

Coping with Anxiety

While the song says it's the most wonderful time of the year, many people find themselves struggling with depression and anxiety during and after the holidays, more than any other time of the year. A seemingly permanent fixture in many people's lives, anxiety not only affects the mind but the body as well. Although it is important to discern the difference between a clinical diagnosis and anxiety in the form of a generalized state that so many people find themselves in today, the matter may only be one that is measurable by degree of intensity. Anxiety can be defined in two separate ways; the first as an apprehensive state of mind, typically that which is due to an anticipated event or general life stressors, and the second, more clinical definition that defines anxiety as an abnormal, overwhelming feeling of apprehension and fear that is often punctuated by physiologic reactions including tension, sweating, and rapid heart rate. Included in this picture of anxiety is often an extreme form of self-doubt over one's ability to cope with particular stressors. Regardless of the definition, anxiety can affect individuals' minds and bodies in varying degrees. Of course, feelings of anxiety (as well as sadness, depression, fear, loneliness, etc.) are completely normal, (contrary to what the manufacturers of antidepressants will have us believe) especially given the tumultuous environment that we find ourselves in today. What is not normal is when these feelings pervade our entire being and are no longer remedied by simple resolution of stress.

Diet and Anxiety

In of itself, poor diet can be a major contributor to anxiety and may therefore serve to prevent some anxiety symptoms. An important contributor to anxiousness, low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) may be caused by infrequent eating or unbalanced dietary choices (too many simple carbohydrates, not enough complex carbs, fats and proteins). Symptoms of hypoglycemia (anxiety, fatigue, hunger, drowsiness, poor concentration, irritability, sweating, hunger, tremors, and palpitations) are thought to be the result of the brain's perception of lowered blood sugar levels. Many people can identify with these symptoms that typically occur in the late afternoon after no or very little lunch that contained little in substantial calories. Infrequent and or poor food choices, mainly those that are high in simple carbohydrates are the most frequent causes of lowered blood sugar levels.

Caffeine is another dietary factor that plays a large role in anxiety. It is of course a well-known stimulant. Several studies have examined the similarity between caffeine's effects and anxiety, as well as the ability of caffeine to escalate feelings of anxiety in those prone to feeling anxious. The bottom line is that for people who are prone to anxiety, they need to make sure they are eating a balanced diet (in small, frequent meals, with little to no simple carbohydrates) and avoid caffeine.

Treatment & Prevention

The B-vitamins (specifically B-6 and B-3) are helpful in addressing anxiety due to their roles in neurotransmitter formation for healthy brain function, and they serve to lessen anxiety through their role in the entire nervous system. Magnesium acts as a gentle

sedative and exerts a calming effect on the brain; it can even lessen pain-related anxiety too. The botanical medicines Lavender (*lavendula officinalis*) and Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) are well known treatments for anxiety, depression and nervousness. These herbs have an inhibitory, or calming effect on the brain as well. The supplements 5-HTP and melatonin also have a hand in calming feelings of anxiety in addition to their benefits as sleep aids.

Anxiety treatment without pharmaceutical intervention strives to prevent the initiation of anxiety using nutritional and or botanical medicines that work to alter the patient's susceptibility to anxiety. Counseling and other forms of psychotherapy are quite helpful in assisting the anxious person working through and addressing anxious patterns. Several pharmaceutical agents are available for anxiety and are helpful for many people; they do have a high level of side effects and discomfort reported however.

With multiple causes, anxiety is a condition that has multiple treatments in different individuals. Decreasing anxiety with adequate nutritional sources may possibly alter anxiety levels and offer a greater quality of life. The human experience includes anxiety in varying levels. However, when anxiety becomes a permanent fixture in ones life, preemptive approaches are necessary. Discovering one's own way of relaxing and engaging in stress reducing exercise and mental exercises can all play a very important role in maintaining an inner peace that seems so illusive at times.

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