

Anxiety: A Primer

Stress is a part of daily life; everybody has their share of stress, no matter how simple their life might seem. Stress can sometimes be a great motivator, but we rarely focus on that type of stress. Stress is a problem when one of three things happens: 1) Stress becomes chronic, 2) when perceived stress does not match the triggers, and 3) when acute stress is such that personal coping skills are no longer effective.

There are several types of stressors: environmental stressors (living next to an airport, weather conditions, or traffic), social stressors (deadlines, personal and occupational expectations, relationship issues), physiological stressors (body aches and pains, illness, hormonal fluctuations, aging) and cognitive stressors (thoughts, one's interpretations, predictions and assumptions about the world and ourselves).

The Biology of Stress- Fight, Flight or Freeze:

Stress can be reduced to a basic biological response, which is associated with a series of changes and mechanisms in the body. This response is called the flight, fight or freeze response. It is our basic, primitive drive to run away and flee from danger, face it and prepare to fight it off, or freeze and do nothing. The fight, flight or freeze response is a biochemical response. The thinking brain sends a message to the rest of the brain that it needs to prepare for danger by stimulating what is called the sympathetic nervous system- our heart rate goes up, breathing changes to match the heart's oxygen needs, muscle tension increases, the metabolism speeds up, blood pressure increases, the digestive system is slowed down, blood goes from the extremities to larger muscles that may need it more (thus cold hands and feet), hearing and sight become sharper; you are ready to face the enemy! Chemically, hormones and neurotransmitters are secreted in the brain; these chemicals impede digestive, reproductive, growth, immune and repair functions. In the long term stress can be extremely detrimental to the body.

Anxiety and Breathing:

People with anxiety and tension have different breath patterns from non-anxious individuals. Anxious people breathe from their chest rather than the more relaxed abdominal breathing that non-anxious people do. Chest breathing is a more shallow breathing pattern. It may result in rapid breathing (hyperventilation), over-breathing (breathing out too much carbon dioxide), or holding in your breath. Through biochemical mechanisms that we will not get into here, this can lead to symptoms such as feeling jittery or nervous, increased heart rate, dizziness, disorientation and feeling disengaged.

The Relaxation Response:

The “relaxation response”, a term coined by Herbert Benson ¹, is the opposing response to the fight flight or freeze reaction. It too is associated with a number of biological and chemical changes in the body and brain. Proper breathing and relaxation training can help you trigger the relaxation response and counter the effects of stress on your body. A person cannot be completely stressed and completely relaxed at the same time. Therefore, the stronger our ability to relax, the better we are at reducing the negative effects of stress.

The Cognitive Model of Anxiety:

Situations leads to thoughts, thoughts lead to emotions and emotions make us behave in specific ways that either improve or worsen our situation.

Thoughts make you feel.

Anxiety/Stress is a feeling; therefore, how I think about my world contributes to feeling stressed or anxious.

The cognitive model of anxiety states that people who are anxious tend to overestimate danger - they catastrophize (“something bad, really bad is going to happen”), and underestimate their ability to control or prevent danger. One’s perception and analysis of situations can trigger stress and anxiety.

When trying to manage and decrease anxiety it is important to evaluate your thoughts and attributions:

- What are you expecting will be the outcome of this situation?
- Is your analysis a realistic one?
- Is it probable? Is it likely?
- How much control do you have over this situation?
- Is there anything you can do?

Sometimes despite trying to manage our thoughts and our fears, we end up feeling stressed, sometimes our expectations are realistic and likely or there is nothing we can do about a given situation. In addition to trying to manage your anxiety through evaluation of your thoughts, it is important to take action, use relaxation techniques, and get support and help.

Managing Stress Day to Day:

You cannot eliminate stress from your life. Some stress is good stress, like starting a new relationship, sending children to school for the first time or getting ready for a big trip.

The goal of relaxation training is to learn how to manage stress good or bad, so that it does not hinder your ability to function, your health and your happiness.

Stress management starts with a few simple steps:

¹ Benson H, Beary JF, Carol MP. The relaxation response. *Psychiatry* 1974;37:37-46.

1. Be aware of the events in your life that may be causing you worry, tension, anxiety, or frustration.
2. Be aware of your body: are you having sleep or appetite disturbances? Repeated or longer lasting headaches? Muscle tension? Do you find yourself sighing or trying to catch your breath throughout the day?
3. Be aware of your general state and mood: are you chronically tired, even with a full night's sleep? Have you been moody or irritable?
4. Be aware of your thoughts: Have they been racing? Are they stuck in your head like a broken record? Are they focused on the "what ifs" and the negative?
5. Take action!
 - a. Try to simplify your day-to-day life as much as you can.
 - b. Take time for your self – Although the world is pulling you in thousand directions and everybody wants a piece of you; make them wait 15 or 20 minutes a day while you focus on you.
 - c. Get support and where you can
 - d. Practice your relaxation skills- deep breathing, visualization exercises, meditation or progressive muscle relaxation.