

Stress and Anxiety:

Recognizing & Dealing with

Stress and Anxiety

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**What is Anxiety?**

Anxiety is basically worry that never stops. Its symptoms can be severe or mild, and include emotional, physical, and/or psychological manifestations. Here are some of the symptoms and possible causes of anxiety.

**Symptoms and Manifestations**

*-Abdominal Problems*

Anxiety can cause pain in your abdomen. Anxiety can also cause nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea. Have you ever had "butterflies in your stomach"? This refers to the fluttery feeling you get in your middle when you're nervous. This is caused by the "flight or fight" response, during which the body decreases circulation to non-vital body processes such as digestion.

This allows your body to go into full alert, able to run or fight as the case may be. When this is prolonged, however, the digestive organs become worn out and, without the return of normal circulation, begin to malfunction.

*-Muscle Tension*

This can cause pain throughout the body, the most frightening being the chest tightness in a "panic attack." (Panic attacks are also symptoms of anxiety.) The muscle spasms can feel like you're choking or like a heart attack, increasing feelings of fear and anxiety.

-*Phobias*

Phobias are irrational fears of harmless or specific things. Fear of heights, spiders, or flying in airplanes are some of the more common phobias.

-Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

People with OCD feel the need to enact some sort of ritual to alleviate anxious feelings. Probably the most well-known example is obsessive hand-washing, but OCD can also involve other ritualistic behavior, such as checking all the doors and windows multiple times to see that they are locked, even when you just locked them.

-*Headaches*

Probably a result of muscle tension or chemical imbalance in the brain, headaches often are part of anxiety.

*-Heart Palpitations*

This is when the heart seems to flutter or beat rapidly and irregularly. Like the butterflies in the stomach, heart palpitations are part of the fight or flight response, only in the case of anxiety it's chronic.

*-Restlessness/Insomnia*

People with anxiety often have trouble relaxing in general and sleeping in particular.

**Causes of Anxiety**

-*Genetics*

There is evidence to suggest that the tendency to develop anxiety can be inherited. This genetic tendency may need an environmental trigger of some sort to develop actual anxiety symptoms.

-*Traumatic Event(s)*

Veterans of wars, survivors of rape and/or sexual abuse, and other victims of traumatic experience can suffer from anxiety. It's as though the brain can not "move on" from the event, creating patterns of anxious thoughts and physical symptoms.

*-Brain Chemicals*

Those who suffer from anxiety tend to have abnormal levels of neurotransmitters, which means their brains have trouble transmitting information on a cellular level.

**Types of Stress**

Stress is stress, right? Well, not always. There are actually categories of stress. They vary according to frequency, severity, and symptoms. Let's take a look at some of them.

**-Eustress**

This may be a new term to some. Eustress refers to "good" stress, or the kind of stress that actually enhances health and performance. This is the kind of stress you feel when you see your child about to topple down a flight of stairs, and it kicks your body systems into gear so that you can act quickly and efficiently to catch your child.

Other ways that eustress manifests are in creative and athletic efforts. An artist who is driven by eustress becomes inspired and full of energy. An athlete gains excited energy and his or her body performs to its highest potential. Eustress is brief, intense, and does not wear the body out.

**-Hyperstress**

The prefix "hyper" denotes too much of something, or an excess of some sort - hyperactivity, hyperthyroidism, etc. Hyperstress is no exception. It refers to relentless stress that forces you to perform optimally and continually.

It's like being asked to give your all every minute of every day, and sometimes through the night as well. Hyperstress is not healthy, and can cause burn-out.

Hyperstressed people often feel tense and edgy. You may find that your emotions are always just below the surface and are easily provoked.

**-Hypostress**

The opposite of the "hyper" prefix, "hypo" denotes a lack, as in hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). If you are hypostressed, you don't have enough stimuli. You're bored and do not have much motivation.

This does not mean you're not doing anything; you just are not doing anything that interests or motivates you. For example, if you have a job that involves repetitive, mechanical action, such as on an assembly line, you may experience hypostress. Hypostress can make you feel restless, discontent, or apathetic.

