

## AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE ON ANXIETY

*Has the medicalisation of anxiety legitimised living without courage?*



Image: Pexels

**By:** Ben Thornhill

Søren Kierkegaard said that “*Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom...He who has learned to live with anxiety in the right way, has learned the ultimate.*” Martin Heidegger believed that it was a natural symptom of anyone living an authentic life, aware of their own mortality and living towards death with purpose and conviction.

An existential perspective on anxiety is that it is something that all people inevitably encounter; part of the body’s reaction to life’s daily challenges. Challenging ourselves to grow creates unavoidable anxiety. Your goals should make you anxious, otherwise they’re not big enough.

Of course, it is not as simple as “just get on with it.” Sufferers of anxiety need help in overcoming what can become a hugely destructive force in their lives. However, the most crucial aspect of an existential approach to anxiety is the acknowledgment of our freedom to choose to confront it.

But first, the problem: We have a situation where millions of people (nearly 7 million in the US alone) are diagnosed with “General Anxiety Disorder” and gobble up a regular regimen of pills in order to treat it. People are left slightly less anxious but still generally lost. The treatment does not get to the heart of the issue.

In existential psychotherapy a clear distinction is made between normal, existential anxiety and neurotic anxiety. It is the misdiagnosis of the former as a “disorder” that leads to this concerning social trend where people do not take responsibility for their choices and actions.

The misdiagnosis and medicalisation of what is one of life’s natural physiological reactions to stressful situations has several consequences:

- Firstly, the proliferation of unreliable information on the true nature of what constitutes a disorder, invites anyone who gets nervous before a job interview or panics at the thought of public speaking to believe that they have a medical condition.
- Secondly, it validates anxiety as something beyond the control of the sufferer; an illness that needs to be treated or removed entirely. This gives credence to a victim mentality encouraging the sufferer simply to take pills to dampen their symptoms without challenging the root causes.
- Thirdly, it separates the anxiety from the individual; an invader or unwanted host in the mind of the victim, which detaches that person from the root causes of the problem and abrogates their responsibility for dealing with the issue themselves.

When we view anxiety in this way, we validate the right of the sufferer to avoid anxiety provoking situations and allow them to remove their anxiety with medication. But surely the use of medication can only be effectively used in conjunction with other lifestyle changes and, most crucially, a heavy dose of courage?

The removal of all anxiety is neither desirable nor possible as it is a natural bodily process without which we would never have survived as a species. The removal of anxiety from our lives has shades of a dystopian future such as that experienced in Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World' where, unable to deal with anxiety or pain, citizens are allowed unlimited access to Soma, a wonder drug that removes all pain and anxiety and has no side effects.

Without actually confronting the underlying causes of the anxiety, the impact on the life of the sufferer will be limited because they are still not learning to overcome their anxiety in order to meet their needs.

If we condone removing anxiety with drugs and yet go no further in helping the sufferer combat anxiety avoids behaviours, these behaviours will continue to be ingrained, which still leaves the anxiety in control of the individual's decision-making processes. Unless we change the behaviour so that the individual can meet their needs more independently in future, any treatment will still inevitably lead to depression and despair.

There are therefore many lessons we can learn from existential thought that could help to tackle anxiety more effectively. First of all, we need to acknowledge by labelling anxiety an illness or disorder, something that can be treated or removed, we separate it from the existential struggles of the sufferer.

Here, the ideas of Rollo May and Max Scheler can be helpful. Scheler argued that we need to go beyond understanding the human mind in abstract ways and address the whole person, not as a machine that can be chemically rebalanced, but a being with social, psychological and spiritual needs. May argued that our goal should not be to avoid or do away with all anxiety (we could not survive completely without it) but being able to live, as much as possible, without neurotic anxiety and the ability to tolerate and confront, the unavoidable existential anxiety of living.

Anxiety is an indicator of something that needs to be addressed, not avoided or dampened. It highlights a disconnection between the person that they need to be and the person that they currently perceive that they are. And the most effective way of closing that gap is for the sufferer to acknowledge their own responsibility for their life situation and making positive choices to improve it.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that we are our choices and that we have both the tools and responsibility to create an authentic existence of meaning and purpose through our freedom of choice. The choices we face in order to meet our needs in life are rarely the easy ones. However, in Western culture where convenience and safety are paramount, people are unused to struggle. A daily affirmation of the need to choose to act with courage and overcome one's anxieties in order to become the person one wants to be would be an alien concept to many.

But this culture leads to people seeing anxiety as unnatural; they avoid anxiety provoking situations and end up loathing themselves because they are unable to meet their needs so they become disillusioned. The very thing they need, they "can't" do because of their anxiety. And by labelling it a disorder, we validate giving into its malign influence and reinforce behaviour patterns that will not treat the root causes of the problems.

An existential therapist's approach, put simply, would be as follows:

- Analyse the decision-making apparatus of the client and identify when anxiety is allowed to take over and become a destructive force in that person's life.
- Uncover the value-system of the client; identify personal strengths and talents that give the client a motivation to tackle the underlying causes of their anxiety.
- Urge the client to make choices in accordance with their value-system - not their fears - and utilise their strengths in a healthy productive way and begin to create the life of purpose and meaning that they deserve, but have previously been denied by learning to submit to anxiety.
- Help the client to acknowledge the fact that they have a responsibility to themselves to create their own life situation and that only they can choose to move forward resolutely and make the changes required to become the person they want to be.

The choices we face might make us feel almost hysterically nervous and leave us vulnerable to failure, but they at least give us the opportunity to create the existence that we owe ourselves. In the modern world, those who choose cour-

ageously are rewarded; they face their anxiety, overcome the situation and learn that there are immense benefits to being able to face their fears; they learn to take risks and leave themselves open to the potential rewards.

We need to acknowledge that anxiety is a part of life. To face it requires courage. The more we face it, the easier it becomes to make the courageous choice. The more we shy away from it, the longer we stall. Taking medication, avoiding it, or using it as an excuse for inaction are no solutions. Seeing it as a call to courage; a call to meet our needs in order to live a healthy and fulfilling life is something that we can learn from existentialism.

At present, I believe society legitimises not acting courageously in the face of anxiety; existentialism advocates living courageously with it. Acknowledging our power to choose the courageous choice is a big part of that. As Sartre would say: We are our choices; we are the ones who choose how we perceive and act in the world; we can learn to choose courage in the face of anxiety and thereby create a better world for ourselves.

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