

How Does Anxiety and Worry Hold You Back in Your Relationships?

Exploring the Lived Experience of Generalized Anxiety Disorder from a Phenomenological Perspective

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Introduction

Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by high levels of experiential avoidance (EA) in addition to pervasive and chronic worry. EA specifically can lead to limited exposure to potentially meaningful experiences in valued domains of living such as relationships, careers, and personal growth, and thus contribute to reduced quality of life and maintenance of distress. Thus, targeting EA through an emphasis on valued living has become an important component of acceptance based behavioral therapies (ABBTs). Valued living within ABBT can be defined to clients as “living in ways that are personally meaningful and important to you,” and is distinct from goal-setting and achieving. However, there is a dearth of research examining the way anxiety interferes with valued living from a client’s lived experience and perspective. Exploring the complexity and depth of clients’ perceptions of anxiety’s interference in their lives early on in psychotherapy can inform efficient and sensitive interventions to reduce experiential avoidance and increase quality of life as treatment progresses.

Participants

A sample of 19 clients, all whom were part of a larger randomized controlled trial comparing the efficacy of acceptance-based behavior therapy (ABBT) to applied relaxation (AR) were enrolled in the current study.

The average age was 38.36 (SD = 13.9). Clients racially self-identified as: Latina (N=1) Black/African American (N=1), Bi-racial Asian/white (N=1), Asian Indian (N=1), White (N=14). Additionally, 53% of clients identified as single (N=10), 42% as married or co-habiting (N= 8), and 5% identified as divorced (N=1). Two clients identified as sexual minorities (i.e. gay or lesbian).

Method

The research team employed phenomenological methodology to analyze the data. Based on Creswell (2007) and Giorgi’s (1997; 2010) methodological guidance, values-journal transcripts were read several times in order to obtain a general sense of the phenomenon. Then, significant statements related to the central question of this study (*How does anxiety get in the way of living the life you want in relationships?*) were extracted from the journal text. Meanings units were formulated and applied to the significant statements and compared across coders. Meaning units were then clustered into broader emergent themes common across participants. As the themes emerged, the research team engaged in dialogue and bracketing to develop consensus as well as to identify and manage bias. The results were then integrated and will be presented below, primarily through quotes from participants. All quotes were selected as they represented the lived experience of the theme, and highlight some of the nuances and diversity that was evident within the emergent themes.

Results: Emergent Themes

Theme # 1: Relationship Communication. Clients experienced difficulties expressing needs and concerns consistently in relationships leading to relationship distress, distance, or dissolution. These difficulties were perceived to be due to anxiety.

Related to this theme, a client who identified as a straight, white, European-American 39 year old woman, and was partnered and cohabiting, wrote :

“My anxiety makes me very irritable with my boyfriend- I get “snippy” and impatient easily... all I can think about is his annoying behavior... I have many negative expectations of him, and am often disappointed because he doesn’t do what I wish he would. I expect the worst with him. I’m afraid that if I am too giving and loving with him, it won’t be returned to me. I’m afraid of being needy emotionally.”

Results: Emergent Themes

Theme # 2: Relationship Avoidance. Clients avoid a range of relationship enhancing activities for fear of negative judgment, rejection, lack of emotional reciprocity, confusion over who to befriend, or fear that relationships are not repairable. Related to this theme, a client who identified as a straight, white, Italian-American, 27 year-old single woman wrote:

“A big reason I believe I withdraw from some family members and friends especially is because when I feel as confused, anxious and as lost as I have been feeling, I can get very insecure and therefore feel a friend would not really want to spend time with me. I sometimes feel some friends would have a better time hanging out with someone else. Therefore, these days I am rarely the one to initiate making plans with people, probably because I am so used to isolating myself and my routine and also due to fear of rejection.”

Theme # 3: Relationship Authenticity. Clients experience challenges with authenticity in relationships, both in being, feeling and connecting authentically to others across different kinds of relationships. Related to this theme, a client who identified as a straight, male, white European-American, 48 year old married father of two, wrote:

“My stress, anxiety, and worry reduce my ability to be in the moment and take away from me the ability to focus on their needs, to understand who they are and to fully appreciate their place in life.”