



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM ANXIETY TO CREATIVITY-A TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

As the world progresses and we are confronted with new challenges to our collective survival, an issue which for so long had been disregarded, gains greater importance when talking about health in a holistic sense. An issue like anxiety which till recently had only been a minor concern of the medical community has now become an issue of serious disquiet. Health conventionally means lack of physical ailments and a healthy body. Yolanda Alonso, University of Almeria (1) in his work talks about how the bio-psycho-social understanding of health has changed and evolved over the years. He goes on to say how in the papers examined by him, psychological and social dimensions of health have been recently included and that despite the evolution of health into a more holistic concept, similar changes haven't been seen in the practical domain of medicine.

This paper aims to connect two vastly different psychological concepts, one as the problem and the other as the solution to the problem. Anxiety is a psychological concern which has severe consequences on the health, well-being and functioning of an individual. Anxiety as defined by American Psychological Association (APA) (2) is 'an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.' People suffering from anxiety disorders often try to avoid situations that trigger their situations and these situations can simply be a normal performance in front of a group of people. This affects people's healthy functioning, performances and relationships. Anxiety to a certain level increases a person's survival instincts and helps them to achieve their potential. However, it becomes a cause of worry when it is detrimental to a person's growth and hampers or inhibits their normal functioning and reactions to circumstances and experiences.

Anxiety disorders as given in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- V (DSM-V)(9) are as follows-

- 1) Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Persistent worrying over events that pose little or no threat and severely affects the day to day functioning of an individual. This could involve unrelenting worry about various things like one's health, financial issues, relationships which are otherwise usual issues for people without Generalized Anxiety Disorder)
- 2) Panic Disorder (Recurrent attacks which are generally characterized by physiological changes like palpitations, sweating, nausea etc.(7) that affect the physical health of an individual)
- 3) Phobias, especially specific phobias (specific and acute fear a person faces attached to an object, person or situation like cynophobia or fear of dogs)

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- 4) Agoraphobia (Fear of situation that may seem embarrassing or out of a person's control like people avoiding a variety of situations like public conveyance, shops, theaters etc.(8))
- 5) Separation Anxiety Disorder (This involves a person having excessive fear of being separated from the people they love)
- 6) Social Anxiety Disorder (An extreme fear of being ridiculed or embarrassed in social situations)
- 7) Selective Mutism- It is an anxiety disorder which is characterized by loss of speech in a particular social setting despite having the ability to speak in other social situations (10)

Another important aspect of this paper is creativity. Creativity is a relatively newer concept of psychology which came into focus with J.P.Guilford's pioneering efforts in the field. He proposed the concept of divergent thinking and linked it to creativity. Rubinstein (2008) reported that patients diagnosed with anxiety had higher divergent thinking which as given by Guilford was a component of creativity(11). It is a comparatively under investigated topic of psychology and for many years, this topic hasn't received as much attention as was due to it. Creativity is often understood as the process of creating new ideas of handling situations or expressing oneself. 'Each creative person is unique' (5) and this project aims to use the creativity of an individual in helping them deal with their anxieties. Researches were undertaken by Robert Sternberg on creativity (6) and in his book he talks about various approaches too understanding creativity. Creativity is an undeniably important aspect of anybody's life and what is important is to delve into it deeper and use it to deal with various crucial issues.

Scope Of The Paper

This paper aims to understand how a severe problem like an anxiety disorder can be mitigated by tapping into one's creativity. Most people's performances are enhanced and their imagination boosted when under stress. This can be seen from the research undertaken by Nixon. P in 1979 which showed that a person's performance standard increases, as the level of stress increases till the point of eustress or healthy stress. (12)

This paper, however, deals with how stress can be managed with the help of the unique creative potential of an individual. Creativity will not be an outcome of stress but an active way to deal with it. By embracing the empowerment that is created by the power of imagination, a person can deal with stress and reduce its negative consequences. People with anxiety disorders can be helped by urging them to channelise their inner unease into works of creativity. Confronted with a stressful situation, people suffering from anxiety disorders can be encouraged to channelise their inner turmoil into creative outlets which would help in reducing their stress and handling the situation better and to the best of their capabilities.

