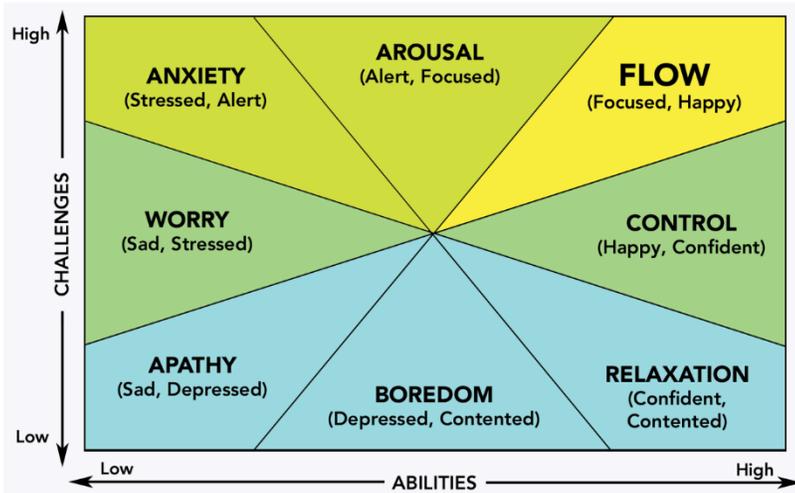


How to Take Anxiety Out of Adversity

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Life is full of challenges. Fortunately, many are inconsequential. But not all. Work, marriage, children, health, friends, neighbors, home ownership, the economy, and government contribute daily to circumstances that can be very difficult. As much as you might try to prevent problems and control your circumstances, problems still arise. No one escapes life's trials and tribulations. The issue therefore becomes how to deal with problems as much as how to prevent them.

How do you normally handle the challenges that come your way? Do you confront them on your own or recruit the help of others? Do you push them aside or give them your immediate

attention? Do you rely on your natural instinct or systematic methods to deal with them? Do your challenges create stress and anxiety or do you handle them with calm and confidence?

Studies find that most people don't deal very well with their challenges. Problems are taking their toll. As if problems themselves weren't bad enough, they are creating more problems in the form of stress, family issues, depression, and other mental health issues. Studies on stress find that 83% of the United States workforce suffer from work-related stress. Two-thirds of people suffer from sleep issues due to stress. One-third of the workforce sees a doctor each year for a stress-related illness. Approximately half of the adult population deals with mental-health related issues. Around one-million people miss work every day due to stress and 120,000 people die each year from work-related stress. Our problems are clearly creating more problems.

Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has researched and written extensively on how people handle their challenges. He discovered that people achieve a high state of mental focus and physical energy (aka "flow") when they are challenged, but also have the abilities to rise to the challenge. In other words, he found that challenges were good for people when in conjunction with the ability to handle them. In contrast, when people are challenged but lack the ability to handle them, they experience worry and anxiety. Counterintuitively for many, Mihaly also found that people who lack challenges miss out on life-enhancing experiences, become complacent, and suffer from boredom which inhibit people's happiness as much as challenges do. So, a lack of challenges is bad while challenges can be good as long as you have the ability to confront your challenges.

If you're going through a rough time at the moment, embracing challenges may not sound so wonderful but realize there are benefits to life's difficulties. You gain experience and learn from them. You become more understanding and empathetic to others. You become more appreciative of when things are going well. And in Mihaly's view, you receive a great deal of satisfaction when you are able to confront and overcome them.

You have many options in handling adversity. You have choices. You can stress over it, ignore it, defer it, blame others, adopt a "woe-is-me" victim's mentality, or confront it. In the latter, you do what you can about it which is obviously a great choice but requires that you have the knowledge, skills, resources, and plans required to confront it.

There will always be difficult circumstances you can't control. Yet you can choose how you think about them and create a plan to deal with them. The ability to plan and deal with difficult circumstances is perhaps the most important trait people can possess. It is a leading determinate of success in life as well as happiness.



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Here is a list of practices available in dealing with life's adversity and challenges. Select and apply the ones that are most appropriate for your circumstances:

1. **Seek wise counsel** – Talk with those whom you trust. Share your thoughts with others who have the caring nature and wisdom to help you think through and best deal with your circumstances.
2. **Set goals** - Establish goals and have a purpose. Hope is the fuel that keeps you going, but only if you have it. Have written goals in the areas of life important to you.
3. **Appreciate the underlying opportunity** - See the opportunity in addition to the adversity. Place value on the learning, experience, and progress that results from engaging in difficult situations.
4. **Have gratitude** - Appreciate what is working. Have balance in what you give attention. Be as grateful for what you have as you are frustrated with what you are confronting.
5. **Let it go** - Care, but not too much, especially for that which you have no control. If you want to improve the world, get engaged and do what you can. For that beyond what you can do, let it go.
6. **Ignore the noise** - Don't give attention to the undeserving. If the adversity is from a heckler without basis or a sensationalist without accuracy, let it go. Don't legitimize that which isn't legitimate.
7. **Set limits** - Be discerning about how much you try to do. You create difficult circumstances when you get too involved, over react, or do more than is reasonably expected.
8. **Own less** - Be discerning about what you buy. Ownership has privileges, but also complications. The more you own, the more you have to clean, protect, maintain, store, upgrade, dispose of, and give your finite attention.
9. **Get engaged** - Don't ignore that which doesn't get better with time. Some issues subside with time, but many don't. Don't put off until tomorrow that which will only get worse.
10. **Plan** - Craft a plan. Be clear about the outcome you want to achieve, identify the steps to get there, and put dates on them. Put your energy toward execution rather than worry.
11. **Become informed** - Build your knowledge. If your challenge requires more expertise or information, do what you can to build it. Research, read books, talk to subject-matter experts, attend seminars, or take classes.
12. **Learn and develop** - Develop your ability. If your challenge requires more skill, build your skill. Engage in activities that give you experience and a chance to practice. Volunteer. Seek special assignments.
13. **Be ready** - Build your arsenal of resources. Build collaborative relationships with people who have skills, knowledge, and resources that complement yours. Have a reasonable reserve to get you through.
14. **Change perspective** - Put issues in perspective. For problems considered “new world issues”, realize you may be making them too important. Or that you are taking yourself too seriously.
15. **Have a distraction** - Engage in other interests and activities, particularly those that provide a positive change in perspective and a break from the difficulties you face. Exercise is a great option for many people.
16. **Give your reasonable best** - Give each day your best and know you did all you could. If you did the research, contacted the people, and executed your plan, accept that you did your best for the day.
17. **Have faith** - If you believe in the spiritual realm, exercise your faith. If you believe in God, do what is right from His perspective and turn the worry over to Him.

Your level of distress and anxiety depends on your ability to overcome the problems you face. Even if you don't feel well equipped, lower your anxiety by creating a plan to deal with it.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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