it feels to lose important papers (anxiety, fear, disappointment), or how it feels to be late (embarrassment, shame, anxiety).

As a do-it-aheader, I'm working to avoid those unpleasant outcomes by confronting them before they have a chance to happen. I'm time-traveling in a way that's different from a procrastinator (who's trying to avoid an unpleasant future by not confronting it), but we're both attempting to achieve the same goals. We're both trying to avoid an unpleasant future.

During the Forum interview with Dr. Lamia, a self-identified procrastinator called in and explained that he could easily finish things that were pleasant, but that he really had to force himself to do things that felt like work, or to finish chores that he didn't feel he was good at. The caller needed his anxiety to get to a fever pitch so that he could power his way through his procrastination and into unpleasant tasks. Even as a do-it-aheader, I totally get that.

When I have a miserable task to accomplish, my entertainment-and-online-gamer habit takes over, and I hide from the misery and discomfort and doubt. However, I've learned to pay myself with procrastination, such that I'll tell myself: "Okay, you can play three games of [insert current favorite game here] or watch a show, but then you need to write that difficult letter or clean out the crisper drawer in the frig." That may sound silly, but it helps me remain emotionally honest.

Because honestly, I don't want to write that letter or clean out the wretched crisper drawer. It's miserable work - and anyway, what if I say the wrong thing in the rotten letter and make things worse?

We can all stand outside the situation and know that I'll feel better once these miserable tasks are completed, but it's a long slog through foul terrain before that can happen. So if I have to do those odious things, then I need a reward first! And though I didn't know which emotion I was working with, I somehow learned to play with and work with my procrastination and my anxiety, rather than being worked over or overwhelmed by them. Score one for the unintentional anxiety wrangler!

Reframing your approach to anxiety

The questions for anxiety are: "What brought this feeling forward? and What truly needs to get done?" The word truly is key, because if you simply ask your procrastination what needs to get done, it might answer: "Eat chocolate, go blog hopping, play Angry Birds, watch movies ..." and then it's four hours later and where are you? Did those

things really need to get done?

But if you ask your medium or intense anxiety what needs to get done, it might answer: "Check the stove to see if you turned it off, now polish the doorknobs, now wash your hands, but where are the nail clippers? What about reorganizing the closet or changing the oil in the car? Oh, did you check the stove?" And again, it's four hours later, and you've been sent on any number of silly errands.

If you can slow yourself down, identify the situation that brought your anxiety forward, and ask yourself what truly needs to get done, you can bring your full awareness to the situation

When any of your emotions (or the emotions of others) is caught in a feedback loop, it's very tempting to turn away (or run away) and ignore them, but you can make significant improvements in your Empathic Accuracy if you can clearly identify emotions and engage with them empathically.

When you can understand the reasons that emotions arise, you can help them do their proper work. This process of identifying, listening to, and responding to emotions so that they can move onward - this is how you develop strong Emotion Regulation skills.

This next skill is a specific healing practice for anxiety.

Conscious Questioning for your anxiety

Anxiety has a purpose and a function, and it's a really important one; it's your task-completion emotion, and it's your procrastination alert system.

Anxiety can be an intensely action-focused emotion, so expressing it when it's intense, or when it's in a feedback loop, can be pretty troublesome - it can run you in five different directions at once. However, repressing anxiety isn't a very good option, because anxiety will keep bubbling up - it's got tasks to complete!

Luckily, we've got an empathic mindfulness practice for anxiety.

In Conscious Questioning, you turn toward your anxiety and identify each of the issues your anxiety is responding to so that you can organize all of your activation. This practice will help you ground and focus yourself again.

You can learn about Conscious Questioning and many other supportive practices for your anxiety in my newest book, *Embracing Anxiety* (Sounds True, June 2020)!

You can perform this practice verbally by asking yourself (out loud) about each of the things that really need to get done (see Janelle's practice for anxiety) - but I find that it's very helpful to write things down as well. Writing is a way to physically express your anxieties, become aware of them, and organize them intentionally. And here's the interesting part: Speaking or writing out your anxieties is an action. It counts as an emotion-specific action that will help your anxiety calm down a bit so that you can ground and focus yourself.

Simply voicing or writing down your anxieties will help your anxieties organize themselves so that you can plan ahead and take effective actions. With this quick and focused practice, you can access the gifts of anxiety, identify any upcoming tasks, organize

everything you need to do to complete those tasks, and gently confront your procrastination tendencies.

Empathic mindfulness skills help you make real changes in your behavior, in your approach to emotions, in your outlook, in your tension levels, and in your empathic skills. No matter how activated your emotions are, you can use your empathic skills to engage with all of them and figure out what they're trying to do.

Remember though, that if you do what you can to empathically address an emotion, and it's still too much (How much emotion is too much?), please reach out for help from a trusted friend, counselor, or healthcare provider. Sometimes, especially with an active and intense emotion like anxiety, we can all use a little support to bring an emotion back into balance.

For more inspiration, check out an interview with Karla McLaren [here](#).