

Anxiety Management, Week #4

Creating a Lifestyle for Managing Stress

A stress-tolerant lifestyle contains several necessary components. If you lower the non-productive stress in your life, you *will* experience less anxiety. Armed with strategies to physically relax, ways to catch and change anxious thought patterns, and healthy lifestyle choices, anxiety is very manageable. First, a review.

How do you assess your current level of anxiety? CATCH. IT. EARLY.



What are your early warning signs of anxiety? _____

On average, what was your level of anxiety this week? _____

What helped lower your anxiety this past week? _____

What strategies did you use to interrupt physical anxiety this past week? _____

How did you interrupt anxious thoughts? _____

Give examples of times you changed your anxious thoughts into more realistic thoughts. _____

What did you notice about times when you were *not* anxious? _____

What challenges to reducing anxiety did you encounter this week? _____

Our anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strengths. ~

Charles H. Spurgeon

Triad of Health: Exercise, sleep, and diet have all been shown to reduce anxiety.

Exercise:

Moving your body with some type of exercise causes chemical shifts in your brain which lower anxiety. In fact, exercise works on our brains in ways similar to anti-anxiety medications. When you are stressed, your body releases cortisol. Exercise reduces the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, while stimulating the production of “feel good” endorphins. It also raises your body temperature, which in turn reduces muscle tension. Exercise uses up energy, and when we don’t move, tension builds. Our bodies were meant to move! Exercise is extremely effective in managing anxiety. But in order to persist, it’s best to pick an activity you like. Starting to move your body does not mean you have to train for a marathon. It can mean something quite simple and accessible.

Assessment of your current level of exercise: _____

Thoughts on how you can reduce anxiety level through movement: _____

One immediate change you are going to make: _____

Sleep:

Everyone knows that when you don’t get enough sleep, you don’t handle things as well. And college students are well-known for not getting enough sleep! Studies support what we know from experience. When sleep deprived, there is more activity in the emotional center of your brain, thus you respond to situations more emotionally. Adequate sleep allows you to more easily access the logical, problem solving portion of your brain. Restoring adequate and quality sleep positively impacts anxiety levels.

Assessment of your current level of sleep: _____

Thoughts on how you can reduce anxiety through changing sleep patterns: _____

One immediate change to your sleep “hygiene” you are going to make: _____

People who have problems with sleep are at increased risk for developing emotional disorders, depression, and anxiety. ~ Dr. Lawrence J. Epstein

Diet:

What you put into your body impacts your mental health. While dietary changes will not eliminate anxiety, tweaking food and beverage choices *can* make a noticeable difference. **Caffeine** is a dietary trigger which can increase anxiety. **Simple sugars** cause your blood sugar to spike and then to quickly fall. When your blood sugar falls, feelings of anxiety often increase. A source of **protein** can stabilize blood sugar and reduce the roller-coaster ride. Complex carbohydrates help stabilize blood sugar as well. A good general guideline is to reduce processed food and reach for food your grandma would recognize as food (Pollen, 2009). While **alcohol** can make you feel relaxed in the short-run, we all know alcohol is a depressant which impacts the neurotransmitters in our brains. Depression and anxiety are closely related, and anything which negatively impacts mood can increase anxiety.

Assessment of your current diet: _____

Thoughts on how you can reduce anxiety level through dietary changes: _____

One dietary change you are going to make immediately: _____

Other lifestyle factors impact anxiety as well. Consider the following:

- Do you have strong study skills? Do you stay away from distractions while studying? Do you study at the time of day when you are the sharpest? Do you study in a space that is conducive to concentrating?
- How are you at managing your time? Do you stay on top of things? Are you realistic about how long things will take? Do you work ahead on assignments to avoid all-nighters?
- Examine your expectations. Are they realistic? Do you expect to accomplish more in one day than is possible? Do you expect everything you complete to be perfect?
- How are your relationships? Do you choose to be with low-stress, low-maintenance people? Or are you spending time with people who increase the stress in your life?
- How involved are you in activities? Do you have some contact with others outside of class? Are you realistic about what you are involved in? How does your level of involvement impact your academic success and your anxiety level?
- Do you know how to be assertive when needed so you don't feel used up by others? Do you know how to say, "No!"?
- Do you have some "down time" when you're awake and off electronics so your brain can rest?
- Do you laugh and have fun? Do you take breaks from being serious?
- Do you do any volunteer work? Focusing on others in need is a great way to reduce your own stress.

