

COPING WITH ANXIETY – UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

By Dr. Linda Miles: Psychotherapist, Author and Media Expert

Do you tend to feel overwhelmed by all the scary messages you are bombarded with daily about the coronavirus, and other stressors reported daily?

Is it difficult to remember what is going well in your life when you are preoccupied with all the outside noise?

Years ago there was a movie entitled *Up the Down Staircase* (1967) about a young teacher who was confused on the first day about which staircase to use. As you think about how to cope with anxiety about coronavirus, picture a staircase in your brain.

Neuroscientists have found that the first part of our brain to evolve is the reptilian brain. As we moved up the evolutionary ladder the last part of our brain to evolve is the frontal cortex. This is the part of our brain that we use for higher reasoning, compassion, and effective problem solving.

What does that mean and how does that relate to anxiety? Let's refer to the bottom of our brain as the basement, which is also described as the reptilian brain. It is called the reptilian brain because the only choices that reptiles have to cope with danger are fight, freeze, or flee.

Whenever you feel that those are your only choices chances are that you are in the basement of your brain. The basement of your brain is murky, moldy, and overgrown, like a swamp. That is what it feels like when we get stuck in the basement brain.

It is the perfect environment for a snake, which is in fact how we feel when our anxiety kicks in. When you feel like your only options are to fight, freeze in place or run away with the help of alcohol or drugs, you're most likely stuck in the basement.

On the other hand the top part of our brain, the frontal cortex, is a big penthouse with a wide veranda. It is filled with love, light, creativity and effective problem-solving.

When you feel that you are trapped in the basement by all the noise about the coronavirus, you want to find ways to move to the peaceful and beautiful vistas on the top floor.

This part of our brain can get above the situation and assess the danger and take the most effective action to help you help yourself and others. You do need to use logic and common sense, and listen to what experts say about preventive measures, such as handwashing, using sanitizers, and social distancing. But you do not want to allow your emotions to run away with you or rob you of the gifts of the present moment.

When you feel overwhelmed by the negative emotions about coronavirus you can practice Mindfulness techniques that will help bring calmness in healing. Imagine that you can inhale sparks of goodness and healing, and that you can breathe out some of that light and healing to others.

When you notice tensions building up in your body, breathe deeply, imagining that there is a healing light that can penetrate the muscles and bring some relaxation.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Mindfulness practice has been shown to help the brain utilize the veranda more often and to reduce the time that we spend with the brain stuck in the basement.

Susan Lazar of Harvard University has demonstrated physical changes in the brain that helped to reduce anxiety after a six weeks practice of mindfulness. By mindfully living in the present, you can make the conscious decision to focus your resources on positive emotions of joy, appreciation, and healing.

This does not mean that you deny the reality of inconveniences or suffering of you, your family or community; it means that you find moments during the day to share kindness, appreciation, and joy.