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Columnists

Coping With Anxiety

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Although anxiety is considered to be a normal response to many stressors in everyday life, the nervousness that adults, teens, and children sometimes experience can make the smallest tasks in life seem completely overwhelming. Anxiety disorders, made up of panic, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias, are the most common type of disorder seen in most therapists' practices.

All people experience anxiety. In fact, it is a built-in self-defense mechanism that saved our lives back in the day when we were escaping predators in the jungle. Anxiety in children is expected and normal, in certain developmental stages. For example, from approximately eight months through four years, healthy youngsters may show intense distress at times of separation from their caretakers. Young children may have short-lived fears like a fear of the dark. If anxieties become severe and begin to interfere with daily activities, such as separating from parents, attending school and making friends, parents should consider seeking the evaluation and advice of a therapist.

However, the good news is that anxiety disorders, or even minor jitters, are generally responsive to certain types of therapy. One of the most effective forms of therapy to treat anxiety disorders is known as cognitive behavioral therapy. Since anxiety generally has a biological component and often runs in families, there is great merit in treating a family in a marriage and family therapist's office. I am going to briefly address some real-life coping strategies one can apply in the midst of an uncomfortable period of anxiety.

Relaxation: Relaxation is more than just watching TV or taking a bath. Conscious relaxation for at least twenty minutes a day is essential in overcoming the daily stress most people deal with in our modern world. There are many CDs that are very effective at relaxing the body. Spending time consciously relaxing each muscle group while someone else's voice guides you can lower daily levels of stress tremendously and have a cumulative effect upon the nervous system. Meditation, yoga, and lying down in a peaceful environment are all very helpful. Relaxation techniques can be performed with children, as well.

Physical Exercise: Exercise helps to increase feelings of well-being, reduce insomnia, increase self-esteem, and reduce depression. If you are considering an exercise plan, it is always necessary to talk to your doctor and see if your plan will be healthy for you. Approaching exercise gradually and building up is also a way to maintain motivation. But, if exercise has not been a part of your life for a long time, it is essential to find an activity that you enjoy. There are so many forms of exercise available that there is sure to be something that fits your personality.

Deep Breathing: If there is only one new behavior that you incorporate into your life, it should be deep breathing. Slow, long abdominal deep breathing is perhaps the most effective and quickest way to end a panic attack and to reduce one's overall level of anxiety. Incorporate this exercise into your life for at least five minutes a day. Whether you are in traffic, in a meeting, with friends, or in any public place, this exercise will help you and your children. The best thing is also that no one will know that you are doing it.

Self Talk: So much of what contributes to anxiety is what we are telling ourselves about whatever is happening in our lives. The truth is, what we say to ourselves about what happens is really what determines our mood and feelings. This is essential to teach our children at a young age- especially if they experience anxiety. So much of what contributes to anxiety has to do with "what if" statements, rather than "what is". A very effective exercise to help identify these thoughts is to monitor your anxiety level for a week. Keep a journal with you at all times. Every time you start to experience anxiety or physical symptoms such as tightness in the chest, stomach upset, headaches, or dizziness, take out the journal and write out your exact thoughts. Once you are able to identify the thoughts that are making you anxious, you can begin to create new thoughts that are healthier. Remind yourself of the truth, that you are okay. Begin to talk to yourself with these positive statements and your anxiety will be reduced quite dramatically, if you can counterattack each fearful thought with a reality check.

Identifying and Expressing Feelings: Often times, people with anxiety disorders repress their feelings. When feelings have been repressed for a long time, they can seem overwhelming when they start to surface. Some people even think panic attacks are the

repressed feelings trying to come out. The scariness goes away as soon as we realize it is simply impossible to go crazy by fully feeling one's feelings. Being able to identify the exact feelings you are holding onto is the first step. Often times, we cannot express our feelings to the person who truly has upset us. In those cases, speaking to a therapist, writing them out, hitting a pillow, yelling inside your car, having a vigorous physical workout, throwing pebbles into a stream, or going for a long walk and imagining having a conversation with the person are all helpful.

Nutrition: If you are suffering from anxiety, it will be extremely helpful to take all the steps you can to reduce your stress. One of the ways we can create change is through monitoring our diet. First, it is essential to eliminate specific anxiety provoking substances from the diet. People often do not realize how many substances such as caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and excess sugar can affect their anxiety levels. It is a great idea to eliminate all coffee, tea, cola, soft drinks containing caffeine, and certain headache reducers while experiencing anxiety. Trying to eat healthy, whole foods, and avoiding processed foods will help the body regulate its functions and return to balance. Eating regularly will also help the body function at its optimum level and avoid weakness that can contribute to panic attacks. It also can be a good idea to go to a nutritionist or licensed acupuncturist. Make sure to speak with your family physician as well if you choose to incorporate any alternative treatments into your life.

Medication: If you have attempted to reduce your anxiety levels for a period of time and still have not experienced relief, it is possible that certain medications will help alleviate your anxiety. Your therapist can refer you or you can find a psychiatrist who will prescribe certain drugs that will help eliminate some of your symptoms of anxiety. However, even with the use of these drugs, it will still be helpful for you to change your beliefs that caused the anxiety. Medications are very helpful in some situations. However, there are always side effects. Always make sure to tell your doctor if you have a history of addictions.

Overall, incorporating beliefs that make you feel more safe and secure will alleviate anxiety. We create new pathways in our brain through our conscious thoughts. This is a fact. So, when we choose to think different things, we will respond differently. This is how we learn. Anxiety is completely possible and relatively simple to overcome with techniques like these.