

# Change your mindset, change your life

Laura Fish MS, LMFT

People regularly seek therapy *to get rid of, stop, or eliminate* something in their lives: intrusive thoughts, challenging emotions, and habits/behaviors. Or, they've been avoiding acknowledging these disruptions, but have come to realize they need to do something to stop the pain.

I get it. When we perceive something is getting in our way from wholehearted living, we want it gone. But if we set out to fight what is there, to banish it, or combat it in some way we are actually activating the same brain circuitry that causes the dis-ease in the first place.

Consider this example. A client I am working with came with this goal, "I want *to get rid of* anxiety." Throughout our first session he kept making comments such as, "I need to learn how *to fight* the anxiety." Essentially, he identified anxiety as the root of all his problems.

Yet this mindset of eliminating, stopping, and fighting anxiety, or whatever challenge arises, keeps us stuck. Why? It is a reactive stance at risk of activating the sympathetic nervous system's fight or flight mechanism. The same stress response that leads to the anxiety or other disruption in the first place.

Pause here and really consider that.

When we aim to fight or avoid (flight), we may unintentionally strengthen the brain circuitry that is already overly developed leading to heightened sensitivity to cues of danger/threat.

This may sound strange, I know

Instead, I show clients how to use attuned awareness to recognize and relate to the signals from within us, around us, and between us by strengthening the social engagement system in the brain: to be open and receptive to what arises from a place of nonjudgment, loving-kindness, and compassion for self and others. A non-combative stance. I teach clients the practice of attending and befriending to help them respond, not react, to life's challenges.

I know, this sounds counter intuitive. Stay with me.

The truth is anxiety, or any strong emotion, is a signal of distress/danger from the body, mind, and brain that needs skillful attention. If we try to just shut it down, it will pop back up. Further, we do not want to shut down the brain's mechanism to warn us of danger. Instead, we want to give that system a tune up, so it isn't overly reactive while also learning how to respond to the information it gives us from a more evolved part of the nervous system.

Emotions, recurring thoughts, and bodily sensations serve as signals that something is missing or wrong. Instead of attempting to shut down those signals, I teach clients how

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to R.S.V.P to the invitations from the body/mind/brain continuum with the attuned engagement of attending and befriending.

## Shifting from Reacting to Responding

How does one attend and befriend when challenges arise? Start by cultivating what Daniel Siegel calls a C.O.A.L state of mind: curious, open, accepting and loving. Not combative.

You apply this C.O.A.L mindset toward yourself first: your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and behaviors. They are there to teach you something. They are not an enemy to combat. It starts with this shift in understanding that attending to the challenges within you, around you, and between yourself and others with openness allows you to befriend challenges with attuned awareness.

The goal is to be in-relationship with whatever arises by learning how to identify, understand, express, and eventually manage intrusive or repetitive thoughts, intense emotions, uncomfortable bodily sensations, intense images, and challenging or unhealthy behaviors.

For the client I mentioned with anxiety, instead of perseverating on a partner's words, a coworker's actions, a friend's inattentiveness, or some other external trigger, I helped him notice these triggers, then turn inward with openness and receptivity to explore his state of mind and brain: am I reacting or responding? How do I feel? What do I think? Where do I feel this in my body? Why? What do I believe about myself right now? What do I believe about others? Then before making a choice of how to respond, I showed him how to offer himself nonjudgment, loving-kindness, and compassion starting with, "No wonder I feel this way."

While my client was skeptical of the process, he took the exquisite risk to try attending and befriending. Almost immediately, he felt the intensity of the anxiety lessening. It didn't disappear; but rather, he was able to see it as if from a distance many times, so it didn't flood him. Other times, he became flooded, awash with a cascade of chemicals from his brain signifying danger or threat to his well-being. As time goes on, however, these moments have lessened as he continues to practice the intrapersonal attunement process of attending and befriending.

## Mindset before method

A C.O.A.L mindset is linked to a responsive setting in the brain. It helps us remain in the ventral vagal, or social engagement, system of the brain, rather than the reactive settings of the sympathetic (fight/flight) or dorsal vagal parasympathetic (freeze, faint) nervous system. From this responsive place, you can then use your mind to choose the tools to help you manage, not combat/eliminate/stop/get rid of, your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, images, and behaviors. Over time, this C.O.A.L state of mind leads to

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traits of being a curious, open, accepting, and loving person with a brain wired to respond to challenges from a place of balance rather than reactivity.

Attend and befriend to cultivate lasting change.

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