

Anxiety Busting



We are living in an age of neurotica. Anxiety is the leading mood disorder in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 45% of all mood disorders are anxiety based and they lead to millions of lost workdays each year. More important than not turning up to work though, are the other health problems that anxiety can cause.



The medical journals are full of the health side-effects of excessive anxiety. People who worry a lot are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's disease (*Neurology*). Anxiety in the family doubles the children's risk of developing diabetes (*Diabetes Care*). High levels of anxiety hormones cause a unique type of heart attack (*New England Journal of Medicine*). High anxiety levels can age you by a decade or more (*PNAS*). It is a really good idea to do something about your anxiety levels before they damage you and that does not mean just popping a pill or even seeing a counsellor.

There is plenty of evidence that many lifestyle and food choices do affect anxiety levels. People with chronic anxiety tend to have low levels of a neurotransmitter in the brain called serotonin. This serotonin has a calming effect and low levels contribute to anxiety. One way to increase serotonin levels is to eat carbohydrates. In one study people on high carbohydrate diets did better on memory tests than those on low carbohydrate diets because of the impact of carbohydrate on your brain. This is not a recommendation to live on sugar. The best carbohydrates are the complex ones from wholemeal foods and from low GI fruit and vegetables.

A cup of coffee may be something that you turn to at stressful moments but it actually one of the worst things that you could do. Despite giving you a temporary kick, caffeine actually worsens anxiety. It binds to receptors in your brain that would normally be occupied by a chemical that you make called adenosine. This adenosine is a feel-good chemical that relieves anxious feelings so caffeine in the long run is making you more anxious.

Likewise alcohol may seem like a short-term remedy but it makes things worse in the long run. In the short term alcohol is a relaxant but if you consume it regularly it reduces the effectiveness of a neurotransmitter in the brain called GABA. Ineffective GABA results in increased anxiety. On the other hand exercise, laughter and meditation all reduce anxiety.



Exercise causes the release of endorphins (feel-good chemicals) and also enhances oxygen transport around the body as well as promoting the removal of wastes. The result is that you have a greater general sense of wellbeing and less anxiety. Laughter busts anxiety by releasing excessive psychological energy. It has been shown to discharge tension from primitive parts of the brain like the amygdala. Scans of the brains of people who meditate on a regular basis show more activity in the left prefrontal lobe, the part of the brain involved in positive emotions and good mood.

Then there are the supplements that will ease anxiety. The mineral magnesium has been shown to reduce anxiety probably because of its affect on communication between nerves. Inositol is required for the action of several neurotransmitters including serotonin. Low levels of inositol in the brain do correlate with anxiety and depression. Vitamin B6 is needed for the formation of GABA. Taking a multivitamin on a daily basis has been shown to reduce scores on anxiety tests. The herb Chamomile has been used for thousands of years to relieve anxiety states and recent research has shown that the flavonoid apigenin from Chamomile binds to the same receptors on nerves as benzodiazepines (pharmaceutical antidepressants).

So based on all of this let's make a quick recipe for an anti-anxiety start to your day:

Go for a 20 minute walk (boost endorphins)

Meditate for 10 minutes (switch on your left prefrontal lobe)

Have two slices of wholemeal raisin toast (carbohydrates lift serotonin and raisins contain vitamin B6)

or

Have a bowl of porridge with raisins and banana

Have a glass of orange juice (source of inositol)

Drink some Chamomile tea (anti-anxiety) instead of coffee

Take a multivitamin.

This is not a total answer to chronic anxiety but it is a good start to a pleasurable day. The real answers to anxiety busting are long term. I was lucky enough to attend some of the *Happiness & Its Causes* conference with the Dalai Lama in Sydney last week. I can't communicate the breadth of the wisdom that was shared there from both Eastern and Western perspectives. However there was one point that most speakers, including the Dalai Lama agreed on. This is that happiness is something that comes from within you and it comes as the result of training. If your mind attaches to destructive thoughts that breed anxiety, then whatever else you do, you must also retrain that mind. One way to do this is through analytical meditation.

Take ten minutes at the end of the day to sit quietly and think over the day that you have just had. Remember the emotions and thoughts that you experienced and which ones led to a happy result. Make a conscious effort to reject your destructive patterning and embrace productive thoughts. I'm grossly oversimplifying some detailed concepts here but try training yourself to be happy and that is probably the best antidote to anxiety.