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Dr Cecilia d'Felice: How to be happy

Banish fear and self-loathing

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'I am getting treatment for chronic anxiety. I don't know how to reconnect with my experience and feelings. There is just a void and all I feel is self-loathing. What does it mean when you say "embrace these feelings?" And how can I step out from the shadows of the past?' Karl

Step 1: Visualise something different

I wonder why you cling to an idea about yourself that is based on fear and self-loathing. How does this help? The story that you tell is unyielding, preventing you from stepping into the possibility of a new narrative, one that could be more hopeful. Every day, find 10 minutes to reflect without interruption. Visualise a version of yourself that is resourceful, that wants to help you by challenging your self-destructive thinking, relating to yourself instead with compassion.

Step 2: Learn self-compassion

Our internal judge is often self-critical. Yours, Karl, has gone into hyper-drive. Trying to push away these 'hateful' parts of ourselves only makes them feel more powerful. Instead, we can render them harmless by understanding them. Ask yourself how real is it to loathe yourself? It's such an extreme position to adopt. A balanced approach would be, 'Well, I am not all good, but I am certainly not all bad. What helps me more, to focus on my failings or to nurture my strengths?' Compassion asks us to relieve the suffering of others. If we turn the lens of compassion on ourselves, we can begin to relieve our own.

Step 3: The time is now

Once we accept and take care of our innate vulnerability - often manifesting as 'anxiety' we can stop clinging to a false tale that ties us to despair. As we discover alternative ways of describing ourselves through visualisation, we can explore aspects of ourselves that we can celebrate. When you notice yourself drifting off into past mistakes, remind yourself that the past is another version of events that are now irrelevant. Letting go of the past releases us from dragging what is meaningless into our present. What matters is now.

Step 4: Re-awaken your senses

Feed your soul, Karl. It is starved. Explore the world through your senses. Go for a walk and become aware of the harmony in nature. Listen to music that inspires you. Spend time preparing and eating good food. Focus on these pleasures and you will find that there is little space for anxiety. I recommend Jon Kabat-Zinn's 'Full Catastrophe Living' and Martin Boroson's 'The One-Moment Master', both will show you ways of engaging with the present.

Cecilia is Mind journalist of the year

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