This project was undertaken to help the youth, an integral part of any society, to be better equipped to deal with stress. The project was aimed at people belonging to the age group of 14-19 years as people belonging to this age are an important part of the society as they can be influenced to make positive changes in the society and the future of any society is in their hands. Helping them to cope would help them have a better life and achieve their aspirations. Identifying this disorder and treating it can help people to mature and reduce the effect of anxiety on their effective working. Adolescents were selected as being the future of the nation, their performance needs to be enhanced and it has to be ensured that they are able to excel to the best of their potential.

Existing Researche In The Field And Research Gaps

A large quantum of research has been undertaken previously to deal with anxiety disorders. As written by Alessandra Gorini and Giuseppe Riva (3) in one of their papers, an effective way of dealing with anxiety disorders is Virtual Reality (VR). Starting in 1995, various experiments were conducted to study the effect of VR on anxiety disorders and it was realised that being exposed to virtual situations which trigger the symptoms in the individual, can help in treating the individual to a large extent. The outcomes of most of these experiments were positive and gradually this method has been adopted as a formative way of treating anxiety disorders.

Over the years a large number of experiments have been conducted by psychologists, although no treatment was well-established, some generalised ways of treatment were developed like Cognitive Behavior Therapy (which aims to change faulty thinking and behavioral patterns to improve a person's level of understanding resulting in improving the quality of living).CBT was developed by combining techniques from Behavioral therapy and Cognitive therapy. Although this way of treating people was efficacious, it wasn't entirely successful.(4)

Although other research has been undertaken to deal with anxiety disorders, there is still a large area unexplored that hasn't been surveyed yet. Although the previous researches have been successful to a large extent, there are other techniques that a person might adopt at an individual level to deal with anxiety disorders.

Methodology:-

The project involved identifying adolescents in the age group of 14-19 years who had earlier recognised that they suffered from anxiety disorder in one of its manifestations. The subjects were located with the help of mutual friends, people with whom interaction was possible and who were willing to be a part of the research. Four subjects were chosen who suffered from various kinds of anxiety disorders and wanted to accept it and use creativity as a means of empowering them against the condition.

After giving their confirmation, these subjects were put under intensive care for two months which began with explaining the model of the project to them. The case studies of each individual subject was thoroughly studied and researched upon and their specific creative potential identified. It was found that all four of them had unique creative outlets and it was vital to nurture those to help them in overcoming their anxiety.

Individual Case Studies

Subject 1 –

The subject is a 19 year old girl who suffered from stage and social anxiety. Her anxiety was characterised by intense terror and introversion; a unique feature being that she stuttered while talking in a social situation. She had been going to a speech therapist ever since she was in school and there realised her latent potential for music. She finds solace in music and plays the guitar and sings to calm herself. She displays no signs of any physical ailment or deformity and is an overall healthy person. She suffered from such extreme levels of social anxiety that it was impossible to get her to perform on stage despite having a considerable amount of talent.

The process adopted with her was encouraging her to attend a performance every week and asking her to observe other artists performing and noting their body language. During the first performance of the subject, it was noticed that she kept faltering in her performance and her fingers were shaking. By attending the performances of others every week and noticing their body language, the subject gradually started picking up some ideas of her own which she could use during her own performances. She was encouraged to use her music as a way of helping her deal with the anxiety. She would use her imagination to think of various songs that she could play and compose. Her initial hesitancy faded as her creative power took over and she decided to lose herself in it before any of her performances. Towards the end of the project, her performances were observed and a significant change had been seen which is discussed in the next section.

Subject 2-

The second subject of the research is a sixteen year old boy who suffered from extreme stage fear and performance anxiety. Usually a vivacious person, his liveliness was lost every time he went up on the stage to perform. The subject yearns to perform as a stand-up comedian but extreme stage fear prevents him from fulfilling his dream. However the subject is an extremely talented painter and loves to solve puzzles. In the beginning of the project, he was uncertain about how to go about achieving his goal because all past experiences had resulted in him forgetting the jokes on-stage and ruining his entire performance. Overcoming the initial hesitation, the subject was encouraged to attend live stand-up comedies and while doing so was given a paper to paint on and puzzles to solve to decrease his anxiety level. The initial first few weeks just involved observation and no changes were seen as such except some wonderful creations by him. However towards the end of February, one month into the research, the subject spontaneously agreed to do a stand-up comedy after having seen three others do it before him. This performance went relatively smoothly despite the subject seeming a little nervous. The subject constantly kept attending such stand-ups and would use his creative talent of painting and solving puzzles to divert his mind from the anxiety-provoking situation.

