



*Interview with
Psychotherapist
Ben Ringler:
What To Do When Your
Partner Is Anxious*

1. When a man's bride is feeling anxious and he's saying to himself, "This can't be normal; if she really loved me and wanted to marry me she wouldn't be feeling this way," what do you say to him to help him normalize this experience and not take it personally?

Normalizing the experience of worry is an essential first step when faced with a bride's anxieties of this major transition. It's very common for brides to feel anxious, and just as common for the grooms to take this personally. You are not alone! Give yourself a break!

Going a step further, it is important to see the reality of this situation clearly (awareness) as it is rather than how it appears. This clarity will ease a groom's worry and concern. It's important to understand that anxiety itself likes to float around and land on any random thought or upcoming event. It's safe to say that the content you are hearing (specific thoughts and fears) is not ultimately what these feelings are about. In other words, it's most likely NOT about you! Anxiety often is the gatekeeper of deeper feelings of excitement, deep joy, and personal growth (which a wedding is sure to facilitate).

It can also be very helpful to start to inquire what happens for you emotionally when your bride feels anxious. Do you feel anxious, too? Angry? Overwhelmed? Indifferent? Any reaction is a normal one and reflecting on your own repetitive emotional patterns can help you feel more empowered in this seemingly out-of-control time.

2. How can you help a man best support his partner when she's in the midst of her anxiety - when she comes to him crying, scared, and anxious? In other words, what is his role - or the masculine role - during the anxiety?

I would say that the masculine role is slightly different than the one we assume in this situation. Rather than simply to be "strong" (i.e. stoicism or to fix the problem), I believe strongly that the groom's

responsibility in times of anxiety is to bring self-awareness, clear communication and compassionate understanding of these emotional storms.

Your bride needs you not to take her anxiety personally. She may not say it or ask for it directly, but she is hoping on a deep level that you can be there in these anxious times and that you do not collapse in your own hurt feelings. The best way to not take it personally is to ask yourself why you are taking it personally and communicate that (when it is clear to you) to your bride.

It is very possible that you are taking her anxious feelings personally because of older patterns that you either witnessed repeatedly (i.e. between your mom and dad) or inherited. How did your family negotiate anxiety or other “negative” feelings? Who was the caretaker in the family of others’ difficult feelings? Are you afraid of being left by your bride? Does this fear touch on early feelings of being abandoned (i.e. divorce)? Questions like these are helpful to ask. When you get a clear answer, you can share these insights with your partner. his information will be grounding for your bride.

If you feel up for it, ask her to tell you about her anxiety. Rather than fixing it, demonstrating your caring about her feelings will calm her and will demonstrate your love and caring for her.

3. What can a man do if he's feeling overwhelmed by his partner's emotions?

The best way to deal with overwhelm is to communicate, get support, and get in your body. If you are experiencing overwhelm by your partner’s emotions, it’s best to be transparent about that to avoid further anxiety on her part (as you run out the door or scream at her!). Tell her that you are feeling overwhelmed, that it’s not her fault, and that you need to do X,Y and Z to take care of yourself so you can come back and support her.

Then, I recommend seeking out certain people (especially other men, men who you trust and who have gone through this) to talk to them about your overwhelm. Find select people who you can call on a dime when you are struggling, who won't judge you and who can understand what you're going through.

Finally, get in your body! When we are overwhelmed, we often go into our heads to try to figure out how to get out of feeling overwhelmed, our muscles tighten, and we forget to breathe. This is fuel for further overwhelm. Find a physical outlet that you enjoy to get your blood flowing, breath going, and even better, sweat rolling. Walk, bike ride, basketball, yoga, swim, push-ups, whatever feels the best to you.

4. Many men believe that their role is to be a source of support to their partners and fail to see that this transition, especially when anxiety is present, can be a growth experience for him as well. How do men grow as they learn about how to best support their partners? (What I often see is that, while the man may not experience a lot of anxiety during the marriage transition, it hits him later during a job change, a move, or the loss of parent. Then it's the woman's turn to learn how to be there for him.)

This is a unique opportunity to learn about yourself, especially in a time when you are not in the heart of anxiety yourself! In developing an understanding on how you react to your bride's anxiety, you will have a deeper understanding of how you react to YOUR OWN anxiety. If you get frustrated with her, you inevitably get frustrated with yourself when you feel anxious. If you feel lost and overwhelmed with her, you will feel similarly when you feel stressed.

You can ask your bride (in a more peaceful moment) what will be most supportive to her (what you can say, do) when her anxiety is running rampant. A hug, words of encouragement ("you're doing great"), words of reassurance ("everything is ok"), etc. may be just what she needs. Concurrently, you can ask yourself what might be helpful to you in anxious times. You can even share that with her so

she knows what she can do when you're stressed. Learning how to soothe yourself is an invaluable tool and facilitates growth.

4. Do you encourage men to seek support from other men - friends or older male mentors?

Undoubtedly! In many cultures, men going through major transitions utilize male mentors to traverse the emotional and physical terrain. It's not easy to hold (by oneself) all the emotional variables that come with a wedding. Seeking support from friends and, better yet, older male mentors with some more life perspective can better normalize the overwhelm and point the way towards good coping strategies and stories of their own that can ease your mind.

Whether it's a family member, a therapist, a rabbi or priest, or friend, it's good to set up a support system: ask people if you can call them when needed, or set up a gathering where you and some other men sit and talk about weddings, or even go and do some activities with some other men just to have a change of pace!



Ben Ringler, MA, MFT is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a private practice in Berkeley and San Francisco. He obtained his Master's at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. Prior to studying psychology, Ben spent five years in the financial markets, in investment banking and high net worth sales. That career transition sparked his interest and passion for the power of transitions. Ben specializes in working with men who are going through significant life transitions, including fatherhood, career change, marriage and divorce. Ben works in an engaged way with his clients and brings his passion for self-inquiry and growth to the clients he works with. You can see more about his work at www.BenRingler.com or you can contact him at (510) 848-8899.

