

# Understanding Anxiety

By Parveen Jain



Worrying and anxiety are two of the numerous types of emotions that living beings seem to experience through all waking moments. Worrying emanates from doubt, concern, or uncertainty related to some real or imagined event. It is a common condition until it turns into anxiety when it becomes excessive and all-consuming of one's attention and internal state. Anxiety can become an impediment to normal life by affecting the victim's emotional and physical health.

Worrying, as we all know, is simply a part of life. Medical scientists and psychologists have studied it extensively for centuries, and healthcare annals are filled with medical solutions and psychological therapies, and new ones keep emerging on regular basis. Yet, despite all the research, the modern-day medications and therapies alleviate only the symptoms of anxiety<sup>1,2,3</sup> – science is yet to discover a sustainable solution or cure for it.

Various alternate-medicines – for example, herbal remedies<sup>4,5</sup> – are also available and claim to help ease the effects of anxiety. Since they are formulated from natural substances, these remedies, when they work, could be better with fewer side-effects. But they too provide only temporary relief at best.

Various lifestyle intervention and modalities of healing therapies<sup>6,7,8</sup> like meditation, yoga and breathing exercises can also bring relief from anxiety by facilitating mental calmness. These therapies, at least in the form in which they are most commonly practiced, are also only temporary solutions. However, as discussed below, they become vehicles for an enduring solution when an individual gains certain insight about the nature of the solution they are ultimately striving for.

The comprehensive and enduring solution for relief from worrying and anxiety can be crafted only by grasping the root causes of these maladies. And, to discover the root causes, one needs to understand the spiritual causes that are veiled beneath these maladies.

All living beings are incessantly engrossed in emotions like fear, worrying and anxiety—which are closely related. Emotions<sup>9</sup> are internal sensations that are formed when one encounters a situation that stimulates one with either positive feelings of happiness, joy, etc., or negative sensations like fear, worrying and anxiety that cause distress. Spiritually speaking, emotions grow out of conscientious deliberations between one's essential consciousness (the very nature of the soul), and one's mind (or psychology that is external to the conscious soul). One's state of consciousness and one's state of mind—engrossed in its vicissitudes—are the two most important factors in determining the type and quality of emerging emotions. Additionally, the nature of one's experiences, personal disposition, and existing medical and emotional states—as well as many other factors which may or may not be under one's control—play a role in structuring the emotions that emerge as a response to various stimulations.



Our mind is always wandering, and one of its most detrimental acts is worrying, which worsens to anxiety in an intensified state. Worrying stems from contemplations that are contaminated with fear, due to uncertainty about conditions. Therefore, it is really fear that is the root cause of worrying, and it can completely devour one's mental facilities with feelings of self-doubt, dread, etc. Thoughts of fear

occur when one feels threatened or is concerned about losing tangible or intangible materials such as wealth, property, fame, position; or living entities involving family member, relationships, pets

and so on. Fear, worrying, and anxiety feed into each other synergistically and one could easily be consumed by a spiral of deteriorating conditions unless there is a deliberate intervention to stop the escalation. The situation could be worse when one is suffering from a mental ailment.

This brings up a basic question: *Why these fearful thoughts, which cause so much psychological pain, occur in the first place.*

The scientific community attributes such fearful thoughts to one's mental condition. That is why science-based remedies work to pacify one's mental facilities to stop the flow of such thoughts, and at times, the same remedies are required to obtain best results from the modalities of healing and lifestyle intervention<sup>10</sup>. However, the answers to the questions of how one's fearful thoughts arise and how to consistently keep them calm, may lie in one's understanding of what life is, and one's place and purpose in this world. These are the subjects that spiritual thinkers have successfully endeavored to understand since time immemorial.



Spirituality-based preventative lifestyle choices and practices, when followed by well-rounded considerations of all of our physical, psychological, and social needs, can reveal important practices that nurture our entire being for the long-term. A spiritual philosophy like the Jain philosophy has successfully helped countless practitioners in this regard for thousands of years. As discussed below, by actually bolstering one's mental facilities to combat certain causes of disorders such as worry, anxiety, and other fear-based afflictions, a spiritual solution could be an important contributor to a holistic remedy for those suffering from mental disorders, and a stand-alone healthy lifestyle practice for those who are free of such ailments.

