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ARE YOU WORRIED YET?

You should be – we live in an age where there are more choices and higher expectations than ever. But accepting that anxiety is an inevitable part of life is the first step to managing it, discovered Sally Baldwin

In the Nineties we were 'stressed', in the Noughties we were 'depressed', and now? We're simply 'anxious'. Very, very busy and very, very anxious. I was so anxious about writing this blasted article (I felt incompetent, fretted that I wouldn't meet the deadline and would likely be fired as a result) that I couldn't sleep a wink and ended up writing it at 3am on a Sunday. The upside? It really couldn't get much more authentic.

Human beings have always been anxious. It's an indispensable part of the nervous system. But as life moves faster, our anxiety becomes greater. We panic when someone doesn't like us back on Tinder, we worry about which Instagram filter to use, we fret that our Twitter feed isn't as funny as everyone else's. We're living in an era of solipsism – never before have we been so consumed with self-examination, self-improvement and self-perfection.

Our role models don't help. We're surrounded by overachievers, public figures who can do it all. Being an inspirational mother, wearing fashionable clothes, being able to do 20 'proper' push-ups and throw a dinner party without getting in a flap are not now things to

be proud of, they feel like a given. Our choices in life are endless; the ability to make a swift decision has become an essential skill. The outcome? Panic attacks – a result of our own insecurities, thoughts that we're not good enough or that we are failing. One small slip sends us on a swift downward spiral. It's all in our heads – but it's relentless.

But for me, anxiety developed long before the internet sent us all into a collective free fall. It was part of a deep-rooted eating disorder so confusingly crippling that I often thought I was going to die. Regularly convinced that I had food poisoning (meals were either over- or undercooked), I was extremely nervous about ingredients that I couldn't see (too many ingredients at one time would send me into a blind panic) and petrified to eat the same thing twice in one day (I once lost the plot after being served a *salade niçoise*, having had scrambled eggs for breakfast). And so I created rules. No unscheduled snacks, no eating cheese instead of pudding. I swerved sauces, unsure of what they contained (melted butter freaked me out). Wine could follow champagne (but never the other way

around); rosé couldn't be seen after the summer. Planning food became an unhealthy obsession.

I gradually beat my anorexia, but the anxiety remained – and my quest for perfection adopted a new disguise. I began obsessing over my skin, my hair (regular blowdries were crucial or the world would collapse), my health (a new mole meant I had skin cancer; broken bones from a massage and being unable to breathe were both common concerns). My anxiety was a kind of mad paranoia, something that prevented me from doing simple, everyday things (I refused to meet the friends of a chap I'd started dating due to a spot I'd picked). It became so embedded that smaller traumas (my bag not matching my outfit, wearing mismatched underwear, a teacup left in the sink or an unmade bed) would send me into such a spin I'd have to go home and change/tidy/stare in the mirror some more.

You might ask what came first – the anorexia or the anxiety? Perhaps it was the eating disorder that caused things to run riot. Or perhaps the anxiety was simply an underlying issue that was never tackled. It all came down to control – and trying to make sense of my life through the stuff that I could change.

But my form of 'addiction' was reliable (in the short term, anyway). It enabled me to hide from the world and to dodge things I didn't want to confront (like growing up or being hurt). I was convinced that these bizarre and frankly unattainable standards that I had placed upon myself were the only thing saving me from losing control: in reality, they were preventing me from making any sort of practical or emotional progress. They were also making damn sure that I was never present: I was so absorbed with the noise going on inside my head that I often had no idea what was taking place in front of my face. I certainly couldn't admit any of this out loud, and the thought of letting others in on this bonkers interior monologue scared me senseless. In my mind it all made complete sense, but I knew everyone else would think I should be locked up – so there my manic thoughts stayed: gaining momentum, power and strength.

Then I met a man who, quite simply, changed my life. I stumbled across Harley Street psychologist Will Napier (willnapier.co.uk) when my eating disorder still had an iron grip, but I had no idea how much it was influencing my day-to-day decisions. However, Napier soon homed in on this anxiety, enabling me to see that these rules that I had created were a smokescreen for deep-rooted fears and appalling coping strategies (oxymoronic, I know). Butter wasn't the problem here – it was what I had turned it into that I had to fight. Little by little, Napier helped me to release this internal dialogue, to say it out loud: with frankly unbelievable results.

