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Do these Three Words Cause Panic: Anxiety Social Situations?

As is typical, I will look at a question/comment from a subscriber to the Panic Attack Recovery Newsletter so that we can look at the anxiety producing thoughts and do some cognitive restructuring together.

If you are able to work through the process with me, rather than just reading, you will glean the most benefit. It's great practice.

You may find that the process seems very basic or unhelpful if you just read these things, but actually working through the examples and using the process with your own thoughts can be very beneficial to you.

So let's look this week's example which came from a subscriber of the newsletter.

Question: "I hate the feeling of panic attacks and I also travel overseas a lot with my job and have had attacks whilst half way around the world from home (scary). I am also making excuses to my partner so I don't have to go out to crowded places in fear of having an attack."

Answer:

For the purposes of this example, let's say that the person's name making the above is Jack. I will always substitute a name and would never breach anyone's privacy when they send questions/comments but these examples can be useful for everyone not just the person submitting them,

First, I would recommend to all subscribers that they try to identify the cognitive distortions present in Jack's thinking by reviewing the list of cognitive distortions that can be found at the end of the installment.

Once you have done so, come back to this spot and see if we have agreement. Remember this is a great way to practice the process which can be applied to your own thoughts. (If you don't remember the Cognitive Distortions, you can scan down to the section listing Cognitive Distortions; otherwise the rest of the installment probably won't be as useful as it could be for you.

So what distortions are present?:

1. Disqualifying the positive is present because while undoubtedly Jack is very scared from his panic attacks when they happen away from the home, the very fact that he can

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travel around the world is a testament to his braveness and is a very positive thing and shows that he can cope with things.

2. Emotional Reasoning is likely present because Jack is concluding that because he feels bad (i.e. scared or anxious), things are really bad.

3. Jumping to Conclusions is likely present when Jack thinks about social situations and obviously becomes very nervous to the point that he makes up excuses to his partner so he does not have to go into social situations. Jack likely does some “mind reading” perhaps thinking folks may see him as strange or see some other defect and in a sense does some “fortune telling” that this will be the case.

Let’s now look at some alternative thoughts:

1. Jack is travelling around the world and obviously able to hold his own when he needs to. In a previous installment a while back I suggested that when we push ourselves beyond our comfort zone we can often do things we normally would not do. I went further to suggest that this is the place (outside our comfort zone) where the panic attack sufferer needs to get to – thus getting outside of their regular anxious behaviours.

The difference here is clear: Jack needs to travel because of his job so he is able to do it (he’s pushing himself beyond the comfort zone); but he can, for now, avoid social situations by making excuses.

Jack is probably aware that he cannot continue to make excuses to his partner because eventually his partner is not likely going to be very happy because they can never go out together in social situations. It would be best for Jack to be open with his partner about his inhibitions. I would suggest that this is part of Jack’s problem: he doesn’t want anyone to know that he is anxious. But if he could let other people know that he’s anxious or even if he does something perhaps a little silly, he would realize that the world won’t come to an end after he does such a thing. If he makes a mistake or does something goofy people aren’t likely to do very much at all. Folks in social situations are all probably quite busy thinking from their own personal perspective to even notice.

2. As mentioned Jack is disqualifying the positive in his life and seemingly not realizing that he can in fact travel around the world. This is an important point for him to realize because entering social situations can’t be any scarier than being away from home. Moreover, there are strategies/techniques that he can do to alleviate his anxiety in these situations and when he is away from home. Many have been discussed throughout this newsletter.

3. I also mentioned that Jack is emotionally reasoning that because he feels anxious and experiences panic attacks while he is away, he concludes that things really are very bad. While it’s undoubtedly true that a panic attack it can be very stressful, I would suggest

that the situation is not near as dire as it may seem to Jack considering he has been surviving thus far.

Additionally, many folks even without anxiety would no doubt feel nervous being away from home or in social situations. The only difference is that the anxiety/panic sufferer lets this stop him/her from going into uncomfortable situations when they can avoid them. However, once one gets to a point of gradually going back into situations and learning to relax even when anxiety begins to creep in, they will likely begin making more and more progress.

In closing, you may recall my mentioning in the past that I have used hypnosis to relax from anxiety and panic attacks and that the benefits of inducing relaxation instead of the fight or flight response can not only be effective while you do it, but rather the benefits can carry into one's daily activities and be something they can summon when required.

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