Reducing Stress/Anxiety

Some describe anxiety as an uneasiness or apprehension. At one time or another everyone experiences it. One’s own experience of anxiety depends on:

1. Genetics
2. Brain chemistry
3. Life events - not much control over these
4. Personality - or the way we perceive and handle life events. You have a great deal of control over this - more than you realize.

Bodies respond to anxious thoughts by emitting stress hormones. They are a built in biological reaction called fight-or-flight response.

In today's world, our bodies still release hormones when faced with a threat. Hormones are released such as adrenaline which raises blood sugar, heart rate, blood pressure and pulse - slows digestion, dilates pupils. It causes us to breathe more shallowly. To stay healthy we have to find ways to disperse those chemicals.

Peace is a natural state of being that is already within us, it's just hidden by all of the stress and tension we take in and focus on. You need to unearth it by peeling off layers of anxiety that are covering it up.

Two Ways to Manage Anxiety

1. Practice prevention - regular relaxation techniques to keep everyday anxiety at low level.
2. Practice an intervention at the time you feel your anxiety level rising - perform a relaxation technique to help you calm down and manage your current situation.

It’s like brushing your teeth that you do everyday. Don’t wait for a cavity. Brushing helps prevent cavities. It’s the same with anxiety. If you can practice relaxation techniques everyday, it can better prevent anxiety from forming.

The way you experience anxiety may differ from the way others experience it. Increasing your awareness of how you experience anxiety can help you manage it.

What does anxiety feel like to you? ____________________________
What tends to trigger feelings of anxiety? (a test, etc.) ____________________________

Your thoughts create your experience of life. Your attitude, or the way you think about things is one of the most powerful tools you have to help you prevent and manage feelings of anxiety. Since you are the only one who controls your thoughts, at every moment you have the ability to create a peaceful experience or an anxious experience for yourself.
When you try to alleviate anxiety by worrying, all you do is make the anxiety stronger. You usually worry because you are anxious about a situation and you want to prevent a negative outcome. Worry has no positive effect on a situation. It draws you physically and emotionally. You feel more helpless and your anxiety level goes up.

All or nothing thinking is a tendency to judge things in extreme black and white categories. It is irrational because in reality things are never completely one way or another. Some are afraid if they don’t achieve perfection (one extreme) they will be a complete failure (other extreme).

1. Thought Stopping Technique
   It helps you to let go of the thoughts that cause you to feel anxious and to change them to thoughts that make you feel peaceful
   1. Notice you are having a thought that causes you anxiety.
   2. Choose a way to forcefully tell yourself to “Stop” out loud or in your mind. Perhaps picture a stop sign.
   3. Consciously change the anxious thought for a peaceful one. Plan your peaceful thought ahead of time so it’s ready immediately.
   4. Say your peaceful thought in your mind.
   5. Keep your mind focused on your peaceful thought until the anxious one is completely gone.

2. When anxious ask yourself, “What’s the worst that could happen?” to help lower your anxiety.

3. Perfectionism can cause anxiety- No one is perfect. That’s why pencils have erasers. Instead, just focus on doing the best you can. In other words, do your best, don’t worry about being the best.
   PENCIL: Perfectionists Enjoy No Contentment In Life.
   Perfectionists tend to achieve less in the long run because of their inability to complete tasks and make final decisions. In the excessive amount of time the perfectionist spends correcting and refining the “unacceptable,” the non-perfectionist can accomplish twice as much work as acceptable.

4. Trying to have control over everything can raise your anxiety level. There are many things we cannot control. Letting go of the need to control everything will reduce your anxiety level.

5. Sending negative affirmations will increase your anxiety level. Sending positive affirmations will help you feel more peaceful.

6. You can reduce feelings of anxiety by using serenity, courage and wisdom. Step back and evaluate the situation you are in, determine the difference between the things you can and cannot change and then act on your knowledge.
7. Practice mindfulness. Be in the moment which can reduce anxiety. Practice using all 5 senses in the activity you are engaged in. Perhaps it’s even eating a bag of chips. If your mind wanders, remind yourself. “Come back to the present,” to bring your mind back to what you are doing now.

8. Visualize a peaceful situation in your mind.

9. Stop, breathe, and think to problem solve and reduce anxiety. When you encounter a challenge, use your body and mind to help problem solve and think of a solution.
   1. Stop what you are doing and remain still for a moment
   2. Breathe- take a long, deep breath. It helps to reduce your heart rate and to release tension in your muscles
   3. Think more clearly and effectively- Look at the situation carefully about what you need to do first, second, third, etc. and then put them into action.

Eliciting the Relaxation Response

Elicitation of the relaxation response is actually quite easy. There are two essential steps:

1. Repetition of a word, sound, phrase, prayer, or muscular activity.
2. Passive disregard of everyday thoughts that inevitably come to mind and the return to your repetition.

The following is the generic technique taught at the Benson-Henry Institute:

1. Pick a focus word, short phrase, or prayer that is firmly rooted in your belief system, such as "one," "peace," "The Lord is my shepherd," "Hail Mary full of grace," or "Shalom."
2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Relax your muscles, progressing from your feet to your calves, thighs, abdomen, shoulders, head, and neck.
5. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, say your focus word, sound, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.
6. Assume a passive attitude. Don’t worry about how well you’re doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, "Oh well," and gently return to your repetition.
7. Continue for ten to 20 minutes.
8. Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.
9. Practice the technique once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner.

Regular elicitation of the relaxation response has been scientifically proven to be an effective treatment for a wide range of stress-related disorders. In fact, to the extent that any disease is caused or made worse by stress, the relaxation response can help.

Other techniques for evoking the relaxation response are:

- Imagery
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Repetitive prayer
- Mindfulness meditation
- Repetitive physical exercises
- Breathe focus

Stressed? Try some of the techniques listed below...

1. Write in a journal
2. Talk to a supportive friend or family member
3. Seek out your advisor or Residence Life staff for assistance
4. Practice relaxation techniques
5. Listen to soothing music
6. Exercise, preferably outdoors, if weather permits
7. Meditate or meditation-in-motion such as Tai chi, yoga, Qi (chi) Gong
8. Take a "mindful" walk (see above)
9. Get off campus for a break
10. Plan study breaks for 10 minutes each hour- yoga, stretching, a quick walk outside
11. Explore stress reducing programs being offered on campus, including programs offered by the Physical Education Department, and by the Office of Residential Life and Learning

Benson Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine

Counseling and Mental Health Service Tufts University
http://ase.tufts.edu/counseling/tuas/