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Anxi

Anxiety is fast becoming the most
Ahead of World Mental Health Day this Sat

WORDS: SARAH

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DOUS?

common affliction of the modern age.
urday, *Stylist* explores its paralyzing effects

FLETCHER

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You wouldn't know it if you met me (though you will now), but I haven't slept properly since

I was a child. Not only do I take forever to get to sleep, but I wake about 10 times a night, worrying whether I've locked the back door or even if my friend is annoyed that I didn't reply to her text. Every night is the same: I lie awake staring into the darkness as my thoughts race and I struggle to calm my short shallow breaths. So ingrained is this nightly routine, that even if nothing immediately bothers me, I find my mind scrabbling around for something to worry about.

Sometimes I even have nightmares about my A-Level exams that were over a decade ago. It always plays out the same way: I realise I haven't done any revision for my Maths A-Level and I have an ever-expanding text book which I know I won't be able to read in time, so failure is inevitable. I dropped my Maths A-Level just weeks after starting it. Clearly my subconscious hasn't forgiven me.

I've lived with this nagging, low-level panic all my life. It's even become a bit of a family joke. So much so that when my brother gave me a copy of Scott Stossel's study into the condition and vivid memoir *My Age Of Anxiety*, I laughed it off. Doesn't everyone feel like this? After all, my friends, outwardly successful, smart young women who you'd assume wouldn't be phased by much, all confess to living in fear of everything from missed meetings to the safety of loved ones.

What's surprising is that anxiety – a feeling that starts in the amygdala region of the brain (the section that controls intense emotional responses) – is quickly translated into a physical reaction, when neurotransmitters carry chemical signals to the nervous system. Our response? Increased heart and breathing rates, tense muscles, a diverted blood flow from our abdominal organs to our brains, and often nausea and diarrhoea as our body goes into full alert.

The reason that happens is that anxiety is essentially our fight or flight response. All very well (and useful) when faced with a wild animal who fancies a light snack, not quite so appropriate when we're trying to locate the fitting rooms in the Topshop sales.

THE ART OF

It can be difficult to pinpoint or articulate anxiety but some artists have



EDVARD MUNCH (1863 – 1944)
One of the most seminal works in modern art, *The Scream* is said to have been inspired by a panic attack Munch experienced. The Norwegian painter is quoted as saying: "For as long as I can remember I have suffered from a deep feeling of anxiety which I have tried to express in my art".
See *The Scream* at National Gallery, Oslo



KATIE JOY CRAWFORD
In her unnerving self-portraits, American photographer Katie Joy Crawford captures the psychological and physiological impact of her struggle with anxiety. "I want this illness exposed for what it is," she told *The Huffington Post*. "I want people to know they aren't alone and that this is a real and very raw disorder."
katiejoycrawford.com

The problem is that in our non-stop, fast-paced existence, sometimes our brains are simply unable to differentiate between physical and non-physical threats, meaning that our bodies are on edge far more often than they should be. So it comes as no surprise that increased levels

"I've lived with this nagging low-level panic all my life, it's a bit of a family joke. Doesn't everyone feel like this?"

of anxiety have been associated with an increase in depression, insomnia, IBS, migraines and respiratory disorders, and if left untreated can contribute to an early death due to its links with heart disease. In fact, the World Health Organisation stated that anxiety was the sixth leading cause of chronic ill health in 2012. Yet, despite all the warning signs, we just carry on in our fretful lives like it's all perfectly normal.

Anxiety is all around us, and it's on the rise. A 2008 Harvard Health Publication, *Anxiety And Physical Illness*, stated that out of the estimated 57 million adults who have anxiety disorders, two thirds are women. In 2013, the Office of National Statistics published statistics that showed nearly 20%

of the UK population over the age of 16 displayed evidence of anxiety and depression, with women (21%) more likely than men (16%) to report symptoms. Dr Michael Rutherford, a psychiatrist at London's Springfield Hospital agrees: "Women are two to three times more likely to suffer from anxiety than men."

"Anxiety disorders affect a significant proportion of the population," adds Dr Rutherford. "But many suffer in silence."

