
Chapter 1

PROMOTING CLIENT CHANGE: The Role Anxiety Plays in Career Decision Making by Marty Apodaca

In Greek mythos, the Hydra was a multi-headed monster that lived below the surface of water. The Hydra was unique in that each time a head was struck off, two more heads sprouted from the wound. Vicious and foul in nature, the Hydra attacked anyone who drew near. So great was the Hydra's threat that a champion was needed to vanquish the beast. Many champions attempted to slay the fiend and all of them failed; no matter how hard or valiantly the champions fought, they were soon overtaken. Eventually the champion summoned to slay the beast was the demigod Hercules. Like others before, Hercules's first attempt to battle the Hydra was unsuccessful. Hard as Hercules struggled, more heads rose up; Hercules could not fight the monster alone. For the many people afflicted with anxiety, combating the disorder may feel like an overwhelming task. Anxiety is complex, multifaceted, and can present in a variety of ways. Like the fiend in the myth, anxiety represents the Hydra's body, the core disorder, while the heads of the beast are the different manifestations that can include phobias, fears, and social anxiety. Like a monster that lives below the surface of human cognition, anxiety can rear a head and cause a client to become locked down, an indecisive individual. This inability to choose can have drastic effects for clients in the career decision-making process.

Anxiety and Career

Anxiety can have a debilitating effect on clients in the career decision-making process. Undergraduate clients can experience anxiety when thinking about potential majors and career. Clients with little to no knowledge about the world of work experience more major/field of study and career related anxiety than their peers (Kimes & Troth, 1974). Undergraduate clients who struggle with career and major exploration perform at a lower academic level than other students (Daniels, Stewart, Stupnisky, Perry, & LoVerso, 2011). These issues can compound and leave clients feeling hopeless about school while also locking clients down emotionally and preventing them from making a decision. These clients can enter offices in crisis mode and often will seek direct advice or answers as to what they "should" do. These clients can present unique challenges since a career practitioner's role is often to help clients develop professionally while providing resources and avenues for exploration. Career practitioners provide answers to questions pertaining to career-related issues, but do not tell clients what they "should" and "should not" do. Clients who look for quick answers tend to want to take the career versions of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Briggs, Briggs-Myers, 2015) and the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) (Strong, Donnay, Morris, Schaubhut, Thompson, 2004) in the hopes the assessments will provide answers. Before clients can take the assessments, often they will meet with a career practitioners who will explain the purpose of the assessments. Many times, these clients will

state a need to “take the tests that will tell them what to major in” or “what career they should be working in,” to which most career advisors would respond that assessments are self-exploratory tools that can assist with this decision but are not quick and fast answers for choosing a major or career. Unperturbed, many clients still insist on taking the assessments while carrying their personal issues, anxiety, and lack of knowledge about self and career into the assessments. Anxiety can negatively impact a client taking an assessment; the results of the MBTI can be inconclusive, with the areas of the preferred clarity index in the slight preference range and the general occupational themes of the SII can be flat or elevated, with an undefined theme code present. These types of occurrences can have a negative impact on clients. In regards to the MBTI, a best practice technique during the interpretation is to have the practitioner explain the dichotomies and then have clients self-identify before the results of the formal MBTI are examined (Myersbriggs.org, 2015). This is done so the client and career practitioner can explore the client’s reported and verified type. If more than two of the four dichotomies (i.e., Extraversion/Introversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling, Judging/Perceiving) are in the slight preference, it can be difficult for clients to differentiate between the areas, leaving the results of the assessment inconclusive. Clients who experience this can become frustrated and insist on continuing with the interpretation in the hopes that some useful information can be gleaned. The SII matches clients’ interests with people who are happily employed and generates a theme code based off of Holland’s RIASEC model. A typical SII profile will have interests that range from very high to very low. A person experiencing anxiety can have a flat profile, where interests fall within the moderate to very low categories, or an elevated profile, where the interests are in the very high to high ranges. Either result can be unsatisfying for clients, as no clear themes or occupations are present. Anxiety can prompt feelings of hopelessness within clients, and these feelings can push clients to answer how they perceive they “should” respond, which in turn can lead to assessment results that are not a true fit for the client (Donnay, Morris, Schaubhut, & Thompson, 2004; Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, Hammer, 2009).

