

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

Are Anxious People Actually Smarter?

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Struggling with anxiety is not easy and can take over one's life. As someone who has struggled with anxiety since I was a child, I have always wished that I was one of those people who went through my days without anything ever bothering me. You know the saying "ignorance is bliss"? This may be truer than we ever expected.

Several studies over the last few years have found that anxiety and intelligence are linked – that anxious people may actually be smarter. Maybe it's not so bad to be a worrier after all, and maybe we do not need to fret so much when our children stress out because that trait goes hand in hand with some very positive attributes.

How could this be possible? The main reason for the connection between anxiety and intelligence is that an anxious mind is quite creative, searching for all possible scenarios – both good and bad. This thought process is also a sign of higher intelligence.

Smarter people are known to have the cognitive ability to examine multiple angles of a situation. They use these skills to avoid dangerous possibilities that place them at risk. Finally, they have a special sense of alertness that less anxious individuals do not have. This allows them to warn and protect others.

What the research shows

A study conducted by Israeli psychologists from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya found this theory to be true. The study entailed reviewing behaviors of 80 students as they responded to anxiety-provoking events. Students with both high and lower IQs were asked to evaluate artwork that was to be presented in a software program. However, as the students opened the software program, they activated a computer virus (as part of the experiment). Then the monitor in the room told each student

to go find technical support. The researchers observed the students' behaviors as they left the room to find help. As they rushed down the hall, students encountered four more hurdles, such as someone stopping them to take a survey and someone else dropping a stack of papers on the floor in front of them. These incidents were set up purposely to trigger additional stress.

The students who exhibited the greatest anxiety about getting to the tech support office as fast as possible and whose anxiety appeared to increase with each hurdle turned out to have higher IQs than others in the test group. In addition, they were more adamant about getting past the hurdles and to fix the computer problem than the students with lower IQs.

A recent study conducted in 2015 by psychologist Alexander Penney and his colleagues at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada also found this connection. They surveyed about 125 college students about their levels of anxiety, stress, depression, social phobia, rumination, and mood. The questions were also used to evaluate their verbal and nonverbal intelligence.

Their answers helped the researchers determine whether they became anxious only in the moment or if it was an ingrained trait they have lived with for a long time.

The data showed that those who said they felt anxious often had higher verbal IQs than those who did not. Verbal intelligence involves problem-solving, critical thinking, and abstract reasoning. These tools give a person the ability to communicate effectively through both speech and writing, with the intent of achieving a certain goal. This intelligence comes from thinking about past situations in different scenarios. The researchers believe that verbally intelligent people are probably more successful at evaluating past and future events in greater detail, leading to more intense rumination and worry.

Researchers have even been able to see differences in the brain to show the link between anxious thoughts and intelligence. In 2012, neuropsychologists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) evaluated MRI scans to see if there is a correlation between intelligence and anxiety. They found that individuals with high IQs and anxiety had a similar characteristic in their brains – the depletion of the nutrient choline in the white matter in a part of the brain. The scientists think that this happens because anxiety and intelligence were probably developed together as we evolved.

Finally, another study showed how social anxiety is linked to being more empathetic to others, which is also a characteristic of high intelligence. Those in the study who suffered with social anxiety were more socially aware and sensitive to other people's feelings and points of view.

How it impacts our lives

The researchers suggest that worrying seems to have developed into a beneficial trait. It evolved along with intelligence to make us more skilled at avoiding danger, regardless of how unlikely that danger is to actually happen. Worry helps us avoid taking dangerous risks so we can survive. Thus, like intelligence, worry may be a benefit to us overall. For example, it can help our children be more successful in school because they are more attentive or diligent to avoid negative consequences. The thought of going to detention, getting left back a year, or being punished at home probably motivate them to get their homework done and study for tests.

We still should consider the downside of anxiety and watch that our children do not struggle with it too much. When strong critical thinking skills are combined with anxiety, it can be challenging and even be paralyzing at times. Because the intelligent mind allows worriers to create all the possible negative scenarios, the worry can take over and even lead to inaction.

Intelligent people with anxiety also tend to ruminate, obsessing about events of the past and thinking about "what if" scenarios. The anxiety can prevent someone from accomplishing daily tasks and cause health problems and insomnia.

Like most things in life, it comes down to a healthy balance. Managing stress and anxiety is still critical, even if it means an individual is more intelligent. In order to utilize our brain to its full potential, we need to keep our anxiety in check. It may be more challenging for intelligent people to shift their thought process to more productive projects instead of ones that review the past repeatedly or predict multiple future scenarios, but it will be worth it in the long run.

What We Can Do For Our Anxious Children

Here are a few ways we can encourage our kids to channel their anxiety into more constructive ways:

- Work on puzzles and challenging problem-solving games.
- Develop fiction stories based on the many scenarios they think about.
- Focus on creative arts like painting, drawing, sculpture, and music to make their imagination come alive.
- For every negative idea they think about, ask them to find a positive one.
- Get them involved in science and technology experiments in which they first predict what will happen and then observe what really happens.

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