



What are the costs of believing anxiety is the villain in your life?

Hating your beast is a losing proposition because *anxiety is normal!* A normal human life consists of feeling a range of emotions — happiness, sadness, anger, and fear — in every shade, flavour, and combination. You don't get to see this, however, by observing other people's social masks — the version of themselves that they show the outside world. By observing most people's calm exterior, it is easy to get the impression that there is a way to become completely anxiety-free.

When you buy into this notion that anxiety is a villain that must be eradicated, like society tells you, you'll be left feeling like you've failed when inevitably your beast will roar. This perceived failure can lead to feeling blame and shame on top of your anxiety. And you will also continue to feel that you have an adversary living inside your mind, tormenting you with the noise of its continued existence!

When I was a young, naive psychology student at Northeastern University, I thought training to be a psychologist would be like going to Hogwarts and learning 'magical' ways to forever rid people of their unpleasant emotions.

What I saw in every single research study on anxiety, however, was that even the best interventions, in the best of studies, did not bring anxiety down to zero — or anywhere close to a complete 'cure'. They did, however, lessen the howling of the anxiety beast for most people and improve their quality of life, which are wonderful things, but anxiety to some degree remains a fact of life.

Viewing anxiety as a villain gives you anxiety about your anxiety

How do you feel when you run into the villainous people in your life? Maybe it is that 'friend' with whom you had a nasty falling out? Or perhaps it is your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend who cheated on you? Or, maybe it's your former boss who was a nightmare to work for?

How does it feel in your body and in your mind when you inadvertently bump into one of those people at a social gathering that you didn't even want to attend? Your heart rate increases, your muscles tense, a sense of dread emerges, and an urge to avoid arises — or aggressive feelings towards them may feel overwhelming.

If that villain is your own emotion that lives within your own nervous system, then that dread turns inward, time and time again. You can't hide from your own mind for long. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "Wherever you go, there you are."



And this technology has recently become very tightly woven into the fabric of our daily existence.

What is one of the first things most people do when they wake up in the morning? They jump into the digital world of the Internet and their smartphones. For so many people, it is also the last thing they do before trying to go to sleep at night.

And guess what is stuffed in between? More and more social media, always-connected messaging, 24-hour news cycles, binge-watching shows, and the evermore sophisticated personalization of advertisements.

If you could travel back in time to 50 years ago and explain this to someone from our pre-Internet history, they might think you are describing a science-fiction novel — but it is very real.



More interactions among young people are virtual these days. A reported 90 percent of young adults in the USA use social media daily, and one in four adolescents report using it 'almost constantly'. Increasing social media use is related to rising anxiety levels in some of us.

This increase in anxiety is due to multiple factors. One factor is the increasing negative online feedback that young people are receiving from peers — up to the point of malicious cyber-bullying. Communicating through a device rather than looking a fellow human being in the eye, makes it easier to treat another person rudely and even cruelly.

One's home has historically been a place to be soothed from the trials of the outer world. No longer. Rejection can now barge into your home, even into your very bed, courtesy of the electronic device in the palm of your hand.

Another challenge with social media is that stressful events in other people's lives are now instantly beamed directly to you. For much of human history, we had a very small tribe to worry about. Our modern tribe is now virtually unlimited — and the trauma experienced (and Tweeted about) of someone on the other side of the world can negatively impact your wellbeing (although it can serve as a useful call to action).

And then there is the 'fear of missing out' or FOMO.

FOMO is now a worldwide anxiety-producing phenomenon. No matter where you are in the world, there is an Instagram photo giving you the message that you are at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people eating the wrong things and feeling the wrong emotion! No matter where you are or what you're doing, you are wrong — just wrong!

Anxiety gets louder when you are observing the social media pics and posts of other people and then negatively comparing yourself and your life to the content of those posts.

Your life, when viewed through the social media comparison lens, is never good enough. While trying to enjoy that long-awaited beach getaway, you see a post of your friends having a wonderful time at a party and you feel like you are the one missing out!

Or, perhaps it is your friend who is posting glamorous pictures of their

What do you think about your anxiety?

Tick all that applies to you in the box below.

I HATE it!
I just want it to go and leave me in peace!
It's a disease and I need to cure it!
It's like a demon, invading my brain and trying to make me suffer!
It's trying to defeat me at my own life!
It's my enemy and I must fight it or get away from it!
Other people live calm lives while I am cursed by anxiety!
It delights in tormenting me.
It is the villain in my life's story!
It's all of the above and oh so much more!

Where does the belief that anxiety is 'bad' come from?

Why is anxiety the emotion we love to hate?

Because it's uncomfortable!

You're just trying to peacefully live your life when, suddenly, your anxiety beast starts to howl! By howling, I mean your brain is flooded with thoughts and images of danger and dread.

You're going to get fired!

You're losing control!

You're going to have a panic attack!

You're going to have a heart attack!

You might pass out!

You might fail the test!

You can't escape!

You won't make it back to safety!

You'll never make it to the bathroom in time!

You're going to choke! (metaphorically or literally)

You're going to humiliate yourself!

You'll never feel better!

Nobody here likes you!

You might suffocate!

The plane will crash!

You're going to die!

List some of your anxiety thoughts:

Your beast's noisy howling in your mind is accompanied by physical howling within your body. You may experience a range of sensations, including:

- agitation
- irritability
- muscle tension
- sweating
- shaking
- numbness
- heart pounding or palpitations
- chest pain
- stomach discomfort, maybe to the point of vomiting
- frequent urination or bowel movements

Dedication

To the anxiety beast in all of us.
Even though you are mistaken most of the time, you are
always trying to help. Those times you get it right are key
to our survival.
Thank you for your vigilant watch.

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