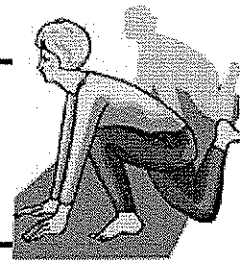


TO YOUR HEALTH



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WHEN ANXIETY IS SOMETHING TO WORRY ABOUT

by Barbara Chenoweth, NP

It is not unusual to have times when it's hard to stop worrying or when it's impossible to shut off troubling thoughts at night. More recently many people suffer from financial stress and not only have fitful nights but are distracted and irritable during the day. At what point does worry become a more serious problem? In the best of times, 20% of older Americans are affected by worry or anxiety disorders, (*Health After 50*, Johns Hopkins Medical Letter, February 2009). In these times of uncertainty, the number could be even higher.

With an anxiety disorder, the normal alarm systems of the body go off at inappropriate times and for extended periods of time. The worry or anxiety interferes with normal activities and may prevent a person from taking care of himself. Some people suffer from anxiety all of their lives while others may have conquered it, only to find it reoccurring under stressful conditions or as they age. Generalized anxiety is the most common of anxiety disorders and is characterized by constant worry. At the opposite extreme are panic attacks, severe bouts of anxiety that can cause physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pain and dizziness. During these stressful attacks, a person may feel that she is dying or losing control.

Signs that can indicate when a person needs professional help with their anxiety include when the following occur *more than half of the time or nearly every day*:

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
- Not being able to stop worrying
- Worrying too much about different

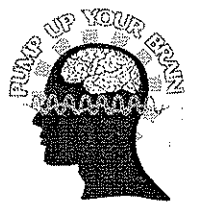
- Having trouble relaxing
- Being unable to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid, as if something awful might happen (*Health After 50*, February 2009).

Worry is always directed towards the future. Either it is a fear that something will happen or a worry that it won't happen. It often becomes a vicious cycle of anticipating a future event that never occurs. In fact, most events that worry us do not happen. Nonetheless, this knowledge does not stop the internal dialogue that worriers continue in their minds. For this reason, one of the best ways to deal with worry is through cognitive behavioral strategies. For example, learning ways to challenge the worrisome thoughts by asking: Am I overestimating the risk? It feels likely to happen, but is it really? Will this even matter a year from now? Remind yourself that worries pass, (*Harvard Health Letter*, January 2007).

Sometimes working with a mental health therapist or a social worker can help a person to develop these mental strategies as well as others:

- Allow yourself a time to worry, then shut it off by physically doing something else
- Take action about the worry
- Stop negative thoughts by substituting or quieting them with words you might give to your best friend if she expressed those same negative thoughts
- Accept your anxiety instead of fighting it or berating yourself for it
- Don't worry alone; friends and family can give gentle reality checks
- Breathe deeply from your belly

In writing about health and the economy,



Dr. Andrew Weil (*Self Healing*, January 2009) suggested that practicing relaxation in whatever form that is helpful can be an effective means to relieve anxiety and stress. For some, listening to music, getting a massage or watching a funny movie may break the cycle of worry. For others, meditation or yoga can reduce anxious thoughts. If the worry is for financial security, making a plan for a long-term, financial strategy may help. Taking a “news fast,” a break from the news, especially before bedtime, on a regular basis, also can disrupt the internal dialogue of worry about the future.

And finally, taking care of the body is essential to prevent worry-related illnesses. A healthy diet is one that includes vegetables and fruits in season, real foods instead of processed, packaged food, minimal sweets and a well-balanced diet. Exercise is an important way to stay healthy *and break the worry cycle*. Even for those who do not like to exercise, walking several times a day, inside during the winter, counts! And for those who enjoy exercise, there are many options available for staying fit. Getting enough sleep at night with a short afternoon siesta completes the plan for a healthy body.

To cope successfully with any worry, whether it concerns health, personal relationships or the economy, requires a broad approach, one that takes into account the importance of the body, mind and spirit. From the spirit comes the hope and energy for making change possible and giving worry less power.

COMING ATTRACTION

Pump Up Your Brain: Building Better Brain Health, a CWV Health Fair Information tables, practical tips, demonstrations, individual cognitive assessments by Boston University staff, win a Wii system Friday, March 13, 9am to 1pm, Auditorium

WHEN IN DOUBT, WORKOUT

By Muire Lindahl

When feelings of stress and anxiety strike, the phrase “it will all work out” offers a sense of reassurance and hope. Often human nature guides us to “do” something to influence a positive outcome. Since we do not always have the resources to “do,” feelings of helplessness can take over.

These are times when the word “workout” takes on a whole new meaning. Working out, a term synonymous with exercise, is a way to dilute the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, and pump in the “feel good” hormones like norepinephrine. A sort walk combined with slow deep breathing can restore a sense of control and well-being.

In their book, *Lowering Your Blood Pressure*, Aggie Casey and Herbert Benson (McGraw Hill 2006 New York) describe how the mind-body connection is created when rhythmic exercise is performed: the mind monitors the body’s movements and sensations. As the body and mind work together, both are alert and focused, calm and relaxed.

Yoga, Tai Chi, and Pilates are familiar forms of mind-body exercise. Exercises done rhythmically with focus on deep breathing can elicit the restorative benefits of clarity and calm that are characteristic of mind-body exercises. They include walking, running, swimming, cycling, strength training and stretching.

As with all exercise, consider:

- 30 minutes daily in 10 minute intervals
- 2-3 minute warm-up
- Slow progression as tolerated
- 2-3 minute cool-down
- 30 second stretches with focused deep breathing

