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## **Overwhelming Anxiety: A Structured Approach To Anxiety**

If you've ever known people who are quite calm and not easily thrown off base then you have probably noticed they can have a calming effect on a negative environment or situation.

I want to share a personal experience with you.

When I had my first panic attack it was a bad one and I called 911 and was taken to hospital by ambulance because I really thought I was having a heart attack (and losing my mind). On the way to the hospital I was having all kinds of anxious thoughts and I remember how calm and unflappable the paramedic was - but not in a detached way. He was very attentive to me and very positive.

Of course, as a paramedic, this behaviour is very important but the point I want to make is that this calm behaviour was very comforting to me. Whenever I expressed a particular fearful thought that was on my mind (in my panic attack) he responded in a very positive but grounded and positive way. I have seen this approach carried countless times with experienced and talented health care workers and it is incredibly amazing and helpful.

Obviously as someone who's sometimes anxious you might be wondering where I'm headed with this. Well I'm trying to show by example a concept that I would like to refer to as a Structured Approach To Anxiety. A Structured Approach to Anxiety can similarly have a calming effect as a person with a calming demeanor.

What do I mean by a Structured Approach to Anxiety?

I'm referring to the idea of continuing to move forward in the face of fear by only dealing with one thing at a time. This is part of what the paramedic did. He continued to move forward with a structured approach. If you ask anyone who has had to deal with a crisis they will tell you the important thing was to keep going. To keep moving. Well rather than being simply the victim of racing thoughts you can regain control with a structured approach to anxiety.

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This is very important because as someone who's had panic attacks you are likely aware how your thoughts can race and how you can have so many thoughts going on in your head.

Another example:

Think for a moment how an effective meeting works. In order to be of use a meeting has to have "order". In other words one person speaks at a time (ideally) and if too many people speak at once nothing gets done - things keep going in circles. This is the same thing that happens with your thoughts - you have too many thoughts going on in too short of time - it's like everyone talking at once - and you get completely overwhelmed.

The trick then is structuring your approach so you take charge and keep your attention on one thought at a time, and when another thought tries to take your attention away from it, move your mind back to the initial thought. Once you are done dealing with the first thought then you can move on to the next.

This can also sometimes happen with people when they try to fall asleep or awaken during the night. Instead of trying to simply not think about anything at all you keep your attention on one at a time.

So here are the steps:

1. You need to first become aware of your tendency to have these racing thoughts during a panic attack
2. You need to make a commitment to change to a more structured and proactive approach (i.e. "taking charge").
3. This will take time and practice but the payoffs can be very rewarding.
4. When you are focusing on one thought and another begins to "tug at you", go back to putting your attention on the thought you were currently working on.

You are probably asking what the heck I mean by "working on thoughts"

This is where step #5 comes in.

5. Use Cognitive Therapy (CBT) Approach. In a nutshell the steps of CBT are: a. write down your thought b. locate the cognitive distortion(s) in your thought c. write down some alternative, more accurate thoughts.

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The importance of writing down each thought, one at a time, is that it makes it easier to keep your attention focused and it is like putting your thought under the magnifying glass (metaphorically speaking).

Think about someone who is leaving you a voicemail vs. sending you an email. With their email (which if of course in text form) you can read it at your pace and analyze each word if you wish - you do not have the option to do so when someone leaves you a voicemail and that's why typically people will write things down like the caller's name, phone number, and other important information. My point here is that writing things down - your thoughts - makes them easier to work with.

A Structured Approach to Anxiety can be very helpful for people who have a hard time with more racing thoughts and people who have a hard time responding to panic in a detached way. By detached I'm referring to the idea of just letting things happen. If just letting things happen works for you then by all means keep going with it but my experience has been that a detached approach does not always work - hence I'm suggesting a structured approach to anxiety.

This is a type of discipline that you can learn over time and it can be very helpful not only with anxiety and panic attacks but with staying focused in life.

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