

# Me, My Heart and Anxiety

*Anne Crump's presentation at the Somerville Foundation Annual Conference September 2017, adapted for GUCH News*

One of the topics people most often I get most calls about is anxiety. My focus here will be on some of the links between anxiety and living with a heart condition, what happens in our bodies and minds when we get fearful and stressed. Then, moving on to think about ideas from the latest research on how we can learn new ways to embrace and live with our experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, befriending our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, so that they become less overwhelming.

## **Anxiety**

We are all familiar with anxious feelings, scary thoughts and worries, these are part of living, coming and going as we navigate our way through all the ups and downs, .... things that happen to us,... and uncertainties in life. Sometimes that anxiety starts to get out of hand and interfere with our daily lives, perhaps limiting what we do. This might present itself in many different guises and levels of severity, ranging from a generalised sense of disquiet; or finding it hard to stop worrying, fears about forthcoming events such as surgery; or stress, difficulty coping with life,.... to suffering from panic attacks, anxiety disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

When people talk with me about their experience of anxiety or panic it is often linked with some aspect of their heart condition such as:

- heart rhythm disturbance, pain or discomfort in the chest area
- breathlessness, fatigue
- related to experiences of surgery (whether past and/or forthcoming)
- changes in health and the fears someone might have for themselves and the future
- some people have also described to me a sense of feeling 'different' with an underlying awareness of their heart condition and worrying thoughts about what might happen.

Many people have found it reassuring when I tell them that anxiety in some form is an issue that many people born with a heart condition call me about. This already makes it feel different to how it had felt to them – rather than perhaps thinking there was something peculiar or weak about them as a person. Quite often we take things on ourselves - it is easy to think it is a personal failing rather than a recognisable and understandable consequence of what's been happening in their lives. Unfortunately, I think this sometimes stops people asking for help, which is another reason why I thought I'd talk about this topic today. I'm going to move on to explaining a little about how our body responds to stress and anxiety.

## How the body responds to anxiety & stress

When we feel stressed, anxious or under threat the body responds automatically, ready to fight, or run away, or we might freeze up, called the '*fight, flight or freeze reaction*'. A whole process is set off in our brains and bodies: Adrenaline and other hormones are released into the body, breathing becomes quicker and more shallow, the heart beats faster, muscles tense, palms become sweaty, and thoughts start racing, you might feel a bit sick, have a dry mouth, feel light headed or spacey. All ready for action. We all know what it is like when someone or something makes us 'jump'.

## Living with the threat reaction

As human beings we are primed to look out for the threat and danger, the bad or risky thing that can happen. This has kept us alive for millennia so it has many benefits in protecting us.

As human beings we also think and give meaning to our experiences. Sometimes our thoughts can lead us astray, in thinking a situation or sensations are dangerous when they aren't. We get caught up in our thoughts, with what might happen, all those 'what if's. . . often jumping to the worst possible conclusions.

Our thoughts can easily get on a negative roll – '*what's happening, my heart's beating quite fast, maybe something's wrong, , maybe I'm going to have a heart attack*'. The more we focus on those sorts of thoughts the more we set off or fuel the whole threat reaction, the heart beat faster, we feel shaky, breathless, a bit spacey etc and it can become a vicious circle.



We can also become fearful of feeling anxious and what happens in our bodies with that rush of adrenaline. Thankfully the threat response of our body does and will pass of its own accord. You could liken it to an ocean wave rising, falling and then dissolving.

So understanding what happens in our bodies and minds and how we react to stress and threat is really important. I invite you to consider this idea for your own situation. It's important as it helps us distinguish the difference between what is part of an anxious or threat response and what isn't. This is complicated by any underlying physical symptoms of your heart condition that are similar to those of the threat response, such as breathlessness or a fast heart rate.

