

Anxiety in Stressful Situations: Self-Regulation Toolkit

A large part of anxiety can stem from losing the sense of what we think we should be able to control but can't. This can lead to feelings of helplessness about what will happen or fixation at how we are to try and prevent this. It can also trigger a sense of losing trust in our process of life. This loss of control or loss of trust can be mirror uncertainty and loss in other parts of our lives. It may also be reminding us of earlier times in our lives where we didn't feel in control, safe or sure about the future.

Why is it so important to reduce stress and anxiety?

There have been many, many studies done on the relationship between stress, anxiety and the immune system. As a result we know that fact that the stress hormone corticosteroid can suppress the effectiveness of the immune system. High levels of stress have been shown to produce: headaches; infectious illness (e.g. 'flu'); cardiovascular disease; diabetes, asthma and gastric ulcers. (1) So when we're stressed, the immune system's ability to fight off antigens is reduced (e.g. it lowers the number of lymphocytes) and therefore it can make us more susceptible to infections. I'm sure this is not what any of us wants.

Aside from this we also have to think about the indirect effect stress and anxiety can have on our immune system. In stressful circumstances people often resort to unhealthy behavioural coping strategies to reduce their stress, such as unhealthy eating, drinking alcohol, smoking or taking drugs.

What happens when we are stressed or anxious?

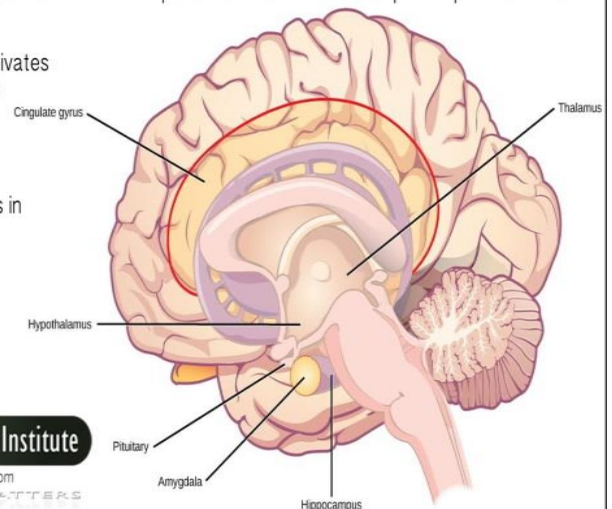
I spoke to a client the other day who has been having disturbing dreams recently. In these dreams he is running away from 'bad guys' or trying to escape a tsunami wave. These are dreams where the subconscious is telling us that it is feeling anxious. Falling, running away and trying to escape disasters are all subconscious symbols that tell us that there is a sense of feeling out of control and powerlessness. These kinds of dreams are pretty common in stressful situations.

I often hear people trying to 'reason out' someone stress or just telling people to 'calm down' or 'just snap out of it' when highly stressed and anxious because something traumatic has happened. This will at best have a limited effect in some, won't help others at all and at worst make some feel negated alongside being overly anxious. This is because when the brain becomes 'emotionally flooded' it disconnects to its logical centre and goes in to its more primitive survival centre and the

- First there is a thought or an experience as a catalyst.
- Second, the catalyst is then pre-consciously compared to other similar experiences we've stored in our memories. The **hippocampus** is actively involved in this process of memory retrieval and comparison.
- Third, once this catalyst gets categorized as "threat" according to this comparison, the **amygdala** helps us evoke the emotional stress response to this new experience based on what our past experiences are telling us.
- Fourth, the **hypothalamus** activates our pituitary and adrenal glands and elevates our stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.
- Finally, the body then engages in muscle contraction, elevated heart rate, shallow breath, and inhibits digestion, salivation, and nutrition absorption.



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sympathetic nervous system is activated. (see diagram above). We often see this in the fight, flight or freeze scenario. Try reasoning with someone having road rage or a rabbit caught in headlights! This is why it is important to take a step back and work on how we activate our parasympathetic nervous system, also known as the 'rest and digest system' and then encourage others to do the same. To help with this I have produced a stress and anxiety busting self-regulation toolkit to use in times like this. In this there are completely free or cheap measures that can be utilised to help regulate the stress/anxiety response.

Stress & Anxiety – Self-Regulation Toolkit ☺

Below are 6 tools you can use to help you to self-regulate and gain resilience in times of anxiety or stress.