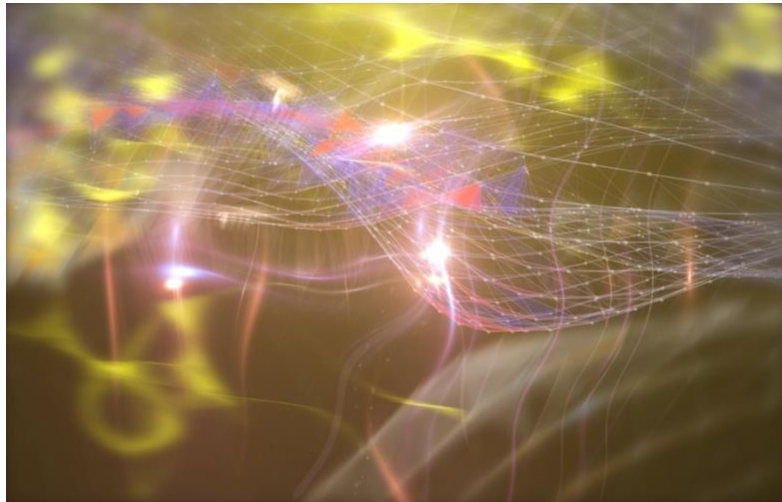
Jain thinkers have studied the phenomena of fear, worrying, and anxiety in great detail because these woes are considered some of the main reasons that slow down or derail a spiritual aspirant's pursuit of divine goal. The underlying culprit, according to them, is our unhealthy attachment to everything and everybody around us – our material possessions, family, friends, pets, etc. The level of fear, and hence the anxiety, is directly related to the potency and nature of attachments—especially when such attachments give us a false sense of security and happiness, and delude us into selfish behavior where one seeks to benefit at the expense of others<sup>11</sup>.

When it comes to material possessions, humans have a tendency to continuously acquire and hoard things – property, clothes, cars, etc.– often unnecessarily and at the expense of others. Acquiring things beyond one’s need is spiritually unhealthy but getting attached to one’s possessions, where one mistakes ownership for happiness, is worse than simply unhealthy – it is actually quite harmful. When one is fondly attached to an achievement like fame, or an item, say a car, any thought of losing it could make the owner miserable and worrisome. It is perfectly fine for one to take pragmatic measures to protect one’s possessions, e.g., an insurance policy for the car, but when the fondness transforms into worry of losing it, the resulting anxiety is harmful at both physical and spiritual levels.

We might say that our relationships with humans and other living beings, e.g., pets, have two key elements: love and attachment. Love in its pure form is exhilarating, and is characterized by a care for others, perhaps to the extent of deferring our own desires. But when such love is eclipsed by selfish attachment, the purity of love is tarnished. Such a relationship is laden with infatuation and insecurity, and any thought of separation gives rise to the fear of “losing the loved one” resulting in anxiety. At this point, the person who is the object of one’s affections becomes objectified and is treated more like a possession than as a human being. Therefore, it is important to comprehend the difference between the love and these forms of unhealthy attachments, and one should strive to build relationships that are based on pure love, one that is not selfish and possessive, but is rather considerate and caring.

How does one conquer fearfulness and tame the evil of such attachments that intensify our internal difficulties? According to the Jain tradition, the answer lies in (1) restraining the mind and its trepidations, and training to keep it focused on auspicious thoughts, and (2) cleansing the consciousness of maladies such as selfish attachment, possessiveness, etc., while making progress towards the naturally pure state of the soul, a state that is essentially at peace and is therefore fundamentally happy and expresses these characteristics as care and consideration for others. For advancements in both one’s proper mental conditioning and refinement of one’s consciousness to attenuate the mental impurities, one needs to practice mindfulness and live an honorable lifestyle. The two are interdependent because for mindfulness<sup>12</sup> one needs to enrich one’s lifestyle with righteousness, and for a righteous lifestyle one needs to remain mindful.

In the Jain tradition, mindfulness is considered to be an innate capacity of the soul and meditation is the spiritual practice that helps us regain that innate capacity. The practice of meditation helps in connecting the mind with the soul, to free one from the tensions between the two, allowing for



the advancement towards a comprehensive realization of divinity. While practicing meditation, it is not uncommon to experience nearly every type of contemplation. But one must endeavor to remain neutral and avoid active engagement in those contemplations that create further

reactions which may intensify our internal afflictions. When one does become engaged in one's internal condition, it is important to not bring fear into the midst because without fear contemplations are worthy, but with fear, they intensify and become worry and anxiety. It is important to note that staying disengaged with the allurements of these internal contemplations during meditation is not easy and it requires a lifetime of practice.

