

CoreNet NorCal held its second virtual Chapter meeting on May 21<sup>st</sup> entitled Anxiety and the Return to Work - Lessons from Virtual Reality and Psychological Science. The fascinating program featured Page Anderson, PhD, Clinical Psychologist and Associated Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Georgia State University.

Dr. Anderson outlined the how she uses Cognitive Behavior Therapy to help patients overcome anxiety and shared insights from her research using virtual reality as a therapeutic exposure tool to treat fear of flying. She also provided useful tips on how to promote well-being and explained how the ability to regulate our attention and thinking can dramatically reduce anxiety.

Here is a summary of key points:

### **What is Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)?**

- Thought, feelings and behavior are connected
- Primary thought with anxiety = something bad will happen
- Anxious thinking – two components
  - Probability bias – likelihood something will bad happen
  - Cost bias – how bad will it be?
- We evaluate the likelihood of an event by how easily we can imagine it
  - Controlled Processing
    - ✓ Intentional
    - ✓ Conscious
    - ✓ Effortful
  - Automatic Processing
    - ✓ Unintentional
    - ✓ Unconscious
    - ✓ Effortless

### **There is nothing inherently wrong with feeling afraid**

- Fear is our friend, or can be
- Fear is there to grab our attention

### **Do not trust your anxiety**

- Just because you feel a feeling does not make the situation true
- Just because you feel afraid does not mean there is something to be afraid of

### **Why does fear get us into trouble?**

- When we feel fear it prevents us from doing the things that make life worth living
- Fear Response – fight/freeze/flight
  - Fight – shows up as irritability
  - Freeze – paralysis – inability to decide what to do
  - Flight – avoiding the thing that makes you feel fear

### **Our attention is a precious and finite resource**

- Be just as intentional about how you allocated your attention as to who you give your money to, who you give your time to, the food that you put in your body
- How you use your attention impacts your relationships with others and your mood

### **Train yourself to give attention to the things that promote your mental health**

- Limit media and social media consumption
- Practice mindfulness
- Seek out flow experiences
- Distract yourself
- Manage your thinking that something bad will happen
- Ask questions for when thoughts are running away
  - Is this important?
  - Is this good enough? Good enough is OK now
  - Is this working? – If not, make a shift

### **Suggestions for return to work**

- Share accurate information on steps you are taking
- Focus on concrete measures being taken to reduce the transmission
- Be empathic
  - Every person perceives and reacts to crises differently
  - Prioritize emotional health
- Make time for mistakes – give a little grace
- Resist multi-tasking
- Anticipate sadness and depression
- Work with HR on accommodation plans for employees with anxiety disorders