

Years ago, my philosophy teacher once told me that there are two types of anxiety in life: The healthy anxiety, and the unhealthy anxiety. The healthy anxiety shows up when our mind identifies a risk to our future physical or mental future. Albeit negative this anxiety is healthy because it helps us survive. On the other hand the unhealthy anxiety happens when our mind tries to control the future but identifies that it can't. For example, I might feel anxious about an interview I have tomorrow because I want to leave a good impression, yet my brain realizes that there is no way I can guarantee that.

Unhealthy anxiety is often related to a term we all know - "the illusion of control." The illusion of control is the human tendency to overestimate our ability to influence outcomes, particularly in chance-driven or uncertain situations. When it comes to anxiety, this illusion becomes a core coping mechanism; we attempt to micromanage our environment, thoughts, and relationships to manufacture a false sense of safety.

In a relationship, unhealthy anxiety can become devastating.

Think about what we actually want from a partner. To know we're loved. To know they'll stay. To know they still find us interesting and aren't quietly drifting somewhere we can't follow. And here's the trap: not one of these is ours to control. You cannot make another person love you. You cannot guarantee they'll stay. Their heart, by definition, is not yours to run.

I'll repeat, no matter how much you love the other person. Their hearts, their thoughts, their desires aren't yours to run.

For someone caught in the illusion of control, that uncertainty is unbearable - so they try to close the gap the only way the anxious mind knows how. They seek reassurance, over and over. They check. They ask where you were, who you were with, why it took an hour to reply. They start managing the relationship the way you'd manage a risk: monitoring it, auditing it, trying to remove every variable that might mean something is wrong.

It never works. Not for lack of effort, but because the thing they're trying to produce - certainty about another person's heart - doesn't exist. Reassurance buys an hour, maybe a day. Then the doubt grows back, a little bigger, and the next dose has to be bigger too. Anyone who's lived inside this knows the feeling: the more proof you reach for, the more proof you need.

And here is where it turns devastating: the behaviors meant to keep a partner close are exactly the ones that push them away.

Esther Perel - a psychotherapist who has spent decades on the question of what keeps desire alive in long-term couples, and reached millions through her books and talks -

writes about how desire needs space, room to be a person rather than a possession. Control is the opposite of space. A partner who is questioned, monitored, and managed stops feeling chosen and starts feeling held, and people pull back from that. Not out of cruelty - out of the plain human need to breathe. So they withdraw, just slightly. And the withdrawal is the precise thing the anxious person feared. Now the fear has evidence: see, they ARE pulling away. So the grip tightens, which causes more withdrawal, which confirms more fear. Couples researchers have a name for this loop - the pursuer-distancer pattern - and it's one of the most corrosive dynamics a relationship can fall into: one person chases, the other retreats, and each move makes the other's worse.

As you read this try to think about your relationship as well. No couple has no issues or tension, and there is a good chance that your relationship, as mine, falls into this infamous pattern.

The quiet tragedy is that the chaser usually isn't trying to control anyone. Underneath the checking is something much simpler - a frightened person asking, are you still there? Do I still matter?

But the illusion of control is a sneaky one. Control is those exact questions asked in a language that guarantees they won't be heard. Nobody hears "do I still matter to you" underneath "why didn't you call." So the real need goes unmet, the fear grows, and the wheel keeps turning.

So what do you do - on either side of it?

Let's start with the anxious one, because that's where the engine is. Acknowledge what is yours and what not. Acknowledge it every day and every time you feel the anxiety start to rise. Acknowledge it to the point that, instead of asking a question like "where were you," you just say "I missed you and I got scared." Teach yourself the boundaries by making yourself aware at all times that reaching for proof feeds the anxiety. Last, play smart - the need you feel can always be said with tenderness, and tenderness is something a partner can actually respond to. Control invites defense; vulnerability invites closeness. Same fear, opposite doors.

Sounds easy to say and hard to do. Well, let's move to the other side. The side which receives someone else's anxiety. You will have to acknowledge that the other side has no desire to control you. Train yourself, every day and every time your partner panics you, to the point where you can say the following two things: "I love you and I'll be there for you," and "I need my space and time now." Only one of these two won't work. You will need to say and practice them both. Ask for the time alone, and have time also, but also pledge for time together and keep that promise.

You are never alone!

This pattern is a lot of why Alcove is built the way it is. The solo space is exactly where you can let things out and go deeper into them, until your panic or your anxiety finds a reason and loosens its grip. Alcove's "help me answer" is exactly the place where your fear can turn into understanding and internal peace, instead of a rushed request. Alcove couples sessions can guide you, so you say what you really want to say without losing the other side.

Above all. Remember that you are never alone. In moments of fear, in moments of anger, in moments of pain, Alcove will always be there for you. Never judging you, never pulling you back, always listening and always there.

Always for you.