

Anxiety as a 'Check-Engine' Light

Anxiety can be thought of as your body's 'check-engine' light. It tells you that there is something wrong or signals the presence of a threatening situation or something to be avoided. Sometimes you can guess what it is. If you see smoke coming out of your car's engine and you remember that you have been driving without oil or coolant, you might guess that the engine has overheated. Likewise, if you see a wolf standing in your backyard, you can clearly understand why your body may be responding with anxiety or fear.



But sometimes we do not know why that 'check engine' light comes on. In the same way, we may find ourselves anxious without necessarily know why. Logically, it may seem like there should not be any reason for us to be anxious, which can make it that much harder to understand its underlying cause.

It can help to remember that anxiety is an adaptive response to a perceived threat. While this may signal a threat existing in the perceived environment, it can also arise from something threatening within the individual themselves. In order to understand what I mean, we must first acknowledge that we are not always aware of the forces that drive our behavior. We like to assume that we are always rational and logical – it gives us a sense of feeling in control. But in reality, a wide array of underlying feelings can influence our actions while they work on an implicit level just outside of our awareness. For example, sometimes the internal threat that causes anxiety is a *feeling* that begins to awake on that implicit level. The person in this situation is aware of the *anxiety*, but not the *feeling* that is still just out of conscious reach.

At this point in my explanation, one might ask: *why would a feeling be a threat?* There is no universally applicable answer to this question, though I can say that emotions are often threatening to individuals who

have never had healthy ways of addressing them. For example, some individuals may have learned to minimize or suppress certain kinds of feelings as an adaptive way of coping with something that may have been too overwhelming to deal with at an earlier time – the emotion gets disconnected from our conscious mind. But our unconscious mind/body still remembers and when these emotions are later ‘triggered’ from within the depths of our unconscious minds, it is detected as a threat. In short, we experience anxiety.

Though the feelings are often hidden, our anxiety essentially gives us away – it tells us that there is indeed something threatening about the situation. For this reason, I often ask people to pay attention to when they feel anxious. Use your anxiety like a metal detector, trusting that it can often lead you to where you need to go. Ask yourself, “What is it about these kinds of situations that make me anxious?” or “Could there be something *emotionally uncomfortable* about these anxiety-provoking situations?” This is not the kind of work that is easily done on one’s own. Having a third party professional, a trained clinician, can help you do that kind of deeper self-exploration to gain emotional insight about the nature of certain kinds of anxiety.