Subject 3 –

The third subject is an 18 year old girl pursuing a degree in medicine. She suffered from extreme social anxiety and was agitated when talking to people. Her fear was embedded in the thought that no one would pay heed to her while she talked and this resulted in the development of social anxiety. This affected her normal functioning and would greatly reduce her chances of excelling. However, she is a talented singer and loves to write and compose songs and sing them. This is her outlet to get away from the world she is scared of. The subject was encouraged to talk to

people who shared similar interests and enjoyed creating music. She went on to join music lessons to increase her interaction with people who would understand her better. She was asked to think of her music and sing her songs in her head when initiating an uncomfortable conversation. This process of widening her horizons using music as a means helped her unlock her potential at the same time helping her overcome her anxiety of dealing with people in a social situation.

Subject 4-

The fourth subject of the project is a 16 year old girl who is still in school. Although she isn't suffering from any physical sickness, she believes herself to be suffering from a fatal disease. Her anxiety is unfounded as she has undergone various tests and all of them had proved to be negative; however she continued to obsess over her health and would constantly search her symptoms online. This hindered her normal functioning. Her extent of hypochondria was so much that she even refused to drink normal water and would only have packaged drinking water. However she was extremely talented when it came to doodling and would often use it as a means of calming herself. She was encouraged every time she had intrusive thoughts to doodle and calm herself.

Findings

Subject 1 –

For the first subject, her biological symptoms were taken into account. Her blood pressure and pulse rate was noted before her performance when she was suffering from extreme anxiety. The readings were as follows- Systolic Pressure- 140; Diastolic Pressure-87; Pulse-89

After the subject had been encouraged to work on her creative talent and use it as a means of managing her anxiety, her blood pressure and pulse was again noted before the last performance she gave in the span of the project. The readings then found were as follows-Systolic Pressure-115; Diastolic Pressure- 75; Pulse- 78

For her last performance, the subject performed her music magnificently without breaking down in the middle of the performance. The subject went on to make an audio for us where she talked about her experience in the project and how it had helped her. "I can now fully immerse myself in the audience. I do various gigs now. Believe me, creativity is the path to success", these were the words she uttered on the last day that we met her after the completion of the project. She had found her true potential and creativity made her feel empowered against the incapacitating anxiety that she felt in any social situation earlier. A video of the subject was made for one of their initial performances and it is clear from the video that she is stiff and uncomfortable while performing. The enjoyment and passion of the subject is lost as she just sings without enjoying the experience. An audio recording was made later in the project and it can be clearly understood from the voice that the subject is more relaxed and at ease while singing the song. The substantial difference could be seen clearly. (Will attach the video and audio)

Subject 2-

The biological parameters of the second person were also monitored. The initial findings before his first performance were as follows-Systolic Pressure- 134; Diastolic Pressure- 95; Pulse- 85

After the subject had been asked to use puzzles and jokes to handle anxiety-provoking situations, he started attending more performances of other stand-up comedians. Towards the end of the project when the subject spontaneously went on to perform, his readings were taken yet again and these were the biological conditions-Systolic pressure-120; Diastolic Pressure-82; Pulse-81

The subject now participates enthusiastically in various stand-up comedy competitions and is ultimately moving towards achieving towards his goal. Creativity is a pathway for him to achieve a dream which till very recently was out of his reach. Everything seems more possible for him now, as life has taken on a new meaning for him with nothing out of his reach.

Subject 3-

The third subject has shown an unprecedented level of change. Towards the end of the project, she was making endeavors to initiate conversations with people and although she hasn't become a social butterfly, it is a huge step towards establishing much better skills at engaging with people. She still has a hard time sustaining conversations however she has shown incredible improvements in her social conversations. She said that 'the journey of unlocking her potential through her creativity and talent has helped her in moulding herself in the best possible

way'. She is trying to break free from the constrictions holding her back and her music is playing an incomparable role in helping her find her true self.