Diaphragmatic Breathing:

People who are stressed and anxious often breathe in a shallow manner in their upper chest. This is because when the sympathetic nervous system is activated your heartbeat speeds up and you breathe faster in order to get more oxygen for fighting or fleeing. Unfortunately this can increase symptoms of anxiety. A number of studies have concluded that diaphragmatic breathing can trigger the body's parasympathetic nervous system benefiting both physical and mental health including reducing anxiety and stress. Diaphragmatic breathing involves breathing to expand the belly by deepening of the inhalation and exhalation breath. This decreases the respiration frequency and oxygenates the blood. It is a great portable tool that you can use whenever you are feeling anxious.

*Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, keeping your shoulders relaxed.

*See your abdomen expand and your chest should rise a little.

*Exhale slowly through your mouth and as you blow the air out purse your lips slightly but keep your jaw relaxed.

(You may hear a soft "whooshing" sound as you exhale.)

*Repeat this exercise for several minutes.

Mindfulness:

There has been much research on the positive effects of mindfulness and last year one study showed that doing a mindful body scan each day reduces physical as well as emotional symptoms stress.(3) All you need to do this is some time. A free short body scan can be found written down on this link and if you download the app there is a spoken version:

<https://www.stopbreathethink.com/body-scan/> Or if you have time for a longer version, there is a 45 minute spoken one that can be found on this link:

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/body_scan_meditation

Magical Magnesium:

Magnesium is an old homely remedy ailments such as, "anxiety, apathy, depression, insecurity, irritability, restlessness.... to name a few. Studies have shown that magnesium deficiency can cause behavioural disturbances such as irritability which resolve with additional magnesium. Alongside this stress has also been shown to deplete our magnesium stores creating deficits. One relaxing and fairly cheap way to up our interaction with magnesium is having an Epsom salts bath.

Pure Epsom salts can be sourced quite cheaply at pharmacists and online. So couple this with a candle and perhaps some relaxing music and you are way on your way to triggering your parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system. (4)



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Bach Flower Remedies:

Dr Edward Bach (1886-1936) was a medical doctor, bacteriologist and homeopath. He developed a method of transferring the energy from the trees and flowers that he found helpful in resolving emotional and physical disturbances into water, which was then preserved with brandy. Bach Flower Remedies can be powerful yet gentle healing tools that can catalyse the resolution of emotional imbalanced states. The following can be useful tools in stressful and anxious situations:
Emergency Essence: This is a combination of 5 essences (Clematis, Cherry Plum, Impatiens, Rock Rose, and Star of Bethlehem) This essence was designed to counteract the effects of shock and trauma and some have found them really helpful for panic attacks and stressful situations.
White Chestnut: is the remedy for unwanted thoughts and mental arguments that intrude into the mind and stop us concentrating.

Cherry Plum: Fear or terror that you may lose control and something terrible will happen.

Gentian: Feeling discouraged when something goes wrong, loss trust and/or grief.

(I buy mine from healingherbs.co.uk for £4.25 per bottle – obviously there are other stockists e.g., ainsworths etc.)

Affirmations:

Affirmations help to re-programme a subconscious response which is why they are used after sessions in Block Clearance Therapy. During times where we know that we are stressed out or anxious due to specific fears we can use a basic fear releasing affirmation. These are to be said 11x a day for as long as is needed.

‘I now release all destructive fear, constructively into light and healing within my being.’

Finally... Find Something You Can Control:

Finally with the potential for more time indoors and a sudden life change looming it can trigger those feelings I mentioned earlier – uncertainty, loss of control or loss of trust. One we can do to help is begin to do something that we can control to regain a sense of certainty. This could be starting (or finishing) a forgotten DIY project, crafting or beginning a Youtube exercise routine. If you are worried about reduced social contact you could start a whatsapp group with friends – maybe you could run it as a meditation group or a book club? Or you could learn a new skill – the Open University for instance has many free online courses which can be found at <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/free-courses> They also have free ebooks on subjects ranging from learning a language, psychology or dance skills

References

(1) McLeod, S. A. (2010). Stress, illness and the immune system. Simply psychology:

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/stress-immune.html>

(2) Xiao Ma, Zi-Qi Yue, Zhu-Qing Gong (2017) The Effect of Diaphragmatic Breathing on Attention, Negative Affect and Stress in Healthy Adults

(3) Schultchen, D (2019) Effects of an 8-Week Body Scan Intervention on Individually Perceived Psychological Stress and Related Steroid Hormones in Hair

(4) ‘Magnesium Today’ www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/evolutionary-psychiatry/201106/magnesium-and-the-brain-the-original-chill-pill



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