-**Distress**

Distress is caused by a traumatic event or events, or some sort of negative environmental factor. It is sometimes used synonymously with anxiety. Distress itself is divided into two types: acute and chronic distress.

***\*Acute distress results from a perceived threat.*** It may be real, such as being physically attacked, or it may be purely psychological. Either way, the result is distress. It's your response to being threatened. Acute distress can also be a reaction to a change or upheaval in your life. It is always temporary.

***\*Chronic distress is more on-going.*** It can result in illness and depression. It may still be caused by perceived threats or difficulties in the environment, but they are continual or frequent.

Chronic distress can result if you are yelled at by your boss every day, for example, or if you are in a problematic marriage. Where acute distress is like a hammer blow, chronic distress is like a slow wearing down with sandpaper.

**Common Treatments for Panic Attacks**

One of the ironies of panic attacks is the feeling that you are alone, or that you will embarrass yourself if you try to seek help or even go into public.

But it's vital to get some sort of treatment so that the fear does not completely debilitate you. The good news is that panic attacks are treatable, and tend to respond well to treatment. Here are some of the more common treatments for this terrifying problem.

**Medication**

While most therapists and doctors do not look at medication as a long-term solution, it is often employed in order to help the patient get a handle on the situation and seek help. It may be that a patient needs medication in order to seek out and benefit from non-medicated treatments.

Some of the medications used to treat panic attacks are:

* Xanax
* Klonopin
* Ativan

These medications are helpful if you are in the middle of a panic attack, often bringing relief from the symptoms quickly.

* Prozac
* Zoloft
* Paxil

These are anti-depressants, and are meant to treat the overall frequency of panic attacks. These medications can also reduce the severity of the attacks. They are not used to alleviate symptoms right away.

**Various Therapies**

Panic attacks do respond to various forms of non-medicated therapies. Here are some of the more effective, common ones.

**Cognitive/Behavioral Therapy**

Behavioral therapy can have different facets depending on the nature of the panic attacks. Basically, this kind of therapy helps the patient "unlearn" certain destructive behaviour patterns while learning constructive ones.

Behavioral therapists help the patient directly address his or her fears. Otherwise, the patient tends to spend all of his or her time avoiding possible panic attack triggers.

**Desensitization**

This is an aspect of behavioral therapy that involves the systematic exposure to whatever the patient fears until the patient can face that fear.

For example, if you have a paralyzing fear of flying in an airplane, the therapist may begin with having you simply walk up to a parked airplane. You may even be asked to touch the airplane. That will be all for the first session, or even the first few sessions.

Then, as you build confidence, the therapist may ask you to take a step or two up the steps to the door of the airplane. Then you can work up to being inside the airplane without it moving. Slowly, in incremental steps, you will be able to "unlearn" the fear response and re-learn a calm response to flying in airplanes.

**Meditation and Relaxation Techniques**

Yoga, Tai Chi, Pilates, and other stretching types of exercises can help the body relax. The calm, deliberate, disciplined movements are the opposite of the chaotic muscle contractions of a panic attack, and help your body lean how to have calm, peaceful, physical responses. The exercise itself in these techniques also helps panic attack sufferers.

Meditation can be practiced independently of the above techniques or in conjunction with them. Once again, the measured, calm, focused thought processes emphasized in meditation can help you learn how to cope with everyday stressors.

**Recognizing When Children Are Stressed and Helping Them Deal With It**

It's tempting for grown-ups to remember childhood as an idyllic time. Sometimes, we adults think that since children don't have to worry about paying the bills, keeping a job, cleaning the house, and so forth, they can't possibly have any problems.

This is a really counterproductive way of thinking, though, because children do get stressed. And they need your help to deal with it.

Children do not have the coping mechanisms, born of experience and maturity, that adults do. This is why seemingly small things can be very upsetting to children. So be patient and learn to recognize your kids' stress and help them cope. Here are some things to look for and some tips on helping them deal with their stress.

**-Physical Symptoms**

Stressed children may exhibit physical symptoms, such as diarrhea, hives or rashes, restless sleep, changes in appetite, and /or nausea.

**-Emotional Psychological Symptoms**

A stressed child may exhibit depression, excessive sensitivity, or social withdrawal. Stressed kids may be aggressive or have angry outbursts.