Clients who have inconclusive assessment results can feel as if they failed. For clients taking both the MBTI and SII, career practitioners must explain to the clients that there is no right nor wrong results associated with the assessments, and can explore informal assessments with clients when the results of the MBTI and SII are inconclusive. Informal assessments, such as card sorts (Osborn, Kronholz, & Finklea, 2015), can be a collaboration between practitioners and clients in an environment that can help lessen and address the effects of anxiety since formal assessments can elevate feelings of anxiety and promote a need to perform within clients.

While exposing clients to work and volunteer related activities can help clients develop an understanding about career and self, anxiety can manifest uncertainty about self and career. Outside influences can also prompt anxiety in clients. For example, the University of New Mexico (UNM) is a Hispanic serving institution, and many clients come from collectivist cultures. Clients from collectivist cultures can share different career values than elder family members. When these values are different, the client can go through a difficult time fulfilling personal interests in school and work. Pushed into an unfulfilling career, clients may experience more work-related anxiety than other employees (Daniels, Stewart, Stupnisky, Perry, & LoVerso, 2011). At the Office of Career Services at UNM, career practitioners encounter these clients when they enter the office and ask about other career options, career transitions, or report feelings of being stuck. Clients often

self-report feeling anxious or explain symptoms related to anxiety when discussing their current cognitions on career.

Catalyst for Change

Hercules could not battle the Hydra alone. In order to defeat the beast, assistance was needed. Hercules sought advice and help from others close to him. Together a plan was made and Hercules became a champion who successfully battled the monster. Anxiety can be the monster that keeps a client from happily living life. Lurking just below the surface of cognition, anxiety can rear one of its many heads and immobilize a client, preventing them from making a decision. Regardless of where a client resides in their career journey, anxiety can leave a client feeling out of control. According to Weinstein, Healy, and Ender (2002), clients who experience less perceived control over their environment and emotions can experience greater levels of anxiety. Loss of control and feelings of hopelessness can create a difficult cycle for clients to break out of. Clients stuck in this loop can feel trapped in their current career or unable to choose a major. Together, a client and career practitioner can work together to find ways to cope with anxiety and move beyond indecision.

Identifying anxiety in clients can be a difficult process for career practitioners if no formal screening measures are employed. While many clients seeking career assistance need help with a resume, cover letter, or some other career issue, the safe and supportive environment of a career practitioner's office can lead a client to divulge more information than they had initially anticipated. When this happens, it is a possible indicator that there may be a bigger problem in a client's life than the presenting issue. Career practitioners can then reassure the client that this is a confidential environment in which to share information, and can acknowledge the difficult time the client is going through, although if a career practitioner does not feel comfortable working with the client or does not hold a background in counseling, this is a good time to refer to a counseling agency. Career practitioners can provide a resource list with outside counseling agencies in the community for the client to contact. During this process, it can be helpful to talk to the client about what information to provide when calling an agency. Several colleges and universities offer counseling services for students and staff members, expediting the process of referral. Some clients' self-disclose personal information or struggles with anxiety freely, easing the process of having an open conversation about what form anxiety takes within a client. Other clients may not be able to identify anxiety as an issue they struggle with, but will talk about the symptoms associated with anxiety which can include difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, a feeling of losing control over the situation, becoming emotionally and physically locked down and unable to make a decision, nausea, sweating, difficulty sleeping, and difficulty concentrating and making decisions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). At times a client may state they are fearful of choosing a major or afraid of making a wrong career move.

Clients who make these statements may not have the emotional vocabulary to distinguish between fear and anxiety; fear is a response to an immediate and present perceived danger while anxiety is a response to potential future occurrences (Craske, Rauch, Ursano, Prenoveau, Pine, & Zinbarg, 2009). A way to conceptualize between anxiety and fear is through the story of Hercules and the Hydra, in which anxiety is an emotional response the hero may feel when thinking about a potential battle against the Hydra, while fear is the response the hero feels while engaged

in combat with the Hydra. If a client reports a feeling of fear, further exploratory questions are asked by the career practitioner to distinguish when the client is experiencing this response. Career practitioners can ask a client when they experience the feeling of fear to distinguish between fear and anxiety. If a client expresses feeling fearful while engaged in a career decision making process such as choosing a major, searching for a job, or writing a resume, but not at the thought of doing these tasks, a client can be experiencing fear and not anxiety. If this is the case, a career practitioner can work with a client in the moment to help identify where these feelings are coming from. Bringing awareness to fear by having the client talk about what they feel and having the career practitioner validate the feeling can help normalize the response and allow the client to move on. If the client expresses feeling locked down and defeated by thinking about making a career decision, then further exploration on how anxiety is affecting the client is needed.

