

## Training with anxiety and what tenets Taekwon-Do has taught me – Fiona Simmonds 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan

Have you ever thought that getting run over (while out for a run) or having a car accident leading up to a grading would be a good thing? These are the sort of irrational thoughts that go through my mind. Why? .....because I suffer from anxiety.

This may come as a surprise to some people as most days I appear fairly confident. But as with many anxiety sufferers, I suffer in silence on a daily basis.

It's quite ironic really. When I was sitting my 2<sup>nd</sup> dan, the gradee's going for 3<sup>rd</sup> dan had to get up and discuss the essays they wrote. Although they were very interesting and informative to listen to, I thought to myself right there and then, that there was no way I was sitting 3<sup>rd</sup> dan, purely based on the fact of having to give that presentation. And here I am writing "that" essay and no doubt will have to present it at the grading. Writing this a few months out, I feel mildly anxious but I know that the anxiety will build as the grading gets closer.

I decided to write my essay on this topic as I thought it may be a useful tool for instructors to understand their students better and recognise behaviours that may be more than just regular nerves. If read by a wider audience it may help someone else who silently struggles to know they are not alone.

### So what is Anxiety?

About 1 in 20 people have a recognised "anxiety disorder" at any one time, though many will suffer from intermittent anxiety. The term "anxiety" includes such things as phobias, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and generalised anxiety disorder (GAD).

The experience of anxiety will differ from person to person but may include the following symptoms:

- Feeling fearful or tense
- Poor sleep
- Irritability
- Feeling of losing control or losing your mind
- Restlessness or an inability to relax
- Poor concentration – finding it hard to focus on anything other than the thing that is making you anxious
- Physical symptoms such as sweating, racing heart, trembling or shaking, dizziness, shortness of breath, chest pain, dry mouth, muscle aches, choking sensation, or stomach symptoms (churning, diarrhoea, or pain)

Poor concentration and the physical symptoms are probably the hardest to deal with as these are the ones you can't hide. While testing for my 2<sup>nd</sup> dan (during the public session) I came off the floor from pattern testing and a fellow gradee commented to me they thought I was doing Kapa Haka as my hands were shaking so much. I did find it quite amusing at the time of the comment, because I was now off the floor and was no longer the "centre of attention". During the performance however the shaking was all I could see when I punched or performed a technique in front of my body. It made it extremely difficult to concentrate on performing the pattern movements.

It is both mentally and physically draining and takes a lot of mental discipline to try to talk yourself down from the panic when you see the physical symptoms. Ideally you need to calm your heart rate which reacts spontaneously upon the panic setting in.

Apparently these physical symptoms are a normal healthy bodily response when faced with what you deem to be a threat (ie a competition or exam) as they elicit the “fight, flight or freeze” chemical release into our most primitive brain function. Many chemicals are released into the bloodstream such as adrenaline and cortisol which enable us to escape or defend ourselves. The physical symptoms you experience are actually a result of this chemical release. However when the danger isn’t real, or is perceived, and you experience these symptoms all the time, you may have developed an anxiety disorder.

Unless you have experienced anxiety you truly don’t understand how debilitating it can be. It is frustrating when people say to you “yes I get really nervous too”. These are clearly people who do not understand anxiety. And it’s not their fault. I had my employer suggest I go to Toastmasters because it really helped them with their nerves. That would literally be my worst nightmare!

#### Let me try and explain what is it like when I have a panic attack

Panic attacks come out of the blue. You can be merrily going along with your day and something will happen to set you off. It can be something as simple as someone mentioning your name in a crowd and everyone turning to look at you, or you may be out to dinner with an acquaintance and find yourself jammed into a very busy restaurant. This is what happened with the Kapa Haka incident, I was part way through testing on a pattern and out of the blue I suddenly realised everyone was watching me. For me, the first thing that happens is my heart starts to beat erratically or fast. All you can feel is the pounding in your chest and the pulsing of the blood in your veins and in your ears. You feel like you can’t get your breath and your hearing goes (almost like the sound of the ocean in your ears). I usually start trembling and it’s not uncommon to be sweating but also to feel cold. Sometimes I will suffer from tunnel vision. I find my peripheral vision goes black and then I worry I might pass out. I find depending on the situation I can also suffer from claustrophobia.

All this can sound very dramatic but when you are experiencing an attack it is all you can think about and your senses are heightened, emphasising everything.

A number of these physical effects I experience are detailed in the new self-defence hand book.

I guess I am lucky to have got this far in Taekwon-Do as I vividly remember going for my first grading when the region used to grade together. I was constantly having an argument in my head and my muscles were flinching trying to stop myself from standing up and walking out prior to my name being called. On another occasion whilst driving to Hamilton with my 7 year old son for a grading, he recognised the symptoms of anxiety and commented “Mum you’re really nervous eh?”