So if you see these symptoms in your child, what can you do? It's tempting to do nothing. Parents may think it will go away on its own, or that their child will outgrow it. But stress needs to be confronted and coped with so that it does not become entrenched in your child's thought and behavior patterns. Here are some things you can do.

**-Listen**

Really listen. You may ask your stressed child what's wrong, or why he is acting a certain way, and you may not get an answer. Or you get an answer like "Nothing." But really listening means paying attention to your child's words and body language even when they don't know you're watching. Certainly asking your child what is wrong is a good thing to do; it shows you care.

But don't interrogate her, or expect your child to be able to verbalize exactly what's occurring in her life and how it's affecting her. Even some adults have trouble with this. So try to "read" into the passing comments, complaints, and body language of your child.

**-Express Empathy**

If you express empathy, it shows your child that you do notice and understand. Verbally expressing empathy can also help your child build a vocabulary to explain his stressful feelings. You might say, "I bet it hurts your feelings when people call you names. It hurts mine, too," and share an experience from your past.

**-Help Your Child Be Proactive**

Work with your child in finding solutions to his stress. Sit down and make lists of things he could do, such as writing a letter to the stress-causing person or cutting back on some of his extra-curricular activities.

Let your child know that she does not have to be doing something 24 hours a day to have personal worth. She has worth because of who she is!

**How to Head Off Stress & Anxiety Before They Happen**

If you suffer from stress and anxiety, you probably want to avoid future run-ins with these problems. Of course, stress is inevitable, but you can learn to cope with it in a functional, healthy way. Here are some tips for staving off stress and anxiety before they catch up with you.

**1.) Good Nutrition**

This is listed as number 1 for a reason. It is one of the most important and effective means by which you can cope with stress and anxiety and prevent them from taking over your life. Some nutrients and foods that are good for proper brain and body fuction are:

* Essential Fatty Acids, such as those found in olive oil, salmon, flax seeds, and other unrefined vegetable oils should be sought out and deliberately included in the diet.
* Vitamin D  
    
  This vitamin plays a signifcant role in mood regulation. In fact, has been used to treat people who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

**2.) Regular Exercise**

This is also very important for avoiding the negative effects of stress and anxiety. Don't wait until you feel stressed or anxious; like good nutrition, make exercise a part of your regular routine.

Exercise increases circulation, and also induces the body to produce endorphins. These brain chemicals profoundly affect your mood and response to stress.

Exercising with realistic goals is also important. You don't want to bring on anxious feelings by "failing" at an enormous exercise goal like running a marathon right away when you've never run before.

Keeping your goals realistic - say running a around a quarter-mile track once and walking another 3 laps - can boost your confidence and give you a sense of accomplishment. These are great weapons against stress and anxiety.

**3.) Positive Self-Talk**

You may need help in learning how to break negative self-talk patterns. Many of us have developed patterns of thought that automatically involve self-abasement.

For example, if you make a mistake on a piece of paperwork, your mind may automatically begin "beating you up," and you'll have thoughts that you can't do anything right, you are terrible at paperwork, and so forth. Learning to recognize this pattern and redirect your thoughts to more positive ones can help prevent further stress and anxiety.

**4.) Deep Breathing**

It may seem silly to focus on breathing as part of preventing stress and anxiety. Everyone knows how to breathe, right? Yes, everyone knows how to breathe, but few people know how to breathe properly.

Deep breathing is the deliberate taking in of breath that helps focus your thoughts and energy. It also promotes the circulation of oxygen throughout the body. Exhaling deeply and fully is also important, as this more thoroughly eliminates toxins from the body.

**5.) Rest**

Getting adequate sleep is essential for helping your body cope with stress. Everything seems bigger, scarier, and more worrisome when you are exhausted.

**6.) Know the Symptoms**

Learn to recognize your body's cues that it's experiencing too much stress and its resulting anxiety. Pay attention to things like feelings of restlessness, fatigue, anxious thoughts, and muscle tension. Once you learn to recognize the stressful trend, you can stop it before it takes hold.