Externalization Scaling Questions

Externalization of a problem is a narrative therapy technique that helps separate a client from their presenting issue. Capuzzi and Gross (2003) state that, "Narrative counselors' or therapists' essential credo is that 'the person is never the problem; the problem is the problem'" (p. 311). Clients who internalize maladaptive thoughts regarding anxiety can become stuck in their problem filled story and view themselves as the problem. It can be helpful to normalize the client's feeling, reflecting that the struggle they are going through is real and helping the client to view anxiety through an objective lens (Corcoran, 2004).

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck, Steer, 1993) asks targeted questions associated with the physical symptoms of anxiety; a technique career practitioners can use is to ask clients where they feel anxiety initially manifest in their body. This may be one of the first times a client has stopped to think about this question. Some clients report tightness in their chest that makes it difficult to breathe, others report intrusive thoughts of inadequacy that keeps them from making a decision, while other clients can share feeling restless and being unable to sleep. After a client reports these thoughts and feelings, it can be useful to ask the clients what is done when they experience these feelings and cognitions. A common response from clients is to combat the thoughts and feelings by attempting to push them away or repress them. Much like the Hydra, the harder the client fights, the more anxiety can push back until it consumes and overwhelms the client. Other clients may report feelings of defeat and inadequacy when anxiety interferes with their current objective. By talking openly about how anxiety affects the client, patterns can start to emerge. Having the client recognize patterns can help them understand the role anxiety plays in their story (White, 2007). Having clients speak about how they have overcome instances of previous anxiety can help examine and externalize clients' strengths. Strengths are important tools for clients to utilize, as they can be employed when clients start to recognize the signs of anxiety. When a client is able to document and draw upon previous instances of success, the client can experience more perceived control over their anxiety (Daniels, Stewart, Stupnisky, Perry, & LoVerso, 2011).

Scaling Questions

When conversations between clients and career practitioners have successfully externalized anxiety, scaling questions can act as a catalyst for goal setting with clients (Corcoran, 2004). Scaling questions help clients and career practitioners thoroughly explore the current effect anxiety is

having on a client. Some questions to consider asking a client are:

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing a total absence from anxiety and 10 representing severe anxiety, what number are you currently at in regards to anxiety?

You stated you are currently at a _____, what events lead up to you feeling this way?

What level would you like to be at in regards to feeling anxious?

What does it look like when you are at this level? What do you feel? What would be different?

You stated feeling at a level _____, what would it look like if you dropped one level to _____?

Would you like to practice some of your stated techniques which help you feel less anxiety? How are you feeling now? Has anything changed?

When thinking about your next step, what goal would you like to set for yourself? What strengths and techniques will you utilize to help you complete this goal? How can I assist you as complete this goal?

These questions can promote a conversation with a client and have the opportunity to branch out in multiple directions. Again, there is not a right nor wrong way to ask these questions, rather the goal is to get the client to speak about anxiety and for the counselor to listen to how anxiety affects the client's life in regards to the client's presenting problem. By listening to clients' experience with anxiety, a career practitioner now has a frame of reference when working with a client to develop a plan of action. For instance, when assigning homework, providing opportunities for incremental success helps develop competence and control over clients' anxiety.

When developing tasks for a client to perform outside of the office, clients will have different courses of action depending on how anxiety affects them. Some clients may feel overwhelmed looking at a list of majors their university offers or possible employment postings. Scaling back assignments and setting tangible goals assists clients in marked success they can build upon. Some clients may set goals that are too high and experience a feeling of failure when the goals are not met. A career practitioner can recognize this and work with the client to ensure the goal is tangible and within the client's reach, thereby ensuring client success and building skills of competency and control. In session, anxiety can manifest differently within clients, but career practitioners can become aware of clients experiencing anxiety within session by looking for signs of fidgeting, excessive sighing and statements of feeling overwhelmed and stressed, and difficulty breathing.

The goal of this method is not to specifically target anxiety and reduce symptoms, but rather to have the client gain a greater sense of understanding and control over their life in order to utilize previous strengths they may not have been cognizant of. This tangible goal setting and marked success is Cognitive Behavioral in origin, but works well when implemented in a narrative model because there is a "greater focus on increasing the overall functioning of the client versus having a focus on certain types of symptom reduction" (Twohig, Woidneck, & Crosby, 2013, p. 228).