The real figures are disguised by the fact anxiety is such a nebulous beast. The term covers everything from post-traumatic stress disorder to phobias, to OCD and panic attacks. To complicate matters further, it often goes hand-in-hand with depression, making it harder still to pin down. The anxiety experience varies hugely from one person to the next. For some, it's very specific – say, a phobia of travelling on the underground – but one of its most common manifestations is Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), which is characterised by ongoing worry about anything and everything, often touching on money, health and other elements of daily life. It can lead to sleeplessness, breathlessness, fatigue, nausea and a heightened state of tension.

GROWING CONCERN
So if women are more emancipated, educated and

F ANXIETY

managed to sum up exactly how it feels through portraits and photography



JOHN WILLIAM KEEDY

After being diagnosed with anxiety, photographer John William Keedy set about trying to capture what it's like to live every day with the condition. The result was the ironically named and deceptively moving series, *It's Hardly Noticeable*, in which he depicts his struggle to cope and conceal the condition.

johnwilliamkeedy.com



BETH EVANS

Chicago-based illustrator Beth Evans was diagnosed with anxiety while at university. Her simple yet honest cartoons were created to help people better understand what the condition feels like – something she perfectly captures in her simple and thought-provoking work.

butthorn.tumblr.com

empowered than ever, why are we so gripped by fear? “Many women feel under increased pressure today, often juggling a job, childcare and a busy social schedule, without the time to look after their own wellbeing,” says Stephen Buckley, head of information at mental health charity Mind. And this can manifest into anxiety: even those who from the outside have seemingly enviable lives are often privately battling spiralling thoughts; Jennifer Lawrence, Kate Moss, Emma Stone and Scarlett Johansson have all spoken out about being plagued by anxiety.

“I have created what from the outside looks like a great life. But I waste so much time worrying about it unravelling,” admits my friend Amy, 35, an accountant from south London, who lives with a constant – and utterly unfounded – fear of losing her job. This pinpoints one of the most debilitating features of

anxiety disorders – our fears are based on something that has never happened and most likely never will. So how do we know when it's gone too far, and regular worries have turned into full-blown anxiety? After all, left unchecked, anxiety can pose a serious threat to our careers,

“Often our fears are based on something that has never happened and most likely never will”

our relationships and our health. The most obvious sign is when daily life becomes completely unmanageable. If your worrying is both persistent and excessive, to the point that it is disrupting your normal activities then it's most likely gone beyond the norm. There are also physical symptoms too. If you're experiencing chronic sleep problems over a long period of time – struggling to fall asleep, waking up panicked in the night, recurring nightmares – it can be

a tell-tale sign. Muscle tension, chronic indigestion and repeated panic attacks are also indicators of a more serious affliction. Combined, the symptoms can be debilitating. “It can take over people's lives and cause sufferers to withdraw from contact with people,” says Buckley.

But happily, there are proven ways to manage and cope. The most recognised form of treatment is still Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which helps people identify and avoid the thoughts that generate anxiety and then learn how to react differently to difficult situations. Other experts point to the benefits of mindfulness: “Simple daily meditations allow people to live their lives with less stress and irritability; dealing with low moods that would previously

have slipped into depression,” says Professor Mark Williams, emeritus professor of clinical psychology and honorary senior research fellow in the department of psychiatry at Oxford Mindfulness Centre. But for me, keeping an honest dialogue going with my friends has been a real help. Because the first piece of advice anyone will give you is to talk to your friends or your family or anyone you trust about your anxiety.

For those in need of solutions, *Stylist* is here to help. Read on for the five best methods for controlling anxiety.

CBT (COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has proven to be very effective in treating anxiety, in that it makes patients question their actions and learn to manage the thoughts that increase anxiety. “CBT works on unhelpful behaviour,” says Dr Rutherford. “Often, people who are anxious will avoid activities or particular situations out of fear that they will make them more anxious, which only reinforces the anxiety and makes these activities more difficult.” For example, if you're scared of public speaking, ask a question at a small team meeting. “CBT can help people ease themselves back into their usual activities by starting small and building up slowly,” says Dr Rutherford. “Eventually, you'll master your anxiety.”

◆ **Be prepared to share every detail.** With anxiety you might find that you can't concentrate in meetings or make a simple decision because you're locked in a negative thought loop (“What if I don't say the right thing? What if I seem like an idiot? What if I get it wrong?”). A therapist will be able to teach you how to tackle these thought loops, but you have to be honest about these thoughts, no matter how embarrassing or trivial they might sound.

