



WHY ARE WE ALL SO ANXIOUS...

WORDS **SALLY BROWN**

→ ...and what can we do to stop feeling so stressed all the time?

A certain level of anxiety – stress, worrying or apprehension – is normal. It’s a feature of our ‘better safe than sorry’ brains attuned to possible dangers. Worry may even have evolved alongside intelligence, says a US study, with our cleverer ancestors – who worried the most – more likely to survive and pass on their ‘worry’ genes. The danger of sabre-tooth tigers has long gone, but anxiety can be useful – worrying about a project can motivate you to work harder on it. But if you’re anxious on a regular basis, you’re putting your psychological and physical health at risk.

‘Stress and anxiety are part of life’, says Caroline Foran, who’s affected by the condition and author of *Owning It: Your Bullsh*t-Free Guide To Coping With Anxiety* (Hachette, £9.99, out 11 May). If you try to live completely anxiety-free you’ll drive yourself mad. Instead, you need to equip yourself with the tools and knowledge to manage it.’ Nicky Lidbetter, CEO of Anxiety UK, agrees and believes there can be upsides to the condition. ‘I always say that people with anxiety do extra thinking – you think everything through to the nth degree. That can be debilitating, but can also be useful – it’s helped me find solutions to several problems and kept me driven,’ she says.

A generation ago, the word ‘anxiety’ was rarely heard, now it’s barely out of the headlines. One in five of us is affected by what’s been described as an ‘anxiety epidemic’. In a recent survey, GPs said 84 per cent of consultations were anxiety-related; stress and anxiety account for 45 per cent of sick days, with women twice as likely to have an anxiety-related disorder, reports the Mental Health Foundation.

To manage it, we need to understand the cause. ‘The pace of life is increasing and we no longer have enough downtime,’ says Lidbetter. ‘Women often

go straight from a demanding job to the demands of looking after a family and home. Digital life may play a part – we’re continually bombarded with stimuli, the mental equivalent of overworking in the gym every day. If you’re pre-disposed to anxiety and you are on a treadmill-style lifestyle, it’s a perfect storm.’

It’s also thought women’s hormonal changes up their vulnerability. You’re most at risk of anxiety in your early 50s, the average age of menopause, or just after giving birth; 37 per cent of girls aged 14-15 also describe themselves as an ‘anxiety sufferer’, compared to only 15 per cent of boys, found a Department of Education report. ‘Social media may encourage girls to compare themselves in a way that raises their insecurities at a time they may have self-esteem issues,’ says Lidbetter.

“WOMEN ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED BY ANXIETY THAN MEN”

It’s an indiscriminate disease; you can be at risk no matter how outwardly functioning you seem. High-profile women, such as *La La Land* star Emma Stone and model Jodie Kidd, have talked about their struggles. ‘To some degree, anxiety’s the more acceptable end of the mental health spectrum, but there’s still a stigma,’ says Lidbetter. ‘If coverage of a celebrity’s anxiety disorder encourages just one person to seek help, it’s useful.’

Physiologically, the impact is huge. Anxiety releases the hormones cortisol and adrenaline, ▶

→ RATE YOUR WORRY LEVELS

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems? (Circle the number that applies.)	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1 Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	0	1	2	3
2 Not being able to stop or control worrying	0	1	2	3
3 Worrying too much about different things	0	1	2	3
4 Trouble relaxing	0	1	2	3
5 Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	0	1	2	3
6 Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	0	1	2	3
7 Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	0	1	2	3

SCORING Add up your numbers: 5-9 - mild anxiety 10-14 - moderate anxiety 15+ - severe anxiety. See our *Natural Soothers* and *Self-Help Strategies*, overleaf

➔ **NATURAL SOOTHERS**

Holland & Barrett Passionflower Stress Relief, £8.99 for 30 tablets Traditional herbal remedy used for the relief of mild anxiety.

Higher Living Whole Chamomile, £4.99 for 15 tea bags A naturally caffeine-free calming tea.

Weleda Lavender Relaxing Bath Milk, £12.95 for 200ml* With soothing lavender oil to de-stress before bed.



an excess of which can overload the adrenal glands, disrupt hormone balance and cause blood sugar swings. Exhaustion, insomnia, headaches, poor concentration, and stomach problems are common side-effects of anxiety. Left unchecked, it can cause palpitations, breathlessness, and nausea, and 20 per cent of those affected will have panic attacks. In the long term, anxiety raises blood pressure, tripling your risk of heart disease, says US research.

So when is worrying normal or a sign of anxiety? 'Core symptoms include difficulty making decisions or feeling fearful of negative outcomes, such as harm to ourselves or loved ones,' says Dr Siegfried Kasper, professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of Vienna, Austria. Such feelings become a problem when they start to restrict your life, says Lidbetter. 'Some people live with anxiety without it affecting their daily life – those with claustrophobia, for instance, can avoid lifts and other small spaces. But if you're avoiding social events, taking days off work, or not eating, it's crossed from being an emotional issue to a psychological disorder.'

'It took me a long time to realise that what I was experiencing was anxiety,' says Foran. 'At first it only manifested in my stomach; I became obsessed about fixing my gut. Nothing major was going on in my life, but I'd moved house and had a new job I didn't like. I had waves of panic, and woke every day with aches and pains all over my body. I didn't get a proper night's sleep for four months. I didn't understand what was happening or why I couldn't just pull it together.' Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) was her saviour. 'It taught me to observe unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviours, then challenge them, and feel better.' She also draws on acupuncture, yoga, mindfulness, and eats a balanced diet.

If this sounds familiar, it's important to seek help. Talking therapies, like CBT, are advised

for anxiety and everyone is entitled to six to 12 sessions on the NHS, but you can access low-cost therapies, including CBT and counselling through Anxiety UK; find a private therapist at counselling-directory.org.uk; or try a self-help book such as *Mind Over Mood* by Dennis Greenburger and Christine Padesky (Guildford Press, £18.99).

'Anxiety and depression tend to go hand in hand,' says Lidbetter. The sooner you accept you need to loosen the grips of anxiety, the easier it is to make the lifestyle changes that help you regain control of your mental wellbeing.

“LONG-TERM ANXIETY TRIPLES YOUR RISK OF HEART DISEASE”

SELF-HELP STRATEGIES

STAY ACTIVE Fifty per cent of people with anxiety say exercise helps relieve symptoms, reports Mind.

CUT BACK CAFFEINE It stimulates the release of adrenaline, which can trigger or make symptoms worse.

LEVEL BLOOD SUGAR Spikes followed by lows in blood sugar can push up levels of stress hormones, such as adrenaline. For more on diet and mental health, visit mind.org.uk.

RELAX REGULARLY Anxiety is accumulative, like water dripping into a glass – if you don't empty it regularly, it'll overflow, so

take time every day to relax and unwind: 20 minutes of mindful breathing, daily, can reduce anxiety and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol in five days, reports a Chinese study. Try calm.com or the *Headspace* app.

TAKE THE POINT Early studies suggest acupuncture can alter levels of chemicals in the brain linked to anxiety.

TRY HERBAL HELP Pharmaceutical quality lavender oil may help reduce excessive brain-cell activity linked to anxiety, say Viennese scientists. St John's wort, can also help some people affected by anxiety**. **h**

*All products available from hollandandbarrett.com. **If you are pregnant, breast-feeding or under medical supervision, consult your doctor before taking supplements. Photographs Getty, iStock