

Like a School of Fish

One of the interesting tricks that our minds play on us is their tendency to make certain experiences into “things.” Psychologists sometimes call this “reifying,” which means “to make real.” While this is often useful, it can also empower unpleasant feelings and experiences and lead us to struggle with them more. Anxiety and panic provide great examples of this. Stop for a moment and take this question seriously: What exactly is anxiety? If you look closely, you will see that anxiety is actually several experiences all occurring at once: Your heart beating faster and harder, muscle tension, changes in your breathing, a range of other physical sensations, worrying and anxious thoughts, raciness in your thinking, a feeling state similar to fear or dread, and tendencies in your behavior, such as scanning for danger, wanting to escape or avoid, trying to fix or regain control, and an urgency to move (“can’t sit still”). Your experience of anxiety may include some or all of these experiences...and perhaps a few others particular to your situation. Also, notice that none of these sensations occur exclusively with anxiety. For example, most but not all of them occur when you are excited, while you cheer for your favorite sports team, or after running up a flight of stairs. In those cases, we don’t experience those sensations as anxiety at all.

In some ways, our experience of anxiety is like our experience of a school of fish. Imagine a school of fish seen from a distance. What you see is a large, looming, perhaps frightening shape moving through the water. It looks more like a large fish, perhaps a shark, than a group of tiny fish. This, of course, is why they do it: it works! Predators see the large shape and swim away without investigating further (and perhaps missing their chance for lunch). If we got closer we would see the frightening object for what it is: not an object at all, but several smaller objects occurring in about the same space at the same time. You could say that there is “no there there” at all. Anxiety can be seen like this. When you have certain sensations in the same body at about the same time and do not have another explanation for it (e.g., you’re not excited, haven’t just taken a powerful stimulant drug, and haven’t just sprinted around the block), we call it “anxiety.”

The next time you are anxious, check this idea out for yourself. What is it? Instead of seeing the looming and scary thing that you must get away from, must get rid of, must get under control, see if it isn’t actually a bunch of sensations. In other words, do not turn away from it—turn towards it. For a moment, let go of the apparent source of your anxiety (a situation, a person, a conflict, a problem—that you are probably playing and re-playing in your head like a movie) and instead look for the individual sensations—the individual fish. Sort them out. Categorize them one by one (see next page). Do this slowly and deliberately. After a few moments of this and after sitting with the swirl of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, consider this question: Which thought, which reaction, which sensation is so bad, so intolerable, that you absolutely must be rid of it? Which sensation(s) must be gone RIGHT NOW? Be honest and be serious about this. And consider the possibility that the answer to this question is: None of them. It is possible, in fact it is likely, that there is no individual sensation or thought, no individual fish in the midst of this school, that is so bad that you must be rid of it.

School of Fish Exercise