Brief Client Case Example

"Sam" met with career practitioner and expressed concerns over an upcoming interview. Sam stated previous struggles with anxiety around career making decisions and life circumstances, and specifically shared being in transition from male to female and having feelings of uncertainty

about potential employers' acceptance of the client as a person. While reporting on reason for the visit, Sam became visibly agitated, fidgeting in their chair; Sam's breathing changed into shallow, rapid breaths and became emotional and teary-eyed. The career practitioner reflected on the observed symptoms the client displayed and asked the client what they were feeling at the moment and if the feeling began in a certain area of the body. Sam stated feeling stressed and anxious of the upcoming interview and that the feelings began as a tightness in the chest. The career practitioner asked the client to rate their current level of anxiety, with 1 being no anxiety at all and 10 being the worst anxiety they ever felt. The client stated they were at a level 9. The career practitioner then asked client what being at a level 8 would look like and how they could work together to bring the anxiety level down to a 8. Sam stated this could be achieved by knowing what to expect during the interview and knowing that the employer would be accepting. Sam was experiencing a lack of control over their situation, which prompted feelings of anxiety.

The career practitioner then asked about Sam's willingness to participate in a breathing exercise in order to become more present during the session. Sam agreed and reported feeling a little more at ease once the exercise was completed. The career practitioner then asked what it would look like if they were successful in the interview. Sam reported being able to articulate responses to questions and not being nervous at all. Career practitioner then normalized the feelings of becoming nervous during an interview and stated that nervousness was a natural reaction to a stressful situation. Sam responded well to the statement and then worked with the career practitioner to evaluate and practice common interview questions. The career practitioner then checked in about Sam's feelings. Sam reported feeling better but was still unsure as to whether the employer would be accepting. The career practitioner explored these feelings and thoughts about whether it would be necessary to reveal personal information during the interview. Interviewing was described as a two way process where Sam could ask the employer questions regarding the work setting. This encouraged Sam to gain control over the situation by giving the client power to reject a position if Sam did not feel it would be a right fit.

The career practitioner asked about Sam's feelings about the upcoming interview. Sam appeared more at ease and stated their anxiety level was now at a 3.5. The career practitioner reflected on the achievement the client had made during the session and asked what helped contribute to the lower level of anxiety. Sam expressed being able to feel control over the upcoming situation and knowing what to expect during the interview. They then collaborated on a structured plan for the client to practice questions and become cognizant of signs of anxiety, as well as how to manage the anxiety in the moment if Sam felt anxious during an interview. The career practitioner then had the client write out what helped lessen the feelings of anxiety and ways to cope and move forward when the client felt anxiety manifest. Additionally while in session, a career practitioner can have the client practice:

Deep breathing: have the client place their hands on their stomach and breathe until their stomach protrudes out, then slowly blow the air out of their mouth. Career practitioners can also participate by demonstrating the technique and giving instructions of when to breathe in and out; this helps engage with clients and also models how to use the technique. This can be practiced over a set time or number of breaths.

Visualizing success: ask the client to explain what it would look like if they overcame anxiety and made a decision. The career practitioner can also ask the client to reflect upon what the client

feels when they visualize success. Follow up questions can include: When was the last time you experienced this feeling?; What can you do to experience this feeling again?

Physical activity: some clients may respond well to physical activity such as walking or stretching. Career practitioners can ask the client if they would like to take a short walk during the session. Brief physical activity such as stretching and walking can help encourage a positive mood state and lessen the anxiety felt during and outside of a session (Parente, 2000).

When to refer: addressing anxiety in session and practicing anxiety reducing techniques may not be enough to help some clients feel less anxious. For these clients, anxiety may be deep rooted and require the outside assistance of a physician, mental health counselor, or both. Career practitioners who do not observe a client's anxiety level decrease in session may feel unable to help clients overcome anxiety. Career practitioners can then refer clients to outside agencies where mental health practitioners and access to medication are available. A client who suffers from severe anxiety and utilizes medication, mental health counseling, and career counseling has a greater chance of moving out of career indecision than clients whose anxiety goes untreated (Haslam, Brown, Atkinson, Haslam, 2004).

