

Getting Unstuck from Anxiety

Anxiety Camp Can Help

By MELISSA HAMILTON

"Aging and life transitions are common triggers for anxiety disorders, and learning skills for managing anxiety can be important tools in coping with these transitions," says Rich Gallagher, founder of Anxiety Camp.

Gallagher, a practicing marriage and family therapist, developed Anxiety Camp in 2009 as part of his graduate studies. The Camp is designed as a low-cost, community-based program for people who suffer from anxiety disorders such as phobias, social anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), panic attacks, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) as opposed to "stress".

"I have offered it six times since 2009, here and in Pennsylvania. Participants who complete the program have experienced an average 60% reduction in measured anxiety levels, and give it very high ratings (over 4 out of 5)," says Gallagher.

Anxiety levels of participants are measured individually and confidentially at the beginning, middle, and end



Rich Gallagher helps people with social anxiety. (photo Melissa Hamilton)

of the program using the Burns Anxiety Inventory (BAI), under license from Dr. David Burns.

Combining recent research in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with family therapy interventions, Anxiety Camp uses gentle, supportive techniques with no forced exposure. As a unique evidence-based treatment approach, it is designed as a psychoeducational program. It is not considered a support group or a therapy group.

"Many participants suffer from social anxiety - in respect of this, we never call on people or require them to participate, and

there are no "weigh-ins" where people have to discuss their own progress publicly. We do have a 'go-around' at the beginning of each session, where people are welcome to voluntarily share experiences or ask questions, as well as group exercises that are normally done in pairs," says Gallagher.

In a Far Side Cartoon, by Gary Larson, a professor dangles a dark box from a high building. The box contains coiling snakes, and a man pounding to get out. Ironically the caption states, "Professor Gallagher and a controversial technique of simultaneously

confronting the fear of heights, snakes, and the dark" - a far cry from the philosophy Rich Gallagher brings to the group, although humor is sprinkled throughout his workbook. He emphasizes staying within a comfort zone.

As a former anxiety sufferer, Gallagher knows what works. Anxiety Camp may sound like the experience of a campfire with s'mores, but in reality the program is serious education and support. Delivered in a well-lit office, the six-week program focuses on four key evidence-based approaches for managing anxiety- physical relaxation techniques,

cognitive restructuring, gradual exposure, and assertive communication skills.

"Ithaca has excellent resources for people who suffer from anxiety, but many people never seek treatment due to expense or an inability to access these resources. The goal of this program is to teach sufferers and their family members the skills needed to be their own anxiety therapist, in a supportive group setting," says Gallagher.

During the first week, participants are taught deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Learning Diaphragmatic breathing is considered the quickest way to halt symptoms of a panic attack. Improper breathing upsets the balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen in the blood stream, causing a person to feel light headed, dizzy and tense (due to build up of lactic acid in the muscles). Progressive muscle relaxation, developed in the 1920s by Dr. Edmund Jacobson,

is still used as an effective intervention to reduce physical tension and anxiety levels.

The centerpiece of the program, cognitive restructuring, is the process of changing the thoughts that cause anxiety. Cognitive restructuring uses principles based on Dr. David Burns' best-selling book *The Feeling Good Handbook*, describing how thoughts contain "cognitive distortions" (such as black-and-white thinking or overgeneralization) that provoke anxiety. The goal is to change scary thoughts into skills and choices: For example, "I can't go into Wegmans" may get restructured as "I react to how crowded the store is, and how far I am from the door, so here is what I will choose to practice."

In the second half of the program, gradual exposure is introduced. Participants are taught to take small steps, while always staying within their comfort zone. Anxiety Camp emphasizes the importance of

using lots of "outs" to strengthen a person while he or she tests a situation. Staying comfortable and present while expanding the comfort zone is the encouraged motto.

"In my view, the act of practicing is clinically much more important than how much you practice, and many anxiety sufferers remain stuck because they try to do too much and sensitize themselves to their fears - we want them to learn to be fully present and aware in a feared situation. Exposure and practice are what change your neural circuits about fear, and often fears fail catastrophically after a surprisingly small number of baby steps," says Gallagher.

Assertive communications skills are the last lesson of the program. "Social anxieties are statistically among the biggest fears, and we teach people how to use principles from strength-based communication to comfortably assert themselves and respond to people. A key point

here are that these are skills that must be taught, not personality strengths - when you learn and practice using different words in interpersonal situations, your feelings change. Many of these skills are based on my own book *How to Tell Anyone Anything*, which was (briefly!) a national top 10 career skills book when it was released in 2009," says Gallagher.

Gallagher is a nationally known author and public speaker, whose books include a number one customer service bestseller and two top 50 communications skills books. He travels nationwide, training thousands in workplace communication skills every year.

The next session of Anxiety Camp is held February 12th-March 19th. To inquire about participation, contact Rich Gallagher for an intake session at 607-527-0283. The Camp is co-facilitated with Sigrid Kulkowitz MA, MFT.

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