OCD and Anxiety: The Value of Doing Nothing

Angela Couch RN MSN PMHNP-BC
and
Jennifer Wells LISW-S
Objectives

• Provide and overview of anxiety and OCD
• Identify the reinforcing nature of neutralizing behaviors
• Explore what is involved with “doing nothing”
Anxiety

• An intense spike of physiological distress that may or may not have associated thoughts/worries
  • Racing heart
  • Shortness of breath
  • Butterflies
  • Churning or upset stomach
  • Sweating or cold chills
  • Fight or flight
  • Often cues a reaction “need to do something to fix this”
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

- Unwanted thoughts, feelings, images or urges that cause intense distress
- Attempts to neutralize or avoid the distress via compulsive physical or mental behaviors or rituals
  - Reassurance seeking (internet research, asking others)
  - Ritual prayer
  - Handwashing
  - Organizing
  - Avoiding certain situations or triggers
  - Re-doing compulsions
  - Checking
- Relief is temporary, and distress is reinforced and returns, therefore locking in the need to “do something” again
Evolution and Anxiety

• Fight or Flight...
  • Those with good instincts went on to survive and procreate, because they sensed dangers ahead and took action that could be life-saving

• Freeze...
  • Those that did not react were eaten by saber tooth tigers and perished in other Jumanji-reminiscent ways
Human Nature: “Anxiety is a problem, so do something!!”
What are some of the “things” that people do?

• Resist
• Reassure themselves
• Self medicate
• Engage in compulsions
• Stall/ procrastinate
• Avoid triggering situations
• Use “crutches” or safety behaviors
• Worry (mentally engage with the content)
Anxiety: Trying To Do “Something”
Anxiety: Doing “Nothing”
Seeing Anxiety Differently?

• Need to reframe our thinking on anxiety
  • Humans continue to experience anxiety, but “threats” are different, and no longer include saber tooth tigers
  • Reframe anxiety as not inherently “bad,” it’s just a misguided attempt to protect ourselves

• Anxiety as a helper
  • Motivates us to do things that need done
  • Helps us meet deadlines
  • Reminds us what we care about
  • Uncertainty and unknowns create excitement
The Excitement of Not Knowing
Why Not Do “Something?”

• Reinforces the idea that all anxiety is bad and intolerable
• Makes the anxiety stronger over time
• Over time, you may find you need to do more and more to manage the anxiety adequately
  • Example—OCD related rituals may get longer or more complex over time
What is “Nothing?”

• Be an observer
• Enjoy the game
• Set limits on “worry” time
• Acceptance
• Don’t engage
Non-Engagement Responses

• Give a label (“that’s just my anxiety”)

• Pretend to agree with anxious thoughts
  “whatever” “it’s possible” “if you say so”

• Lean into it
  • “bring it on”

• Engage in value-driven behaviors
Performance anxiety case example

• High schooler is trying out for the varsity baseball team and is having physiological anxiety and “what if?” anxious thoughts
Examples of doing “Something”

• Asking a friend whether they think I should bother or not
• Practicing my throwing over and over until I get it “just right”
• Staying up all night reviewing the right moves in my head, and planning how I will handle myself at tryouts
• Not eating before tryouts in case I’m nauseated, and taking the medication the doctor gave me “just in case” I have a panic episode
• Mentally practicing what I’ll do if I have to throw up
• Coming up with an excuse to avoid trying out so I’m not embarrassed
Examples of doing “Nothing”  
(Non-Engagement Responses)

• “Thanks for the reminder that tryouts are important to me!”
• “Yup, it’s possible that I won’t make the team and I will embarrass myself trying.”
• “Oh good, it’s time for tryouts. I hope that my anxiety is out of control!”
• “If I throw up, the coach will know that I am really committed!”
• Focus attention on the physical aspects of the sport.
OCD case example

• An individual with OCD is highly distressed over the unwanted images they have about harming their new puppy.
Examples of doing “Something”

• Arranging to not be alone with the puppy
• Making sure the knives are put away
• Always taking off the collar
• Avoiding playing with the puppy
• Trying to get reassurance from my boyfriend and parents that I would never do something like that
Examples of doing “Nothing”  
(Non-Engagement Response)

• “Good one, OCD! I predicted that you would use my new puppy against me.”
• “It’s possible that today is the day that I will finally turn into a puppy abuser!”
• “I want to have this obsession many times today because it will remind me that I am doing a good job interacting with my puppy.”
• Play with the puppy!
Conclusion

• Pulling back to avoid anxiety makes it stronger and prolongs the anxiety (sensitization)

• Leaning in to anxiety weakens it and over time leads to habituation (desensitization)
Assignment

Leave here and do one thing outside your comfort zone today!