

Anxious about being anxious?

Part II



PRACTICE MINDFULNESS, taking time out of your day for deep breathing and reflecting on the positive things in your life. (TNS)

• **BATYA L. LUDMAN**

In my previous column, I mentioned that long-term stress and anxiety can actually rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to emotional and physical problems.

It's well-known that your attitude strongly influences your thoughts and behaviors. Your reaction to stress is, among other things, dependent on your personality, coping style, genetic factors and a host of lifetime experiences.

Awareness of and learning to manage your personal stressors can help you achieve control over many aspects of your environment, change your life dramatically and feel better.

Recent studies have shown that prenatal influences on gene expression may have far-reaching consequences even several generations later. This remarkable research suggests that how you live your life today may impact the emotional and physical well-being of your grandchildren and even their offspring. As such, it's crucial to understand just how your thoughts, emotions, behaviors and lifestyle contribute to how you handle life's ups and downs, and allow optimal self-care and growth.

Here are some suggestions for quickly reducing your stress level. An entire book can be written on each of these topics.

- **Begin your day with the right attitude:** Start your morning with a few deep breaths, and remind yourself of just why you feel grateful and what you appreciate. This two-minute exercise can bring a sense of calm and positivity to your whole day, enabling you to make better decisions, treat others differently and feel better.

- **Practice being mindful and in the present moment:** Learning to slow down and focus on your various sensations and feelings can heighten your awareness and enable you to better cope. Recognizing your body's personal warning signs that signal even a tiny increase in anxiety, such as a clenched fist or a twinge in the chest, is the first step in promoting change. Remember: You can't be both calm and anxious at the same time, so learn how to be calm.

- **Visualize your safe space:** This is a place you associate with a state of calm, holds good memories and is available for you to "visit" in your mind whenever you feel anxious.

- **Let go of the need to be perfect, and embrace your ability to be human:** Not everything is within your control. Learn to let go of things that you don't need to worry about. Put aside "what if" scenarios of a future that may never happen, and don't ruminate on the past; it can't be changed.

- **Set a designated time and place to worry.** Constant worrying can lead to a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, depression and anxiety. If you must worry (and I don't think you need to!), pick a time to do so. Remain disciplined, not allowing yourself to fret outside of that time; I suggest Thursday from 5 to 5:15 p.m. This helps you control your worries rather than letting them control you. Remember, while you may not have control over which thoughts come into your head, you can choose how to deal with them in a way that creates your own calm.

- **Stay positive, and bring positive into your life:** Associate whenever possible with people who help you feel good. Remember to laugh and appreciate the humor of a situation.

- **Create balance by prioritizing what's really important:** Examine your schedule, and use your time wisely. Shorten your to-do list, learn to say

no and delegate to others. Create "me," "couple," "family" and "friend" time; make time to relax, exercise and eat well.

- **Be intentional in your thinking and behavior:** When you move into higher states of arousal, you may react without awareness, feel out of control and make poor choices. Notice your body language, your words and tone. Be responsible for your own behavior in a way that honors who you are. Walk away, if necessary, to calm yourself (this may take 20 minutes or more). Practice being more patient with others, as well as yourself.

- **Turn off the news:** Take a break from the world of technology. Destress by tuning out the world, and filter information that is not relevant to your everyday life. Repetitive visual reminders of painful events can increase anxiety and re-traumatize your brain!

- **Practice good sleep hygiene:** Get enough sleep by turning off technology at least an hour before bed. Sleep in a dark room, and if you wake up at night with intruding thoughts, write them down, enabling you to return to sleep. If you can't sleep, practice relaxation exercises.

- **Think outside the box:** Creative solutions can reduce your anxiety. In times of stress, it's easy to become more rigid. Solutions you may not have thought of may come from how others have dealt with a similar situation. What advice would you give to your best friend? Recognize that all problems aren't solvable, but you can do a lot to either change the situation or change your reaction to it. If you can't eliminate stress, manage it with the "Five As": awareness, avoidance, altering the stressor or your reaction to it, adaptation and if all else fails, acceptance.

- **The only thing certain is uncertainty:** The more you accept that you can't always plan or predict, the less anxious you will be. While you may think you have control, you often don't.

- **Don't sweat the small stuff:** Ask yourself if this is really worth getting anxious about. Often, we overreact and imagine the worst, yet lack evidence to support our irrational beliefs. Is it really important, or do you just think it is? Have you responded appropriately, or overreacted? Will you even remember it in three years?

Sadly, we no longer know how to be alone and comfortable within ourselves, but rely instead on being passively entertained. Our society has misguided priorities, and is addicted to instant accessibility and immediate gratification. When things took longer, we seemed to appreciate them more.

Just think about a letter versus an email. Technology has decreased our communication skills by depriving us of face-to-face interaction. We have made ourselves more stressed by the Internet, email, smartphones, constant texting and tweeting – all of which reduce meaningful leisure time and have impeded our ability to talk with one another and destress.

Facebook friends have replaced real ones. We've lost our ability to slow down life and appreciate what is important.

Even so, you have the ability to change all of this for yourself, and generations to come. The secret lies in how and what you do to nurture yourself and your loved ones. ■

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