

The Ugly Butterflies: Managing Anxiety Better

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If you have an anxiety disorder, you know the anguish, shame, and turmoil that it can create. For those of you that do not have an anxiety disorder or do not recognize the insidiousness of it, I want you to momentarily imagine and understand.

The fight-or-flight response goes haywire in someone with anxiety. Adrenaline kicks in when it shouldn't, and causes the body and mind to tense up and feel alert, scared, uncertain, and disorganized. Physiologically, breathing and heart rate increase. Therefore, less oxygen will make it to the brain or extremities, causing brain fog and cold and clammy hands.

Anxiety makes you feel like your mind is in handcuffs and your body is disconnected from itself. You feel a complete loss of control, or as if you are "losing your mind." This is terrifying, and often causes the individual to feel that she needs to escape or find a comfort zone to return to a less anxious state.

An anxiety or panic attack can last for several minutes to several hours. Certain anxiety disorder symptoms can be felt every moment of every day.

Positive anxiety or stress, called eustress, also exists. It frequently is referred to as "having butterflies." I refer to the anxiety that is not a positive experience as the "ugly butterflies."

Many research-based therapeutic techniques exist for treating the symptoms of anxiety disorders. Biofeedback, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and mindfulness therapy are among the effective approaches that mental health professionals might use to work with an anxious person.

Here are some steps that you can begin incorporating today to regain control over symptoms of anxiety:

- **Become aware.**

Educate yourself about your anxiety. What are your triggers — thoughts, people, objects, food, places? What does it feel like? Where in your body do you feel physical changes? Where do you feel emotional changes? Are you surprised by your anxiety attacks or do you know when they are coming? Identify what your experience with anxiety is composed of and write it down. Keep this with you so that you can refer to it to remind yourself that you know what you are feeling. This is the first step in managing it.

- **Validate your anxiety.**

Often we become fearful of or frustrated with our anxiety. That feeds it and makes the symptoms intensify. Ask yourself: what is wrong? What am I trying to tell myself? Don't push away what you are experiencing. This is your body's natural alert system, so ask it what it wants you to know and thank it. Answering what is wrong often will bring insight and realization that nothing is immediately threatening you. If there is something that has triggered your anxiety, such as a car accident or job loss, remind yourself of the worst outcome, plan solutions, thank yourself for noticing that something wrong has happened, and allow yourself to breathe and regain control.

- **Notice your diet.**

Do you drink caffeine? If yes, when and how much? Do you eat foods with high amounts of sugar? How often do you eat fatty, processed foods?

Diet choices such as these can exacerbate or ease your anxiety. Sugar, caffeine and fatty foods can be triggering your anxiety. More protein, herbal teas, whole grains, water, fruits and vegetables may ease your anxiety. Discover what works for you and doesn't work for you, and have fun experimenting with new recipes and ingredients.

- **Are you active?**

A healthy, active mind and body boosts your immune response as well as your overall physical and mental health. Excess energy that anxiety creates can be channeled through activity. Discover what activity helps soothe you and brings you back to the present moment. This can be watching sports, walking your dog, practicing yoga or meditation, dancing, playing musical instruments, writing, knitting, playing a sport, riding a bike, reading, gardening, learning a new language, cooking, baking, and playing a board game, socializing with friends, or discovering a new hobby.

- **When you relax, are you truly relaxed?**

A relaxed body is a relaxed mind, and a relaxed mind is a relaxed body. We often can miss opportunities for relaxing in our busy schedules. For example, sitting in traffic, taking a shower, or right before bed or after waking up can be opportunities for practicing self-care. Find moments in your day when you can practice relaxation techniques and become fully engaged with them. Deep diaphragmatic breathing has a ripple effect on your autonomic nervous system and helps calm your other systems and quiet your mind. It is the first and fastest way in allowing yourself to regain control of your mind and body. Do not try to relax; allow yourself to relax.

Slowly inhale for four seconds, and watch as your belly begins to expand and fill your lungs as if inflating a balloon. Gently hold for one or two seconds, and then slowly exhale for six seconds, completely letting go of your tension and worries. Biofeedback, mindfulness, meditation and yoga can all enhance your relaxation response to manage anxiety.

- **Smile and remember that you are in control.**

Anxiety tricks our minds and bodies into thinking that we have lost all control. Remind yourself through statements such as “this is my body, I’m in control” or “I feel calm, I am present.” Find a statement that works for you whether it is empowering or makes you laugh, and reminds you of who is the boss of your experience (you).

- **Know that you are not alone.**

Panic and anxiety disorders can feel extremely isolating in spite of how common they are. It is not always visible to others and therefore many individuals can go untreated or misunderstood. Seek professional guidance from a trained mental health clinician, discuss what you are feeling with compassionate family members and friends, and remember that somewhere nearby someone else also is having the ugly butterflies

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