

[IMAGE]

Tackling Anxiety

By Julie T. Chen, MD

When I ask my patients if they have anxiety symptoms, many of them deny it, but then they will say they feel "stressed." It is as though there is a negative stigma about the word *anxiety*.

Why is it that our society thinks it is abnormal to have some level of anxiety when the modern American life is so stressful? This anxiety is a natural response to alert us to the fact that there is something in our life that is causing ongoing stress to our body. It is an adaptive response to protect ourselves so that we can alter the trigger to prevent long-term damage to or drain on our body and health.

What we do with this physiological signal is what determines whether the anxiety ends up being harmful long-term or being helpful in altering the stressful event so as to maintain health. In short, what we do with anxiety is what's important.

When we feel stressed or anxious, it is our body's way of telling us that the current situation is not optimal for healthy functioning; that our body and mind don't like it and that it could cause negative health impacts in the long run. It is important for us to identify these situations because long-term stress can lead to adrenal fatigue and increased inflammation in our body, which leads to unhealthy states.

anxiety - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark So, when we feel anxious, how can we overcome it? We need to remove the anxiety-provoking cause, and if we can't, we need to initiate adaptive behaviors so as to lessen the overall negative impact.

In regards to removal of the anxiety-provoking cause, sometimes that is not possible (as is often the case with family members or work). In these situations, we have to find ways to lessen the stress and impact on our body from these stressors.

When we are anxious, our body's cortisol level rises, along with levels of several other hormones associated with stress. Cortisol is a stress hormone in our body; if it is secreted at elevated levels over time, it may lead to adrenal fatigue.

Your adrenal gland is one of the organs that act almost like a battery in your body. When it is exhausted from chronic stress and anxiety, its overall function diminishes and your body's inflammatory status

worsens, leading to a decrease in overall health and endurance.

By implementing intentional moments during the day of mind-body techniques, you can keep the adrenal strain and anxiety from being a constant drain on your health and give your body necessary periods of respite from the stress.

There are numerous versions of mind-body techniques, but some examples include breath work, self-hypnosis, imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, journaling, and music therapy. I usually recommend that my patients implement these mind-body techniques several times per day; if symptoms persist, we discuss supplements and herbs that may help to facilitate the calming process. I also discuss with my patients other treatment options such as manual therapies, including chiropractic and massage; and energy medicine options, like healing touch therapy, that may decrease anxiety in some patients.

There are also a wide variety of herbs and supplements that may help with anxiety. For example, chamomile tea is calming, as is passionflower and hops teas, just to name a few. Certain supplements are also helpful for anxiety such as L-theanine, other amino acids, and various minerals, herbs, and vitamins.

Keep in mind that just because some of these are sold over the counter does not mean they should be used unsupervised. As a general rule, you should always inform your doctor of any and all supplements and herbs you are taking. Some of these will require regular monitoring of liver and kidney function just like medications. So, please check with your physician prior to starting any supplements and keep all of your doctors informed about your supplement regimen.

As you can see, there are multiple reasons for clueing your doctor in on your anxiety symptoms. Besides treating you according to their expertise, they can guide you in regards to the supplements you may need and refer you for mind-body therapies as well as behavioral therapy if that's what you want.

Another reason to inform your doctor about anxiety is that chronic stress can lead to worsening of many chronic conditions including heart disease, hypertension, and autoimmune diseases, just to name a few. This way, your doctor knows to keep a closer eye on these issues in case they arise; or if you already have these health issues, they can monitor you more closely.

One last key point about anxiety therapy: generally, many of the anti-anxiety supplements can be sedating. So keep that in mind as you decide what time of day you will be taking them and whether you will need to drive after taking them; remember that you should not drive if you are drowsy.

I believe that the optimal anti-anxiety regimen is a combination of mind-body therapy, alteration of stressful situations when possible, and calming aides used as needed when you have significant stress in your life. Since chronic anxiety and stress can have a profound negative impact on your body's physiology, it makes the most sense to try all healing options available to lessen the impact of anxiety on your body.

Use the anxiety feeling as a signal that your body is not liking the situation you are in. Use your anxiety as a tool to help you figure out which situations are going to have a negative impact on your health and well-being. If the anxiety symptoms are too overwhelming, you can turn to your doctor for guidance to help you manage your symptoms and make sure a healthy, normal reaction to stress stays healthy.

Ultimately, the question I like to ask my patients is this: Would you drive your car across the country without any rest? Of course not. So, why would you drive your body at high levels of constant stress without doing something about it?

The human body is a powerful, magnificent machine, and we should treat it with all the gentleness and care that it deserves so each of it can continue to "drive" it for many more years to come. Talk to your doctor about the health consequences of unaddressed anxiety.

Five Tips To Ease Anxiety:

music - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark 1) **Music.** Use all of your senses to help you de-stress. If music brings you joy, incorporate that into your relaxation time. If certain scents help you relax, then relax in an environment where that scent predominates. Your senses can help you to maximize your de-stressing time!

stretching - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark 2) **Stretching.** Make sure to take a few minutes every 1-3 hours to stretch, relax, and calm your mind. You can't run at top speed all day long every day, so remember to take time to slow down your mind and body. Your body will thank you for it!

diet - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark 3) **Diet.** Eat an anti-inflammatory diet full of vegetables, low sugar foods, omega-3's, and plant-based proteins like nuts. Eating at regular intervals with these healthy foods will help to keep your mood stable.

exercise - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark 4) Exercise. Exercise raises endorphins in the body and is a great way to de-stress. So, put on your athletic shoes and go for a walk around the block even if you can't make it to the gym. Any exercise, even in short intervals several times per day, is beneficial to your mind and will help to calm anxiety feelings.

sleep - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark 5) Sleep. Sleep is essential for our body to achieve a state of balance and to avoid feeling stressed. Our body likes rhythm; that's why regular sleep hours and regular eating times are helpful in keeping the body running smoothly. Help your body achieve that feeling of equilibrium by making time to rest and eat regularly.

Dr. Julie T. Chen is board-certified in internal medicine and fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, Calif. She is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations, is on several medical expert panels of Web sites and nonprofit organizations, is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines, and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates various healing modalities into her practice including, but is not limited to, medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback. To learn more, visit www.makinghealthyez.com.

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