**What is a Panic Attack?**

A panic attack can be a very frightening thing. Some sufferers feel as if they are choking or having a heart attack. But knowing what's going on can go a long way in helping you cope with such an attack.

Here is what a panic attack is, and some of its possible causes and symptoms.

**What Is a Panic Attack?**

When you experience sudden, terrifying feelings of fear over which you have no control, it may be a panic attack. Such feelings are often accompanied by physical sensations, such as pain in the chest or abdomen or a feeling of suffocation and choking. Panic attacks are often a symptom of an anxiety disorder.

**Causes**

As noted above, panic attacks are often a manifestation of an underlying disorder. Thus, to find the cause(s) of the attack, doctors and therapists must look at causal factors of the disorder.

Sometimes, panic attacks don't have any apparent cause, or may have specific triggers. For example, you may experience a panic attack every time you try to get into an elevator or drive under a bridge.

The elevator and the bridge are not causing the attacks, but something about your perception of them is. Thus, there is an underlying anxiety or fear that needs to be addressed.

**Symptoms**

One of the most difficult and frightening aspects of panic attacks is that they can strike without warning. There are both symptoms of a panic attack itself, and symptoms of a panic disorder that may give rise to an attack. First, let's look at the symptoms of a panic attack itself.

Symptoms of a panic attack are numerous. They include feelings of detachment from reality or from your surroundings; pain in the chest; heart palpitations; rapid pulse; dizziness; sweating; gasping for breath (or hyperventilating); and nausea or stomach pain. Sometimes you may feel like you're dying.

The symptoms feed on themselves, so to speak, so that the longer you experience the attack the more the fear grips you. Panic attacks do pass, however - usually after about 10 minutes or under 1/2 hour.

Symptoms of a panic disorder actually include panic attacks themselves. In addition, signs of panic disorders may also include fear of panic attacks; an inability to socialize; desperate attempts to avoid another panic attack (such as avoiding all possible triggers and obsessing over what those triggers are/were); and, in the case of panic disorder with agoraphobia, you are so afraid of having a panic attack in public that you avoid crowded places or even any public place.

If you suffer from any of these problems or symptoms, there are effective treatments available. Discuss the problem with your doctor, and he or she can refer you to a therapist who can help.

**Knowing When Things Are Getting Serious**

While some people run to the doctor for every cut and scrape, others put off seeing a physician for nagging symptoms that could indicate something serious.

So how do you know? When should you see the doctor?

Sometimes, of course, it's obvious. If you are in unbearable pain or experiencing heavy bleeding or injury, you go to the doctor. Sometimes, though, it's not so obvious. Is that lump a tumor, or just a localized infection? Is this vague, migratory pain something to worry about? Should I see a doctor about this chronic cough?

Let's take a look at some of the symptoms that can be vague enough to cause conflict over seeing a doctor.

**1.) Chronic Coughing**

If you have a cold and a nagging cough that lasts for a week or so, it's probably not a big deal. But prolonged, chronic coughing could be a very serious symptom.

In fact, whooping cough can present in adults as simply a chronic cough that lasts for weeks or even months. So if your cough is very painful, lasts more than a week, or brings up blood, you should see a doctor.

**2.) Nagging or Migratory Pain**

Pain is sometimes a serious symptom, but at other times it's just something like an old injury acting up. Generally speaking, however, living with chronic pain, even if it's bearable, is just not the best way to live life.

If your pain is at an injury site or seems like muscle stiffness or cramps, you might consider seeing a chiropractor. He or she will be able to recognize the source and nature of the pain, and will let you know if it's serious.

Severe, sudden pain should be examined by a doctor, no matter what part of the body is affected.

**3.) Lumps Under the Skin**

If the lump is in your breast, you do not necessarily need to seek medical attention. Monitor the lump and see if it goes away or decreases during your menstrual cycle. This kind of cystic breast activity is normal. But if the lump is persistent and does not change or grows in size, visit your doctor.

Other lumps may or may not be an issue. The key is to monitor it - does the lump stay the same, get bigger, or change color, shape and/or size? If it does any of these things, or develops an infection, see your doctor.