*For example: I am feeling breathlessness: is that because have exerted myself by running up the stairs and is a natural consequence of exercise, or because I'm getting anxious for some reason and my automatic threat response (triggered by a memory that's popped into my head of when I found it hard to catch my breath and got really panicky) , or is a level of breathlessness usual for me in relation to how my circulatory system is at this present time, or is it a change or a difference that I need to take notice of and need to consult my doctor about.*

Do check with your doctor or cardiologist if you are unsure whether the symptoms you are experiencing are associated with your heart condition or with anxiety or possibly something else.

The more we get to know ourselves and what is usual/normal for our particular body and how we tend to react physically, mentally and emotionally to anxiety, threat and arousal in the body, the easier it becomes to make that judgement. In this spirit of curiosity, we can also gain information about what might trigger and set off our feelings of anxiety and what might keep us in an anxious state. Developing our self-awareness also helps in moving forward in learning new ways to be with and address those anxious thoughts and feelings. We can also build on our capacity to soothe and calm ourselves and help turn off the threat response.

### **Being with what is**

There are many things we can't change in life, such as, living with a heart condition and how that might manifest itself with possible particular symptoms of discomfort or challenges that need to be faced. We are not able to stop our automatic threat response to perceived danger getting set off – that's going to happen, we can't control it.

We can however look the ways we react to our experiences, at how we deal with our day to day living with a heart condition. Here I mean all our emotional, mental and physical reactions to our particular circumstances, which include anxiety, worries or scary thoughts, frustration, or physical tension. It's here where we have the chance to make changes and create new relief for ourselves. The thinking part of our brain, as well as generating worries, can also be trained to assist in how we interpret anxious and other habitual reactions and sensations in our minds and bodies.

### **What we resist persists**

The more we fight and struggle with anxiety, pain or discomfort or try to push these away, the worse it gets. Often as a very human response, we move between resisting – *'I don't want this to be happening'*, to feeling completely caught up in the experience and overwhelmed, and so, losing perspective.

With anxiety we can also become frightened of feeling anxious and how our body responds, and so start to do less and less to try and avoid those feelings and sensations.

Learning to befriend ourselves and cultivating a gentleness towards our experiences both pleasant and unpleasant, is the way to start to retrain our minds and have different experiences.

**The more we can find ways to tolerate anxiety and become less afraid of our reactions, the more we can move towards being accepting of 'what is' while reducing or overcoming the suffering caused by our reactions.**

## Befriending ourselves

Befriending ourselves, our bodies and our hearts is a way of getting in a different relationship with our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Becoming curious, tuning in to our inner experience, seeing how our mind and body work together, taking time to recognise our habitual reactions. One way to think about this is to imagine your symptoms/bodily sensations and reactions as if they were a puppy.

So imagine for a moment you had a new puppy:

- how they might be as a puppy might depend on its breed, size, its personality, natural disposition
- you might need to get used to the puppy being around
- spend time with the puppy to get to know their little ways
- what excites, perplexes, comforts them
- if you noticed a change you might wonder about it and seek to explore what might be helpful or needed.
- find ways to soothe or comfort your puppy if they become distressed
- as the puppy grows, different adjustments might need to be made in relation to their care



So what might this mean for you? In the same way as described for the puppy, you can look gently at your experience, wonder about it and listen to yourself – *for instance noticing and wondering about one of your symptoms or worries, observing what your automatic thoughts or reactions might be and how these affect you. Taking time to pause so you can consider your responses. Trying to get alongside those experiences rather than caught up in them or resisting them.*

