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Social Anxiety & Panic Disorder Part 1

Other people can at times can be a source of anxiety for those suffering from panic disorder. Many people with panic disorder suffer from social anxiety.

More specifically, poor communication with other people can at times be immensely frustrating and certainly can make us more anxious. Once we begin to overanalyze some of the perceived negatives then a full blown panic attack is possible.

What is poor communication?

Poor communication is taking the negative aspects of a conversation and generalizing them to the entire way you see yourself.

Let's look at an example.

Imagine that you had just received a performance review from your boss and he had some criticisms about some aspects of your performance.

This naturally would be frustrating. Not necessarily because the criticisms were not valid. Not necessarily because the feedback was not useful. But because your interpretation of the feedback is that it is untrue or unfair and you therefore feel you need to either defend yourself or retreat or find another job.

However there are alternatives.

First, though, it is important not to take a defensive stance because that will just make things worse. Instead you need to find a common point with your supervisor. In other words you need to find something in the feedback that you can agree with.

For example, let's say that one piece of feedback given to you is that you take too long to prepare a certain report. Upon hearing this you immediately think "that's unfair" or "that's untrue".

Page 1 of 3

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Instead of reacting in this way, a better strategy would be to agree and say something like “I appreciate the feedback and this is helpful for me to improve my performance.” Another alternative is to say “I’m sorry that I did not meet your expectations. Can you offer some suggestions on how I could improve?”

That last statement is probably better because it will allow you to focus on the specifics of the feedback received instead of generalizing (like I mentioned above) to your perception of yourself.

This will probably lead to a more positive conversation with your supervisor and more helpful one than simply closing down to the feedback.

I’m sure you have come across persons in your life who were not defensive. They remained calm even when dealing with very challenging people. I think if you look back you will see that they did not take a defensive stance and this could have allowed the other person to feel heard, and they probably found truth or agreed with a part of what the person was saying.

This is not to suggest that other people are always right or that you should agree with everything that is said. But what I’m saying is that not going on the defensive can allow you to not have as much anxiety and can lead to a much more positive outcome – for you and the person you’re interacting with.

Just remember the type of person I mentioned above who does not get defensive with even the more difficult person.

You might be wondering some specifics more about how this directly relates to anxiety or panic attacks?

Well, you likely recall from the beginning and at various times throughout this newsletter I have discussed that a panic attack is the “Fight or Flight Response”. This response is exactly what gets activated when we come into a negative communication situation or encounter a negative person.

But the great news is that you can change how you react to the situation and shut the situation down by not becoming defensive. You do not fuel the anxiety and do not feel like you have to argue with the person.

You are doing the opposite of what you’d normally do in this situation.

You'll recall that I also spoke some time ago that about doing the opposite of what you'd normally do when you become anxious so you can reverse the physiological response of the panic attack because doing so appears to provide feedback to your brain that the "Fight or Flight Response" is not needed.

Furthermore by finding a grain of truth in what the other person is saying – even it's a miniscule point of agreement – there is some agreement, they feel heard, and you're not being defensive.

A great way of improving your handling of difficult communication situations is to role play with another person or even yourself.

Write out an imaginary dialogue and practice what you'd say and how you would not be defensive. You will learn to not think in black and white terms i.e. simply right and wrong.

I'm not suggesting this is always easy but over time it can be a great skill that can serve to reduce your anxiety but also improve your communications with others and bring you closer together.

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