Napier has made it his *raison d'être* to help his anxious clients live life to the full. Observing that our culture treats common, everyday anxiety as a problem that must be fixed, he argues, 'It's OK not to be OK. Most cases I see in the consulting room are some version of trying to exempt yourself from inevitable suffering.' His advice is 'don't fight reality'. Through his work, Napier distinguishes between problem, cause and solution.

THE PROBLEM

Anxiety is a normal part of life, and if we try and get rid of it we are treating it as if it is a threat. Primary (in other words, inevitable) anxiety leads to secondary anxiety. Essentially, it's getting anxious about the fact that we're anxious. This is not just about 'the house is going to burn down', 'he's shagging someone else because my boobs are too small' kind of thoughts: it's when these thoughts morph into 'I am going to worry about this so much that I won't be able to cope'. Or 'Will they notice how worried I am and reject me?'. 'It's like being hooked up to a stress detector and being told, "I'm going to point a gun at you – but don't worry: I will only pull the trigger if you are at all anxious,"' says Napier. 'This secondary kind of anxiety actually feeds itself.'

THE CAUSE

Napier is convinced that a common cause of secondary anxiety is 'enmeshment'. Enmeshment is a term from family therapy that describes a lack of personal boundaries and an inability to cope with one's own or another's distress. When you consider that our response to anxiety is determined by how we see our parents deal with our anxiety, it makes sense. Napier suggests the example of the cabin crew during turbulence: if they look relaxed, we relax. If they are

panicking, we think that something terrible is about to happen. He identifies two kinds of enmeshment: 'Wet enmeshment happens when a parent becomes overemotional when the child is upset and rushes to make things better. The irony is that although it looks like intense attention, it is addressing the psychological needs of the parent rather than the child. And so the phrase goes: "Water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink." Alternatively, there is "dry enmeshment", which is when the parent avoids distressing the child by dismissing the issue, telling them to "snap out of it" or "not to worry".'

THE SOLUTION

Offer yourself what you didn't get from your parents. 'Discover that it's OK to be anxious' says Napier. 'Make room for your inevitable suffering through a daily practice of mindfulness, meditation or yoga. We can learn how to handle our emotions rather than avoid them.'

In short, the mantra you need to adopt for yourself and others is:

I GET THAT YOU'RE SUFFERING

Admit it, acknowledge it.

I MIND THAT YOU'RE SUFFERING

Learn to be kind to yourself – don't beat yourself up.

I CAN HANDLE THAT YOU'RE SUFFERING

Treat your anxiety as part of reality, not as a threat.

I'm living proof that Napier's words work. Anxiety can only breed when you see it as the enemy, fight against it and try and win. As soon as I voiced the white noise inside my head, my friends didn't think I was clinically insane – they listened and they understood. Even by writing this I feel a release: I'm throwing the thoughts that have ruled my life for so long out into the universe for everyone to judge. Best of all, it's working. I'm still here, but the demons have disappeared. □

FIVE WAYS TO MAKE YOU FEEL LESS ANXIOUS

RIGHT NOW

Look at something blue. Research shows that it helps to lessen stress and can even slow your respiratory rate.

IN AN HOUR

The Organic Pharmacy's Homeopathic Consultation prescribes natural remedies to help combat palpitations and feelings of being overwhelmed.

£60 for an hour;

theorganicpharmacy.com

IN A DAY

Breathe: inhale for the count of four, hold for the count of one, exhale for the count of seven. Repeat 10 times. Perform this once in the morning and once in the evening.

IN A WEEKEND

Read *Things Might Go Terribly, Horribly Wrong* by Kelly G Wilson. It helps to address anxiety while encouraging you to face up to the things in life you don't want to. £11; New Harbinger Publications

IN SIX MONTHS

Book a Vedic meditation course with Will Williams (beginners, intermediate or mastery). £294; willwilliamsmeditation.co.uk