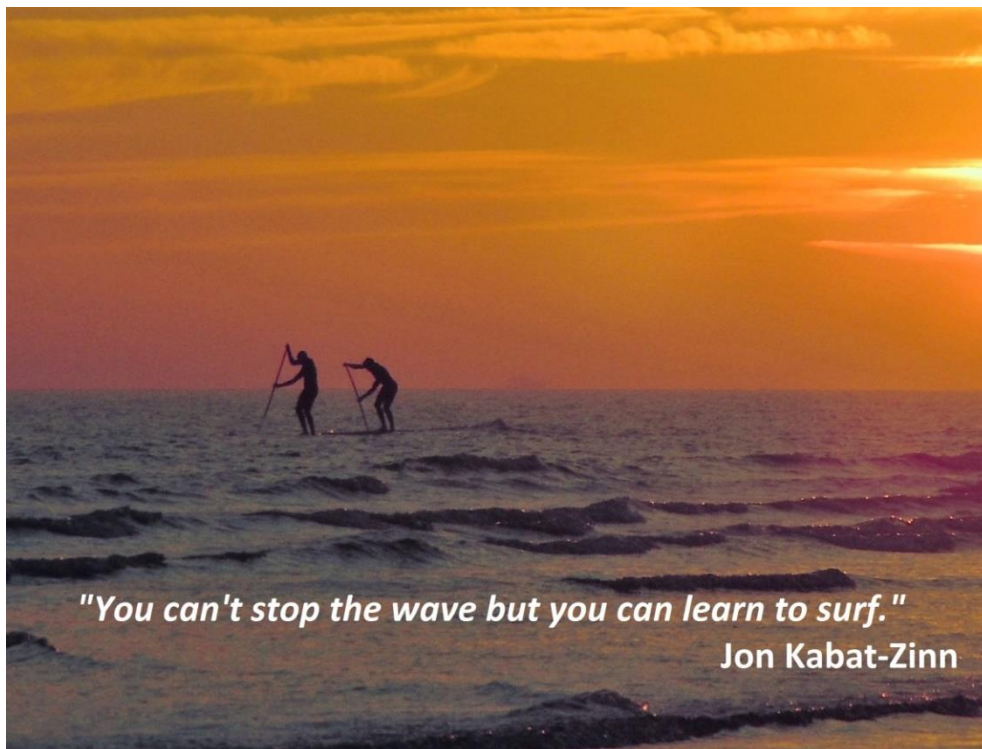
Research shows that the more we can mindfully focus in the present rather than on all those scary “what ifs”, the less anxious we will tend to feel. Thoughts are just thoughts, they are not facts and not necessarily true. Feelings do tend to pass if we hold on in there. Our threat response and rush of adrenaline also, like an ocean wave, will rise and disperse. To quote Jon Kabat-Zinn:

*“You can’t stop the wave but you can learn to surf.”*

Cultivating a non-judgemental and kindly attitude towards yourself is vital. Finding ways to encourage, soothe, support and talk to yourself as you might a best friend or loved one. Sometimes we can be very harsh with ourselves and add further to our distress. Even blame ourselves for getting stressed or for how we react and cope with life when we are doing the best we can.

Remember that *learning to be **with*** discomfort and anxiety rather than avoiding or pushing away or fighting it, is an ongoing process, it takes time and attention and requires practice and gentleness. Some days are always easier than others.

Nurturing ourselves and factoring into our lives all those things that we know lift our spirits, buoy us up, help us relax and de-stress all play a powerful part in this as well.



Befriending ourselves is a way to learn to surf and move with the ebb and flow of our thoughts, feelings and experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. Acknowledging there are going to be waves, sometimes the sea will get rough. How can we move with the swell rather than fighting against the tide and ride the waves to calmer waters.

## What might help

There are many things that can assist us to befriend ourselves and help us address our anxious thoughts and feelings or those particular experiences associated with panic attacks or post traumatic stress disorder. Depending on how you are as a person, some may suit you more than others. Here is a selection:

- Calming breathing technique
- Relaxation exercises
- Use of the imagination and visualisation
- Grounding exercises
- Mindfulness
  
- Talking therapies
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Counselling
- Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)
  
- Exercise
- Yoga or Tia Chi
- Getting out into nature
- Creative activities: singing, writing, dance and drama

Sometimes even if something hasn't worked for you it can be worth returning to it for another try. There are also a small percentage of people who become more anxious when trying to focus on particular techniques such as, calm breathing and relaxation exercises and so they may be better to exploring other options which can be helpful.

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