Conclusion

Clients who are afflicted with anxiety present unique challenges in that how anxiety is individually constructed among clients can be complex and multifaceted. Understanding what anxiety means to clients and the unique ways in which anxiety affects clients is the foundation upon what change and action are built. Providing clients with action orientated tasks in small, incremental steps can help build confidence and skills within clients, thereby enabling clients to take control of their lives and make career decisions in a less-encumbered way.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Beck, A.T., & Steer, R.A. (1993). *Beck anxiety inventory manual*. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation.
- Briggs, K., Briggs-Myers, I. (2015). *The myers-briggs type indicator*. Mountain View, CA: CPP.
- Capuzzi, D., Gross, D.R. (2003). *Counseling and psychotherapy: Theories and interventions*. (3rd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall
- Corcoran, J. (2004). *Building strengths and skills: A collaborative approach to working with clients*. Retrieved from [http://site.ebrary.com.libproxy.unm.edu/lib/unma/reader.action?docID=10142449](http://site.ebrary.com.libproxy.unm.edu/lib/unma/reader/action?docID=10142449)
- Craske, M. G., Rauch, S. L., Ursano, R., Prenoveau, J. (2009). *What is an anxiety disorder? Depression and Anxiety*. Retrieved from www.dsm5.org/Research/Documents/Craske_What%20is%20an%20Anxiety%20DO.pdf
- Daniels, L.M., Stewart, T. L., Stupnisky, R.H., Perry, R.P., & LoVerso, T. (2011). Relieving

career anxiety and indecision: the role of undergraduate students' perceived control and faculty affiliations. *Social Psychology of Education* **14**, 409-426. Doi: 10.1007/s11218-010-9151-x

Donnay, D.A.C., Morris, M.L., Schaubhut, N.A., Thompson, R.C. (2004). *Strong interest inventory manual: Research, development, and strategies for interpretation*. (Revised ed.). Mountain View, CA: CPP.

Haslam, C., Brown, S., Atkinson, S., Haslam, R. (2004). Patients' experiences of medication for anxiety and depression: Effects on working life. *Family Practice* **21**(2), 204-212. Doi: 10.1093/fampra/cmh218

Kimes, H. G., & Troth, W. A. (1974). Relationship of trait anxiety to career decisiveness. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* **21**, 277-280.

Myers, I., McCauley, M.H., Quenk, N.L., Hammer, A.L. (2009). *MBTI manual: A guide to the development and use of the myers-briggs type indicator instrument*. (3rd ed.). Mountain View, CA: CPP.

Myersbriggs.org. (2015). *The Myers and Briggs Foundation: Ethical guidelines*. Retrieved from <http://www.myersbriggs.org/myers-and-briggs-foundation/ethical-use-of-the-mbti-instrument/ethical-guidelines.htm>

Osborn, D. S., Kronholz, J. F., & Finklea, J. T. (2015). Card Sorts. In M. McMahon, & M. Watson (Eds.), *Career Assessment: Qualitative Approaches* (pp. 81-88). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.sensepublishers.com/catalogs/bookseries/career-development-series/career-assessment/>

Parente, D. (2000). Influence of aerobic and stretching exercise on anxiety and sensation-seeking mood state. *Perceptual and Motor Skills* **90** (1), 347-348. Doi: 10.2466/pms.2000.90.1.347

Strong, E. K., Jr., Donnay, D. A. C., Morris, M. L., Schaubhut, N. A., & Thompson, R. C. (2004). *Strong interest inventory*. (Revised ed.). Mountain View, CA: CPP

Twohig, M. P., Woidneck, M. R., & Crosby, J. M. (2013). Newer generations of CBT for anxiety disorders. In Simos, G. & Hofmann, S. G. *CBT for anxiety disorders: A practitioners book*. (pp. 225-258). Retrieved from <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/unma/reader.action?docID=10674767>

Weinstein, F.M., Healy, C. C., & Ender, P.B. (2002). Career choice anxiety, coping, and perceived control. *The Career Development Quarterly* **50**, 339-349.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.

About the author



Marty Apodaca is a Career Development Facilitator at the University of New Mexico (UNM). He earned the Master of Arts in Counseling at UNM, a CACREP accredited program. He has served as a liaison to the Ethnic Centers at UNM and is currently working on developing an interactive and support based program for first generation students. He is the past president of the New Mexico Career Development Association and an active member of the National Career Development Association and New Mexico Counseling Association. His current interest is in helping clients share, connect with, and ultimately develop authorship over their stories.

Contact him as follows:

Marty Apodaca
MSC06 37101, University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131 USA
e-mail: rapodaca@unm.edu