**4.) Weight Gain**

Unexpected weight gain can be more than just a disappointment. If you have not changed your dietary or exercise habits, weight gain could indicate something more serious. Water in the tissues, or edema, is characterized by weight gain as are insulin disorders.

Unexplained weight gain could indicate a poorly functioning thyroid. Therefore, see your doctor if you gain weight for no apparent reason and your attempts at losing it fail.

**5.) Weight Loss**

Unfortunately, many people welcome weight loss as a good thing and neglect to recognize that it could be a serious symptom. Cancer, hyperthyroidism, and liver disease are all characterized by weight loss.

If you have not made any significant dietary or exercise changes, or if you are actually eating more and exercising less and still losing weight, see your doctor.

**Common Treatments for Anxiety**

Anxiety is a difficult thing to live with. It can affect your relationships and overall quality of life. The good news is, anxiety tends to respond to treatment. Here are some of the more common treatments for anxiety.

**-Behavioral Therapy**

Behavioral therapy is about just that - behavior. It is not designed to delve into the patient's past, or explore underlying causes of the patient's anxiety.

It does, however, help the patient identify patterns of thinking and behaving, and how those thoughts and behaviors are connected. The goal is to help the patient manage the problem.

**-Cognitive Therapy**

This kind of therapy teaches the patient to have rational responses to stressful situations rather than negative, self-abasing responses.

Cognitive therapy helps the patient face - and therefore overcome - the irrational thoughts and beliefs that bring on an anxious response.

**-Medication**

While there are several anxiety medications on the market, most experts agree that medication should be used in conjunction with some other sort of therapy. Medication is generally considered a short-term help, and, depending on the type of anxiety exhibited, is not a long-term solution.

**-Regular Exercise**

This is basic, but effective. Exercise causes the brain to release endorphins, the "feel good" brain chemicals that help you relax and feel happy and content.

Exercise also uses your muscles and promotes good circulation. Daily exercise is best, but even regular exercise several times a week has proven helpful.

**-Meditation or Relaxation Techniques**

Like regular exercise, these treatments need to be practiced regularly. They can help release muscle tension. Meditation and relaxation also promote centered, calm patterns of thought.

**-Hypnosis**

While most of us think of a patient lying on a couch with a psychiatrist swinging a pocket watch in front of the patient's face, modern, legitimate hypnosis is practiced differently.

Performed by a hypnotherapist, hypnosis puts the patient into a deeply relaxed state. While the patient is in this state, the hypnotherapist suggests techniques and methods for managing the patient's anxiety.

**-Biofeedback**

This treatment basically teaches you how to recogize your body's anxiety symptoms. It "tunes you in" to your body's cues so that you can recognize an oncoming episode of anxiety. If you can recognize its onset, you can learn to stop it from getting full-blown.

**-Psychotherapy**

This usually involves talking to someone, and is sometimes called "talk therapy." Therapists help the anxiety sufferer understand and identify what is going on, which then enables the sufferer to manage his or her anxiety.

**Foods & Drinks That May Increase Anxiety**

If you suffer from anxiety, you may blame certain triggers in your environment for bringing on the anxious feelings. But what you eat and drink can have a profound effect on your body's chemistry. Some foods and drinks may actually worsen your anxiety.

Here are some of the culprits.

**Drinks**

*-Coffee*

As you might have expected, the caffeine in coffee can make anxiety worse. It causes constriction of blood vessels and that feeling of the "jitters." It can also cause or worsen insomnia. In addition, coffee inhibits the absorption of Vitamin C, an important nutrient for optimal mind and body function.

-*Soft Drinks and Colas*

Even if you choose caffeine-free, sugar-free soft drinks, you are still drinking a beverage that can worsen your anxiety. The high-acid content of dark colas produces an acidic environment in the body. In order to alleviate this acidity, calcium and magnesium are leached from your bones.

Both of these minerals are crucial to proper brain and muscle function. In fact, muscles can not relax properly without calcium and magnesium. The tense muscles associated with anxiety are therefore exacerbated.

So if you choose a clear, caffeine-free, sugar-free soft drink, it won’t worsen your anxiety, right? Wrong! The artificial sweetener in these drinks, aspartame, may have significant cognitive effects. It may indeed worsen the psychological aspect of anxiety.

