

MAKING AN EMOTIONS "CHAVRUTA"

I. Understanding Anxiety

Most people are afraid of something. We have objects or circumstances we try to avoid and situations that make us nervous. Anxiety is a label for the feeling of debilitating and persistent worry related to a specific topic, such as a fear of clowns, or a host of general concepts, such as finances, career and/or family). It can be categorized into various disorders based on the situation when anxious feelings began, the symptoms experienced and the range of themes or ideas that induce anxiety.

Anxiety can affect people at any age or stage of life; even children can suffer from specific phobias. Some people experience anxiety seemingly out of the blue, while others can pinpoint a specific event as the source of their concern. [Anxiety as a mental illness affects more than 18 percent of adults in the United States](#). And even though effective anxiety treatments exist, fewer than 37% of people suffering receive treatment ([Anxiety & Depression Association of America](#)).

Since everyone worries, people often mistakenly overlook anxiety struggles—even if they have good intentions. Mental health issues can be difficult to discuss, and when they do come up, people are quick to tell their struggling friends to “focus on the positive,” to look for “the silver lining.” But to fully overcome anxiety, the feelings of intense worry need to be discussed and assessed, not suppressed.



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II. The Jewish Approach



Psychotherapy, or “talk therapy,” is a primary treatment method for anxiety (National Institute of Mental Health). It involves discussing one’s worries in a directed manner with an expert. While “talk therapy” is practiced currently, Jewish tradition has long recommended a similar approach to alleviate mental distress.

King Solomon, the wisest person to live, according to Jewish tradition, wrote in the book of Proverbs: “If there is concern in a man’s heart, let him quash it.”
(Proverbs 12:25)

The Talmud elaborates, explaining that the best way to quash concerns in one’s heart is to share them with others in order to lessen any anxiety.
(Talmud Yoma 75a)

The tractate Brachot from Talmud also hints at a treatment that is applicable to anxiety. It says, “A prisoner cannot free oneself from prison.”
(Talmud Brachot 5b)

In other words, sometimes we are stuck and can’t solve our problems ourselves. Even if we’re the friend who helps others through their difficulties, we, too, need support to triumph over troubling thoughts and situations—a friend to help us escape the trap of our own minds. Friends can help us find light when we’re in the dark, assure us and build our confidence.

With both of these phrases, Judaism advises: Allow others to help you address and confront your burden of worries.



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III. Acquire an 'Emotions' Chavruta

Psychology views persistent worry as a learned pattern of thinking in which worried thoughts are frequently entertained. These thought-patterns can be broken. Researchers Sarah Kate McGowan and Evelyn Behar found that designating a specific slot of time to concentrate on one's worries can reduce anxiety (2012).

To maintain accountability for working on a specific topic at a designated time, it is helpful to have a partner. Judaism calls such a study partner a chavruta, which shares a root with the Hebrew word for friend, chaver, both having to do with connection. Whether we are learning with a study partner or working through emotions with a friend, we will form—and require—connection.



The Ethics of the Fathers, a collection of sage advice, encourages us to acquire a friend (Avot 1:6). Expounding on that passage, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides says the best kind of friend is a friend of virtue, someone who wants what is best for the other and builds up the other's confidence. He adds that a friend is someone you can tell anything—without fearing they'll bring you down. A friend is someone with whom you can learn as well as someone who helps to better you and steer you toward a good path.

If you can identify a good friend, Jewish wisdom and psychology advise you to let them help you. Designate a time with them to share what's on your mind, and allow yourself to be raised up by those who care about you.

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IV. Activity - Finding the Right Partner



In a Group:

1. Find a partner with whom you are willing to be vulnerable. (You are courageous!)
2. Both of you will write down and share three worries on your mind with each other.*
 - a. Consider using this structure: "I feel ___ about ___ because ___."
 - b. This format helps both people assess and meditate on each worry, considering the core feelings and beliefs behind it.
3. Allow your partner to listen, ask questions and share insight. Allow yourself to receive from them new ways of looking at the situation and strength, or chizzuk.
4. When your partner speaks, listen intently, validate their emotional experience, and offer support.

Setting up your Chavruta:

Be deliberate in identifying a buddy with whom to discuss your thoughts. List three contacts you'd want as an emotions chavruta:

- Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
- Name: _____ Phone Number: _____
- Name: _____ Phone Number: _____



Explain to these candidates the type of partnership you're seeking, and ask to schedule a regular chat with them.

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V. Can't think of what to write or share? Consider these prompts:

- What do I wish I wasn't carrying alone?
- Of the thoughts I have been giving a lot of time and energy to, which ones still bother me?
- What would I want my friend to understand about me and what I'm going through, even if it's difficult to discuss?