Honorable lifestyle<sup>13</sup> is essential for the growth of mindfulness, and at the same time, it is critical for the minimization of selfish attachments—a necessity to minimize our fearful thoughts. In this context, controlled acquisitiveness and possessiveness, and pragmatic austerity and renunciation are the most important lifestyle traits—which means we must seek to acquire only that which is necessary, not be controlling of what one has, and give up the unnecessary embellishments which are unnecessary for living a productive and healthy life. Penance and austerity help in fostering mental calmness by developing the ability to restrain oneself from unhealthy practices, which also supports the end-goal of righteous living. It is important to note that advanced Jain spiritual practitioners eventually strive to completely eliminate attachments and fear, and therefore, practice complete non-acquisitiveness, non-possessiveness, austerity and renunciation

In summary, worrying and anxiety, triggered by fearful contemplations, are two of the most detrimental impediments to a healthy and wholesome lifestyle. Modern science can be important and, in some cases, even indispensable in helping with the symptoms of these disorders. But even modern science would agree that for long-term sustainable solutions, one needs a well-rounded



approach to health, one that may include the spiritual methods that have been practiced by spiritual-minded individuals for centuries. Jain thinkers, with an extensive and highly developed philosophical thought in this area, have been teaching such lifestyle practices for millennia to help eradicate the root causes of these maladies, and they are every bit as relevant in modern times as they were in ancient times (indeed, at present time, they may even be more relevant than ever!). In addition to providing sustained solutions for a holistic means of preventing these internal maladies, Jain practices foster wholesome living that is enriched with love, peace and ecological equanimity. Only when our lives become enriched in this manner, we are truly healthy and happy.

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- <sup>1</sup> Bret Stelka, *Can Fear Be Erased?*, Scientific American, December 4, 2014, Web. <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/can-fear-be-erased/>>
  - <sup>2</sup> David Levine, *Why I Get My Brain Zapped*, Scientific American, July 19, 2016, Web. <<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/mind-guest-blog/why-i-get-my-brain-zapped/>>
  - <sup>3</sup> Simon Makin, *Effective Psychological Therapy May Slow Cellular Aging*, Scientific American, April 1, 2020, Web. <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/effective-psychological-therapy-may-slow-cellular-aging/>>
  - <sup>4</sup> Hal Arkowitz and Scott Lilienfeld, *Can Herbs Ease Anxiety and Depression?*, Scientific American, July 1, 2013, Web. <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/can-herbs-ease-anxiety-and-depression/>>
  - <sup>5</sup> *Try This: 25 Supplements for Anxiety*, Healthline, Web. <<https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/supplements-for-anxiety>>
  - <sup>6</sup> Elisha Goldstein, *7 Ways to Ease Your Anxious Mind*, Mindful, Web. <<https://www.mindful.org/7-ways-to-ease-your-anxious-mind/>>
  - <sup>7</sup> Deepak Chopra, *Breaking the Cycle of Anxiety*, Oprah.com, Web. <<http://www.oprah.com/spirit/deepak-chopra-breaking-the-cycle-of-anxiety/all>>
  - <sup>8</sup> Hal Arkowitz, *Is Mindfulness Good Medicine?*, Scientific American, September 1, 2014, Web. <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-mindfulness-good-medicine/>>
  - <sup>9</sup> Parveen Jain, *Emotions and The Pursuit of Honorable Living*, June 20, 2020, <<https://www.parveenjain.com/blog/emotions-and-the-pursuit-of-peaceful-living>>
  - <sup>10</sup> It is critical that those who require lifestyle interventions do not neglect the important science-based treatments, and certainly there is no “one size fits all” approach to proper mental health. However, there are certain lifestyle choices that one can make that decrease risk of mental health issues. An analogy might be that while exercise and diet can help prevent disease, once one does fall ill, it may not suffice to rely on diet and exercise alone. Similarly, one’s spiritual practice and outlook on life may be preventative in terms of mental health issues, but if one has certain issues, it is nonetheless critical that one seek the help of mental health medical professionals and benefit from the important discoveries of modern science.
  - <sup>11</sup> For instance, if one feels that one can *only* be happy if one has a certain possession, or if one becomes possessive of another person in a way that objectifies that person, or when one is so attached to a possession that one is excessively vexed by its loss, these are all examples of how our attachments can create difficulties with our own mental health and potentially even harm others.
  - <sup>12</sup> Parveen Jain, *Living with Mindfulness*, March 17, 2020, <[www.parveenjain.com/blog/living-with-mindfulness](http://www.parveenjain.com/blog/living-with-mindfulness)>
  - <sup>13</sup> Parveen Jain, *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, chap. 12, December 2019, DK Printworld, New Delhi, India.