In Praise of Anxiety

May 11, 2022

Nobody likes to feel anxious. Anxiety is among the most pervasive and reviled of human emotions. An entire industry has sprung up to aid us in eradicating it, from self-help books and holistic remedies to pharmaceuticals and cutting-edge cognitive behavioral therapy. Yet we are an ever more profoundly anxious society. Epidemiological studies show that over 100 million people in the U.S. will suffer from an anxiety disorder in their lifetime. Rates, especially among the young, have been rising for the past decade. Our efforts to contain anxiety aren’t working.

As a clinical psychologist and neuroscience researcher, I have devoted the past 20 years to understanding difficult emotions like anxiety, and I believe that we mental health professionals have made a terrible mistake. We’ve convinced people that anxiety is a dangerous affliction and that the solution is to eliminate it, as we do with other diseases. But feeling anxious isn’t the problem. The problem is that we don’t understand how to respond constructively to anxiety. That’s why it’s increasingly hard to know how to feel good.

This “bad” feeling isn’t a malfunction or failure of mental health. It’s a triumph of human evolution, a response that emerged along with one of our greatest attributes: the ability to think about the uncertain future and prepare for it. Anxiety places us in the “future tense” (pun intended)—a state in which we are motivated not only to survive but to thrive, by being more persistent, hopeful and innovative.

…