



Anxiety and the Guilt Factor

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Christmas is coming, and as usual many of us feel that as a relentless countdown to threat rather than pleasure. It is a festival that is often fraught with guilt and anxiety. Often the problem with anxiety is that you can't put your finger on quite what is causing it, though at this time of year it's easy to link it with high expectations, or unhappy memories and all sorts of thoughts about what we ought to do, or to feel. Thoughts such as "I should be feeling jolly and festive" while being full of anxiety or dread, "I must get a good enough present for x", or "I have so many presents to buy – it's overwhelming", or "I ought to arrange to get the family together but I might fail somehow", or "I should accept that invitation to that party" while feeling no desire to go. This time of year is one when most of us recognise anxiety one way or another. Others experience anxiety constantly, irrespective of the season.

The anxiety sits in the body (often the head, heart, the breath and the guts) and the physical experience seems to precede any conscious thought. Typical symptoms will include interrupted sleep patterns, waking with a sharp intake of breath or a jolt, sudden racing heart palpitations, headaches and/or a constant churning or painful tension in the guts.

Even rational knowledge of the likely cause doesn't solve the problem. It will often be connected with feelings of guilt. But that doesn't seem to make it go away. The more you strive to figure out the root of the anxiety, the more you beat yourself up for failing and the guilt load increases. You continue to make decisions based on the regrets and guilt feelings about the past, yet those decisions still don't free you from anxiety. Christmas is the perfect example.

It is a simple yet profound fact that we attach meanings to our experiences which then create our reality. Those meanings are built upon beliefs, which are connected to feeling experiences we have had which have shaped us at the time – the earlier they happen the more fundamental they are to us. We confuse these beliefs with truth.

Our feelings and guilty attachments about the past can enter our present experience so powerfully that it can feel like a haunting that comes from somewhere external to ourselves. The most common example of this would probably be found with dreams which are so vivid they leave us in an altered state for some time afterwards, or sensory phenomena like disturbing sights, sensations, sounds or smells which impose themselves.

Counselling and psychotherapy have the potential to bring fresh perspective and transformation. The apparently fixed forms of reality which our rational mind is both controlling and to which it is subject can be loosened, and fitted together in a new way. This is very much connected with the feeling and emotional levels of experience, and only then does the rational processing really shift.

So how do we measure the shift? It can happen as a slow sense of change and the release of guilty beliefs and anxiety which is felt as sessions go on, yet for which it is hard to find a particular rational set of markers. Alternatively it can happen in a moment of epiphany, or disorientation and shifted perception. The outcome is that life, or Christmas our seasonal example, can be experienced afresh without the load it usually carries.

One thing is for sure: the mind creates illusions for itself, but also holds the keys to its own discovery and growth. But those keys will work best when the person opens the doors that connect with feeling, and the deep truths embedded within us. Counselling and psychotherapy offer support and facilitation of that wonderful process.