

eWellness magazine

Lower the Anxiety Associated With Change: Recognizing the Positives and Eliminating the Negatives

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It is likely there have been situations when you have asked yourself, "Why are there times when I experience anxiety relative to a change I am facing in my life?"

To answer this question, let's start by thinking of your replies to the following few simple questions:

1. What do you think has the potential of creating more anxiety: the change associated with taking a bus to work in the morning or the change associated with having an operation to repair your knee?
2. What do you think has the potential of creating more anxiety: the change associated with rearranging a room of furniture at work or the change associated with moving an entire business to a new location?
3. What do you think has the potential of creating more anxiety: the change associated with driving your car across town or the change associated with flying on an airplane across the country?

While the answers seem absurdly obvious and probably the associations between the questions may have some similarity in characteristics, there are definitely differences between the examples that are relevant to our quest to understand the relationship between anxiety and change.

In the first question, the major reason the anxiety associated with the operation on your knee is more likely to occur is due to how much more significant having an operation is relative to taking a bus to work. So the level of **significance** associated with a specific change will tend to influence the potential anxiety you experience.

In the second question, it is the level of **difficulty** that is a driver in determining the potential for anxiety. It is far more difficult to move an entire business operation to another location than it is to simply rearrange a few pieces of office furniture. We need to recognize that no matter how you want to personally define difficulty, the more difficulty you have associated with a change the more likely you are to experience the potential of anxiety.

Finally, the third question raises the issue of **control**. When you are driving the car you are completely in control. So generally speaking, you are more likely to experience less anxiety, when you are in control than when you are not in control—as in the case of relying on an airline and its pilot to fly you where you want to go. It is an interesting dynamic that having control of a situation can often greatly reduce the level of anxiety associated with a change, even when that change fails to occur.

A lack of control can also be associated with the unknown. Even though a change might be fairly simple, if an individual, organization, or society faces a change that contains a lot of unknowns, the unknowns create a feeling of a lack of control. This then increases the potential for anxiety.

For example, taking a train from one city to another city can be a relatively straightforward way of obtaining the change of traveling between locations. However, if you have never taken a train before and/or you are in a new city, there can be the potential for a great deal of anxiety associated with this change because the unknown creates a perception of a lack of control. So it is a lack of control that in turn increases the potential for anxiety. If you continue to take this same train in the future between the cities, chances are your anxiety will probably decrease, given that you become more familiar (that is, more experienced) with the change, resulting in a feeling of being more in control.

It is also important to realize that significance, difficulty, and control are not just individual characteristics but are, in fact, dynamics that can be interacting with each other relative to the same change. For example, a change can be very significant, but if you believe that you have a great deal of control over the change, then the anxiety that might otherwise exist can be tempered or even completely negated.

So the level of significance, difficulty, and control play a considerable role in the amount of anxiety that can be associated with any given change we are facing and the following rules can be applied:

- The greater the significance associated with a change, the greater the potential for anxiety.
- The greater the difficulty associated with a change, the greater the potential for anxiety.
- The greater the control you have associated with a change, the lower the potential for anxiety.
- Significance, difficulty, and control can be interacting simultaneously relative to a given change, thereby, creating a set of mixed dynamics relative to the anxiety that exists with any given change that we face.

It is important to note that these rules apply to us not only as individuals but also as organizations and societies. In fact, much of history has been influenced by the anxiety associated with the change an organization or a society was facing. For example, there is a good chance that you have been employed by, or maybe even managed, a business organization that completely reorganized itself because of its anxiety about its ability to remain competitive in the changing marketplace. Or how about a society that went to war because of its anxiety over an actual or perceived loss of control in its access to food, water, or other resources.

Now that we have established the main drivers behind anxiety and change, is there *why* behind these relationships?

The answer to “why” exists in the fact that you realize that you are not always successful in obtaining the change you desire. If you know that the change you desire will always take place, then there would be no reason to have any anxiety. However, through experience, you have come to recognize that a desired change cannot be guaranteed.

You also have learned to realize the ramifications and affects associated with significance, difficulty, and control and this inability to obtain guaranteed change. From the time you were a baby on you have accumulated a vast conscious and unconscious knowledge base relative to change. This knowledge base has inherently provided you with the ability to realize that change is not guaranteed and has created recognition that significance, difficulty, and control can play a major role when attempting to obtain a desired change.

It has also inherently created a defense mechanism in the form of anxiety that helps bring certain change from the unconscious to the conscious where you are more likely to focus on it relative to everything else going on in your daily life. Even though in the end there might not be anything you can do about increasing the potential for success, this anxiety response provides you with an opportunity to focus on the desired change with the hope of increasing the chances for a successful change.

Is this set of dynamics good or bad? I believe that the answer is generally positive. While anxiety caused by the underlying drivers of significance, difficulty, and control can sometime paralyze us or create negative consequences, these emotions are in fact the natural response associated with bringing issues/change into the forefront of our conscious attention. This in turn helps us focus on changes that require immediate and/or our full mental awareness.

In the end, this new found understanding of the relationship between anxiety and change should help you recognize the positives of the anxiety response while eliminating some of the negative aspects of anxiety by providing a basis for you to focus on and leverage off of the underlying drivers of significance, difficulty and control.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR :Tom Somodi is a speaker and expert in the areas of domestic and international reorganizations, acquisitions and strategic change initiatives covering manufacturing, distribution and service sectors. He has extensive public and private company executive and board level experience including positions as CEO, COO, CFO and CSO. Tom's forthcoming book, *The Science of Change: Basics Behind Why Change Succeeds & Fails*, is expected to be released in the Fall of 2013.