Fake it: Another helpful strategy in managing anxiety is to consider what you *will be* doing when you are less anxious. Then act that way. Go through the motions, even if you remain anxious. Acting the way you want to feel can seem disingenuous at first, but you just might grow into the place you want to be. We don't simply *think* our way out of feelings, we *act* our way out as well.

Journaling: Consider keeping a journal with separate sections. In one section, note your anxiety, how it impacted you and how you reacted. In another section, list three things from each day which reduced your anxiety. Add a third section called "Gratitude." List three things from each day for which you are thankful. Notice how adding this piece trains your mind to notice the positives in each day.

To Continue Progress:

To assure I catch my anxiety early, I will _____

To manage physical anxiety, I will _____

To manage anxious thoughts, I will _____

Immediate lifestyle changes I will start include _____

I will assure I practice this by _____

Another strategy I plan to try later is _____

Keep picturing yourself in the future with less anxiety. What are you *doing* differently? How are you *thinking* differently? _____

At the end of each day, identify what lowered your anxiety during the day. Consider writing it in a journal.

At the end of each day, remember the times you were *not* anxious that day.

I believe that anyone can conquer fear by doing the things he fears to do, provided he keeps doing them until he gets a record of successful experiences behind him. ~ Eleanor Roosevelt

If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten. ~ Anonymous

Every day brings a choice: to practice stress or to practice peace. ~ Joan Borysenko

Thank you for participating in this four-week workshop!!

Best wishes as you continue to work on managing anxiety and lowering stress.

Central ideas from Wehrenberg, M. (2008). *The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Eunie Alsaker, LICSW, CT, Winona State University Counseling & Wellness Services, ealsaker@winona.edu

ABCs OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

Attitude: Much of stress has to do with perspective. Stress hardy individuals view stressors as temporary challenges or a chance for a new opportunity. They believe they have the internal resources to handle a demanding situation or they seek out outside resources if they see the need. They know they will navigate their way through to the other side.

Behaviors: Certain behaviors significantly reduce one's stress level. Two essential components are having (at least) one active stress reducing technique and (at least) one quiet, self-directed stress reducing technique. Active = some sort of physical movement or exercise, as movement reduces stress-producing hormones. Quiet = some sort of relaxation, meditation, prayer, deep breathing, time for reflection, etc. Getting sufficient sleep is critical. Everything is harder when you are over-tired.

Cognitions: This usually needs to be addressed prior to attitude, for attitude generally follows our thoughts or cognitions. Identify your self-talk, its role, and ways to change it. Are your thoughts stress producing? Are you talking to yourself in the encouraging way you would talk to a friend? Challenge yourself with the possibility that just because you are afraid of something doesn't mean this fear will actually happen. Change, "I'm sure I will fail this test!" to "STOP. I have studied. I am prepared. I will do my best."

Distractions: When do you *not* think about your worries? If the answer is "never," you need more breaks or ways to divert your attention. What do you do just for fun? What makes you laugh? When is your mind on something unrelated to the stress?

Environment: Assess your environment. Is it too loud in your room to study? Do you get sucked into Facebook or non-academic sites on your computer? Are your friends generally supportive and emotionally healthy? If there are things or people routinely in your life which increase stress, how can you change this? If you *can* change things in your environment, do so. Put that computer away, find an effective place to study, choose healthy friends, clean your room, etc. If you *can't* change some things (like the normal stress of college courses), work hard on changing your cognitions: from "I can't handle this." "I'll never get it all done." "I'm such a loser for not starting on this sooner." to "One day at a time." "I can get it done." "Breathe and think."