*-Alcohol*

At first, this seems like the opposite of caffeine, and therefore a good idea for anxiety sufferers. But actually, alcohol consumption (beyond a small glass of wine a few times a week) can worsen depression and inhibit absorption of key nutrients.

**Foods**

*-Chocolate*

While chocolate is often considered the "feel-good" food, it contains significant caffeine and large amounts of sugar. As discussed above, caffeine has the opposite effect that an anxious person wants and needs. The sugar is another problem, and is discussed below.

*-Excessive Sugar*

By "excessive," some nutritionists mean anything over 5 tablespoons of refined sugar daily. While you may think that would be easy, it's not. Sugar is in everything, and 5 tablespoons is just 1 tablespoon more than 1/4 cup.

If you drink several large glasses of sweet iced tea, you have probably drunk close to 1/4 cup of sugar. And that does not take into account the sugar in your foods, either hidden (such as in frozen foods) or obvious (such as "frosted" cereals).

So why is sugar a problem? For one thing, the body uses Vitamin B6, which is crucial to mood and proper hormone function, to metabolize sugar. In other words, sugar depletes your body of this and other important nutrients. It can also create highs and lows in mood, and bring on a post-sugar "crash," or low blood sugar.

*-Refined Flour*

Refined flour acts much like sugar in the body. And it has none of the essential fatty acids, fiber, and other nutrients that whole grains do.

*-Highly Processed Foods*

Many processed foods are full of preservatives, dough "conditioners" (in the case of store-bought bread products), artificial flavors, and artificial colors. Some of these can pass through the blood-brain barrier, affecting cognitive function.

Tartarazine (FD&C yellow #5), commonly found in candy, gum, margarine, and many other processed foods can disrupt the hormone balance in the body.

**Healthy Stress vs. Unhealthy Stress**

The phrase "healthy stress" may seem like an oxymoron, but it's actually a reality. Stress is inescapable; everyone feels some stress at some points throughout their lives. Our bodies are therefore equipped to handle certain types and amounts of stress. We can even benefit from it.

So what is the difference between healthy and unhealthy stress? What makes stress healthy? Here are some things to think about regarding stress and its role in your health.

**Healthy Stress**

*-The Great Motivator*

Without stress, not very much would get done. Stress is what drives you to teach your kids proper behavior, to earn money, and to pay your bills on time. It is what keeps you on your toes in a football game or when catching your tumbling toddler. A certain amount of stress about traffic accidents motivates you to drive safely.

*-Reaction Time*

Did you feel stress when that person cut you off in traffic? The stress response was partially responsible for your quick pressure on the brakes! Stress can motivate us into quick, sometimes life-saving action.

In the case of an emergency, one of your stress hormones - adrenaline - kicks in, and prompts you to act quickly and sometimes with remarkable strength.

*-Endorphins*

Endorphins are the "feel good" neurotransmitters. When the body is stressed or in pain, its natural pain relievers are released in the form of endorphins. Exercise is a healthy way to bring this kind of endorphin-releasing stress onto your body.

While you should not exercise to the point of unbearable pain, it's okay to "feel the burn" and push yourself a little. Massage therapy and acupuncture can also stimulate the release of endorphins.

-Other Health Benefits

Experts are finding anti-tumor activity in people who undergo healthy stress, indicating that healthy stress stimulates the immune system.

**Unhealthy Stress**

*-Constant*

The unhealthy type of stress is constant. You do not return to a normal energy level after it has passed. Unhealthy stress can take the form of constant worry, depression, and exhaustion. It can cause weight gain as well due to the release of cortisol, the "stress hormone."

*-Immunity*

Continual stress weakens the immune system. That can leave you more susceptible to everyday illnesses and more serious problems such as cancer.

*-Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*

People who are chronically stressed usually worry about common, everyday things over which they have no control. These are the kinds of things that are not going to go away, such as paying bills, keeping the house clean, and so forth.

Once one set of worries is tackled, another set comes along. Accepting these annoyances as part of life can go a long way in helping you cope with unhealthy stress.