Subject 4-

The fourth subject of the project has also shown an astonishing amount of growth. She has gone from being pre-occupied about her health every minute of the day to functioning satisfactorily without stressing about her physical well-being. She has made several doodles in the span of the project and every time intrusive thoughts about her health cause anxiety, she tries to vent it out by making doodles and other art pieces. At the end of the project, while talking to her, she told us that the thought of a severe disease that she might have been afflicted with hadn't entered her mind in a long time. Now she spends a lot of time making doodles that are an insight to the creativity in her. 'I started carrying a pencil and a paper and I started making doodles every time an anxiety episode occurred. I noticed that I stopped thinking about it and making doodles has become one of my favorite pastimes now'. Her words were a wonderful motivation as the project had succeeded in helping her overcome a severe problem and live an unaffected life.

Creative Samples

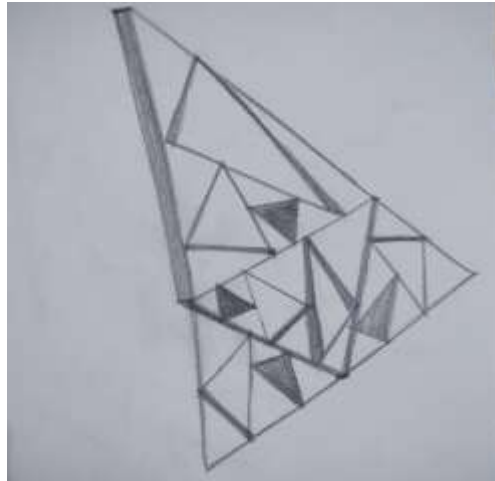
Painting Made By Subject-2





A Doodle Made By Subject-2 When Facing An Anxiety Attack Before A Performance





Doodling Samples By Subject-4



Sample By Subject-4

Correlations

The project is meant to understand how various kinds of anxiety are affected by the creative potentials in an individual.

For the first subject suffering from stage and social anxiety, her music has helped her in dealing with it entirely. Social anxiety in this case was wholly affected by the creativity of the individual and helped her in overcoming her stage fright.

For the second subject, stage fright was the predominant source of anxiety and writing jokes and creating paintings helped him in overpowering his fear. The person has now shifted to performing spontaneously and has lost all his hesitancy. He has shown a tremendous growth from being unable to perform to going on stage at a moment's notice and performing to the best of his potentials.

The third subject was suffering from social anxiety disorder and although she has shown progress in initiating conversations, there is still scope of improvement in her social functioning. Her songs aid her in talking to people and it is easier for her to communicate with people who share her passion for music. However there are ways she can still show greater improvement and this is mostly likely to be brought about by her passion for music.

The fourth subject has stopped being pre-occupied by her fixation to know about whether she has any severe disease or not. She has gone ahead with her life performing all her daily functions without her fear engulfing her. A positive correlation was found between creativity and its power to conquer a very strong and constant fear. Creativity helped her function smoothly in life and gave purpose to her existence. A life earlier spent on an aberrant preoccupation was now being utilized to create pieces of solace.

Conclusions And Future Directions:-

The project helped in understanding various avenues of anxiety and creativity which could be correlated to create a more ordered and purposeful life. The project's aim is to show that creativity can help in overcoming severe anxiety disorders was fulfilled as the subjects themselves found a difference in their lives. It can also be concluded that, despite there being various other ways of treating a disorder like anxiety, creativity provides an outlet which not only helps the person embrace himself/herself as they really are but also use it for creations that are often remarkable. This was a small step towards finding a solution to a problem within one's own self. The need is to employ this at a much larger level and always encourage people towards finding their creative potentials.

Working with the school/college psychology department/counsellor could be a step towards spreading the idea of this project to a larger group of people. Having more outreach and being better equipped to deal with this issue, the psychology department/counsellor can help in interacting with mental health professionals who could assess the idea and try to increase its reach by implementing it when handling people with anxiety disorders. Various educational, and sensitization programmes can also be organised so that people realize the importance of their passion and how they can use it in solving serious issues. Workshops can be conducted which would emphasise on developing the latent talent of individuals and help them in coping with their concealed disorders like anxiety. The power that creativity gives a person is indomitable and it can be used to overcome hurdles to achieve one's purpose in life; the need is to just find one's passion and nurture it.

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