As a mum I have tried not to let my kids see the depth of my struggle as I do not want them to think this is how you react to stressful situations. When they are nervous about giving speeches at school etc, I try to reassure them and give them coping techniques if they get nervous.

As an instructor it is a valuable tool to be able to recognise stress and possible triggers in your students, so the following are some examples of what I struggle with:

- I can feel very nervous visiting other do jangs even if they are local and I know the instructors well.
- Going to gradings or camps. My grading partner had to withdraw a few weeks out from 2<sup>nd</sup> dan which threw me into a tizz at the time.
- Being surrounded by senior dans – what if I get my protocol wrong (which inevitably you do as your mind goes blank), what if I say something wrong?
- Once I burst into tears on Master Rimmer when he suggested a change to a technique in my step sparring routine for 1st Dan, and after giving me a hug he commented that he had never met anyone so uptight about their grading.
- In everyday life it can be as simple as going to the movies or out for dinner. I often need to sit on the end of a row or table where I feel I can “escape” if I get overwhelmed. Often claustrophobia can go hand in hand with anxiety. (A supportive partner helps if they understand why you need to do this)
- Going anywhere new. This includes school camps or work courses and conferences. I remember staying home from a school camp when I was about 14 because the thought of going just simply sent me into meltdown and I couldn’t function.
- Change in routine, or anything new. Buying our first house brought on a case of full blown anxiety and depression. (not that I knew that was the cause at the time). Our solicitor did look at me sideways while I cried my way through the signing of the documents 😊
- Being the centre of attention. I had a presentation to give during my tertiary study; my written report was completed and marked however I got so stressed about having to present the report my face broke out in sores and I couldn’t stop crying when I thought about it. I turned up to class in this state to do my presentation and the lecturer took one look at me and decided to internally assess me. (This is also the reason I am 1 paper away from an additional diploma)

You will find an anxiety sufferer will constantly be worrying about what could go wrong with an upcoming event. Try leaving your belt at home on a black belt grading day! I never thought of that scenario but it happened to me.

### Coping strategies

Intensity of anxiety can be influenced by what else is going on in your life and your overall wellbeing. You will have good days and bad days.

Sufferers will eventually work out their own mechanisms for coping. It might be understanding their triggers and trying to limit these occasions. However often that is not practical so you need to learn some coping strategies.

Understand what makes you happy and relaxed. Find your sweet spot – a place that pushes you but you enjoy what you are doing and lose track of time. Try and integrate these things into your regular life to reduce your overall stress levels. They can be as simple as walking your dog, going for a run, or reading a novel on the couch in the sun. Some people may use relaxation, yoga or breathing techniques.

Personally I find I use exercise to wind down and to take my mind off something that may be worrying me. It won't take the worry away completely but it gives me a break from it which reduces the overall levels of stress.

There are a number of bodily functions that tie in together to play a part in anxiety; from your sympathetic nervous system, vagus nerve, amygdala, cortisol, serotonin, hippocampus, the list goes on. The detail behind how these all integrate may be better left for a 4<sup>th</sup> dan thesis.

I find vitamin supplements such as Executive Stress Vitamin B help me. I take this daily as vitamin B maintains a healthy nervous system and supports the adrenal glands. High levels of stress can burn up your vitamin B levels quicker.

I also find compartmentalising helps. Deal with things in smaller sections. For training this means putting sections of training into boxes and just concentrate on that box rather than becoming overwhelmed or feeling inadequate by the many boxes.

Plan ahead - Starting the task early, try to get a head start to minimise the feeling of rushing or panicking due to a short space of time.

Routine also helps, knowing what is coming up.

There are also therapies and medications that professionals can help with, if the sufferer cannot find their own coping methods.

Suffering from anxiety can limit one's life experiences and opportunities but you do what you need to do to cope. One of my old bosses once said to me "Life is too short to spend time worrying or stressing out. Only do what you feel comfortable with and that makes you happy." Wise words I always remember.

## Conclusion

I have been lucky to have an instructor, who, although she is very confident, does not force upon you, anything that you are overly uncomfortable with. She will however, encourage you and help you along the journey.

I have come a long way and that is mainly due to my progression through TKD.

I have learnt that being surrounded by an understanding environment that accepts that people are not perfect, and people need to work within their own physical abilities, is a valuable community. This is why I encourage new people to join the organisation even if they are older.

If you observe one of your students hesitate when asked to perform something it may not be that they do not know their techniques but that they are trying to mentally compose themselves first. So be compassionate towards your students. You never know what internal struggles they are going through.

If you suspect one of your students struggles with anxiety and has trouble performing in front of class or an audience, then this can be developed slowly by putting them in a group whereby they can be at the back. This will help grow their confidence.

I suspect that I will have a melt down about 3 weeks out from grading, this happens every time; it happens at a time when it is close enough to be very real but still far enough away that I feel I am not ready.

But I also know this will pass. My progression through Taekwon-do has taught me the tenets of perseverance and indomitable spirit.

“You can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf”

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