

Focus Changes Feelings

Sometimes the Smallest Details Can Interrupt the Biggest Worries

Somewhere along the way, anxiety develops an extraordinary ability to capture our attention. We become so absorbed in what might happen next, what our bodies are feeling, or what could possibly go wrong that the rest of the world begins fading into the background. The more attention we give those frightening possibilities, the larger they seem to become. Sometimes the quickest way to interrupt that spiral is to give our attention a different assignment.

I remember receiving a call from a performer who was preparing to go onstage at the Grand Ole Opry. He was struggling with anxiety, and his mind had become preoccupied with the uncomfortable feelings he was experiencing. Rather than trying to convince him that everything would be fine, I asked him to look closely at his guitar.

His guitar had beautiful, intricate inlaid woodwork, the kind of craftsmanship most people admire without ever examining its smallest details. I asked him to study the patterns, count the individual features, and concentrate on the workmanship. As he began examining the guitar, his attention shifted away from monitoring his anxiety and toward something concrete that required concentration. He went on stage and reported feeling better.

The guitar hadn't changed, the performance was still ahead of him, and we hadn't resolved every concern he might have had about going onstage. What changed was where he directed his attention. Instead of continually examining what was happening inside his body, he became involved in observing something outside himself.

Our attention has a limited capacity. When we're absorbed in anxious predictions, we tend to notice more things that reinforce those predictions. A racing heart becomes another reason to worry, an uncomfortable sensation becomes something to investigate, and before long we're watching ourselves so closely that anxiety has become the main event. Giving the mind a specific, neutral task can interrupt that cycle, even if only temporarily.

Fortunately, you don't need a beautifully decorated guitar or a backstage pass to the Grand Ole Opry. Sometimes I suggest something as ordinary as examining the stitching along a shirt cuff. Look closely at the thread, count twenty stitches, notice the spacing, and see whether you can find a slight variation in the pattern. You might study the grain in a wooden table, count the leaves on a nearby plant, or examine the smallest details in a picture hanging on the wall.

The activity isn't complicated, and that's part of its usefulness. You're giving your attention a manageable task that requires enough concentration to compete with the anxious thoughts demanding your attention. Puzzles, coloring intricate designs, and other activities that involve careful observation can serve a similar purpose.

There's one important distinction, however. Redirecting attention can be a useful parachute when anxiety becomes overwhelming, but we don't want to become convinced that every uncomfortable feeling must

be immediately distracted away. Sometimes we need to learn that anxiety can be experienced and tolerated without treating it as an emergency. That's part of building the bridge we'll explore later.

Put It Into Action

The next time you notice your attention becoming trapped in anxious thoughts or uncomfortable sensations, choose an ordinary object nearby. For one or two minutes, examine it carefully, counting its smallest details, studying its patterns, or noticing features you've never paid attention to before. When your mind wanders back toward anxiety, gently return your attention to the object.

Afterward, notice whether your anxiety has changed, but don't judge the exercise solely by how much relief you experienced. Ask yourself, "Was I able to direct my attention somewhere other than my anxiety?"

Sometimes the most useful tool in the room is hiding in your shirt cuff.

Practice Your Parachutes Before You Need Them

Repetition reduces resistance.

At first, directing your attention away from anxious thoughts may feel awkward or even pointless. That's understandable. You've probably spent years practicing the habit of paying attention to possible dangers. Give yourself some time to practice directing that same attention toward something you actually choose. You're learning a different response, not trying to win a contest against your own thoughts.