



ANXIETY AND STRESS - SELF HELP GUIDE

Everyone feels anxious or stressed sometimes. It's a completely normal part of human existence. There's that deadline you've got to meet, and the kids to pick up, and a million and one things to do before you can relax, and what if something happens? What if you miss the deadline? What if you're late picking up the kids?

'What if' can be a wonderful tool for fiction writing and for brainstorming ideas for a project, but too much of it in situations where it isn't needed can bring on anxiety and stress, and be completely paralysing.

This guide will take you through what stress and anxiety can do to your body and mind, and look at how to get treatment. You'll also find out about ways to help yourself, how to relax, and ways to banish those 'what ifs'.

What are anxiety and stress, and how can they affect you?

Anxiety and stress often come in combination, and the symptoms can be quite similar for both. Stress is not always a bad thing. It's a way to spur us on to achieve our deadlines, a way to realise that we might want to improve our situation or to get a new job. It can be an excellent driver to move us forward in life, but too much of it is not good for us and can lead to the dreaded stress/anxiety combo meal.

Stress and anxiety can be brought on by huge events such as a divorce or a death in the family, but sometimes it's because of an accumulation of too many small things in a row.

Anxiety

Anxiety can bring on those nasty, gnawing feelings of worry, fear and the sense that something is wrong, or is going to be wrong. That something awful is going to happen.

Anyone might get a little (or a lot!) anxious if they have to perform in public or do something out of their comfort zone, but those feelings are easily resolved once the situation is over.

True anxiety can linger in the back of your mind, constantly nagging at you and causing you to worry even if there's nothing to worry about and robbing all the joy out of life.

You might not be able to sleep or eat properly, and your sex drive may be affected. You might not be able to focus on what you need to do day to day.

Anxiety can affect you physically too, with muscle pain or headaches from being tense all the time, pins and needles, the feeling of being light-headed and even panic attacks.

In the long term, a racing heart and raised blood pressure could raise the risk of stroke or a heart attack, and a lowered immune system could mean you suffer from cold after cold and catch everything going around at work.

Stress

Stress, like anxiety, can be represented in physical symptoms such as headaches, because of the tension. Our bodies produce cortisol and adrenaline as part of the fight or flight response and can give you an upset stomach and longer term problems like hypertension.

The combination of both stress and anxiety can be overwhelming if you can't find a way to deal with it. You might have difficulty in coping with things you usually do easily, you could have difficulty doing your job, and, in some ways worst of all, anxiety and stress can affect your personal relationships and stop you enjoying your time away from work.

Treatment methods

If you are suffering from stress, anxiety or both, you are advised to consult your medical practitioner rather than attempting to treat yourself.

Your GP may give you medication in the short term to help you control your stress and anxiety. You might be given antidepressants or benzodiazepines, or even beta blockers to ease you over the situation that's getting on top of you. While there are some side effects, medication can make all the difference with these conditions.

Your doctor may prefer to go for the non-medication route and may recommend one-to-one counselling to help you discover the causes of your stress and how to find new ways to deal with your problems.

You might also be given general suggestions such as eating well to support your body and your immune system, exercising to relieve tension and learning relaxation techniques.

One other treatment that can have considerable success with anxiety and stress is solution-focused clinical hypnotherapy. Your doctor may recommend this and may be able to refer you to a suitable therapist.

Your therapist will listen to you and get to know you and will use hypnotherapy to allow you to relax in the session. Your therapist will then be able to talk to you and more easily find out the causes of your stress, even if you can't remember exactly where and how they began.

Hypnotherapy can be wonderfully healing for many conditions, with the added bonus that you could find yourself a lot calmer and more relaxed in general.

Self-help

It's a huge thing to even admit that you need help. That really is a giant step forward, but read on to find out what other things you can do to help yourself:

1. Talk

Let your friends and family know how you feel. Talk to them about your symptoms and your worries. You'll often find they are incredibly supportive and understand exactly how you feel, and that can be a great relief in itself.

If this is affecting your work, it may also be worth talking to your line manager, too. There may be flexi-time available or you might be able to take a few days off to deal with things. Perhaps work has an occupational health department to look after you and refer you to further help, and to make sure that you can take time off for doctor's appointments and counselling sessions.

Don't suffer in silence.

2. Take care of yourself

When you're stressed, it's so easy to fall into a routine of not sleeping or eating properly; of not taking time for yourself. It's even easier to forget the gym and that salsa class you normally love, and before you know it, you're avoiding your friends and not going out anywhere at all.

Don't do that. Take care of yourself. Make – or ask someone else to make! – your favourite food. Take your time and eat it slowly, savouring every bite.

Take a long bath with all the bath bombs, candles and bubbles you like, if that works for you.

What do you usually enjoy doing? Dancing, reading, crafting? Whatever it is, make time for it.

You might not be up to doing everything you usually do, and that's OK. You feel how you feel and you need to do what you need to do. Acknowledge that, but don't isolate yourself and lose the pleasures that you normally enjoy. Try to keep something for yourself to keep you going.

3. Relax

This is easier said than done when you're stressed, but there are things you can do to help you lose that tension.

Learn some relaxation exercises and breathing techniques. Having those in your mental arsenal can help you reduce or avoid a panic attack, and help you sleep. Try breathing in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth from your diaphragm.

One great exercise for tension in your body is to scan your body mentally from top to toe, noticing how you feel, and then slowly tensing and relaxing each part of your body from your toes to your head. You'll release a lot of tension doing that and you might find you can fall asleep quicker if you do it in bed.

Take up meditation and yoga. You'll learn to relax, tone your body and improve your focus at the same time.

Other complementary therapies might also help, such as massage, aromatherapy and reflexology.

Get some exercise, too. The endorphins can help boost your mood and make it easier for you to relax.

4. Positive self-talk

When you're anxious, there can be a constant stream of negative thoughts running through your brain, with worries about things that have actually happened and worries about things that only 'might' happen.

It's difficult to cut the negative stream off, but one way to do it is to try and change to positive self-talk instead, perhaps by spending some time each day journaling and writing down the good things that have happened to you today. A gratitude journal can help you concentrate on the good things in life and take your focus away, at least a little, from any worries.

Be kind to yourself, too. You're not stupid or incapable, and if you can't keep up with everything the way you normally would because of how you're feeling, give yourself a break. No-one is Superman or Superwoman, and no-one expects you to be.

What would you tell a friend in this situation? What language would you use to talk to them? Talk to yourself that way instead.

Challenge your anxious thoughts with logic. Write down what scares you in great detail, take note of what you think is the worst that can happen, and then look for evidence. Is it really true? Could that really happen? Could I really not cope with it, if it did? Can I look at this in a more positive and realistic way?

You may find that doing this exercise will calm you down, and even knock some of your worries on the head for good.

Conclusion

Don't suffer alone. Talk to your doctor and your loved ones, and get some help.

Think about what you can do for yourself, too, and make time to just be and enjoy the things you love to do.

When you know you suffer from stress and anxiety, just having that diagnosis alone can help you cope, because then you know that the thoughts you have are not necessarily going to come true.

If you'd like to find out more about my solution focused clinical hypnotherapy service, do give me a call for an informal chat, or you can book online. My practice is located in the delightful town of Falmouth in Cornwall.

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