◆ **Don't be put off by cost.** Waiting lists for NHS psychotherapy can be very long so if your anxiety is becoming unmanageable, perhaps consider going private. “Often private psychotherapists are willing to reduce their rates if you explain your situation,” explains Eleanor Morgan author of the upcoming *Anxiety For Beginners*. “Call and give



→ them a brief overview of your anxiety and the impact it is having on your life and most will be willing to organise a reduction." Find a therapist through welldoing.org or through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) website (bacp.co.uk).

DIET AND EXERCISE

Somewhat surprisingly, what you eat can affect anxiety. The Mediterranean diet, which is low in saturated fats, is particularly good for mental health. "Try to increase your intake of Omega 3 fatty acids found in fish, which aid brain function, and minerals such as zinc and magnesium, which can be found in red meat and spinach and promote mental health," recommends Stephen Buckley.

◆ **Up the ante.** Exercise increases mental resilience and reduces anxiety long-term and the more intense the exercise, the more your brain produces neurohormones that improve cognitive function and elevate mood. So if you can, go for a run rather than a walk, or swap leisurely breast-stroke for front crawl. But the important thing is to keep the exercise manageable for your fitness level.

◆ **Keep a diary.** Recording your activities and feelings is especially helpful if you suffer from panic attacks, as it makes it easier to spot a pattern and understand the cause. In your diary, as well as noting down your activities and feelings, record what you eat and drink as things like caffeine and alcohol are known to trigger symptoms of anxiety. Moodtracker, a free app available on the NHS health store, is great for keeping a calendar of your thoughts and helps identify patterns.

RELAXATION AND MEDITATION

Mindfulness is described by the Mental Health Foundation as "paying attention to the present moment, without getting stuck in the past or worrying about the future." It can help you reduce stress and irritability so that you can deal with low moods which would have previously escalated into anxiety. A tutor will help you get to grips with the meditation, you'll need four to six sessions to learn the technique.

◆ **Learn how to breathe.** "If you feel a panic attack coming on, try and breathe easy," says Dr Nick Grey, consultant clinical

psychologist at the Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma in London. "Remind yourself that although it feels horrible, panic attacks aren't actually dangerous. So reduce your breathing to a slow, even pace. Be aware of the breath slowing down. Focus on the inhalation and exhalation rather than everything else around you. It's a really effective way to be

calmer and the situation should seem more manageable." Try the Headspace app which teaches you how to meditate in 10 minute daily sessions.

SLEEP

'Sleep Hygiene' is all about the development of good bedtime habits which can also help combat insomnia, a common symptom of anxiety. The key principle is to

is one of the primary causes of disrupted sleep, which can cause anxiety. "Bright light from screens can disrupt your circadian rhythms (the changes in your brain over a 24 hour period) making it harder for your body to understand that it's time to switch off and sleep," says Stephen Buckley. "Switch off your gadgets an hour before bed and charge your phone in a different room to where you sleep."

MEDICATION

If you think you are suffering from anxiety, your first step should always be to talk to your GP. While a doctor may suggest alternative routes first, prescription drugs can help alongside therapy. "It's perfectly understandable to be reluctant about starting medication, but if you've undertaken therapy and are still feeling overwhelmed, you might benefit from a multi-pronged attack," says Dr Justin Sauer, who treats anxiety patients at Bupa Cromwell Hospital's Memory Clinic. "Adding medication to your treatment could help get your anxiety under control quicker."

◆ **Write down your symptoms.** GPs tend to only have 10 minutes with each patient, so it's a good idea to write down a list of the symptoms that you most want to discuss to make sure you get the right help. For example, if your anxiety is causing a lot of negative thoughts, you may be prescribed an SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) like Prozac, which is used to address symptoms of depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and panic disorder.

◆ **Explain your symptoms.** Sometimes the reason for your anxiety might be temporary; for instance, if you have a large work project or are going through a stressful domestic crisis. In this case, your doctor may be able to prescribe Beta Blockers. "These work by slowing the heart beat and reducing blood pressure to tackle the physical symptoms of anxiety such as pounding heart, tremors, sweating and blushing," says Dr Sauer. "This, in turn, can make you feel more in control. But it's important to understand that while they are good for getting you through a stressful event, they aren't a solution to generalised, long-term anxiety."

"Remind yourself that although it feels horrible, panic attacks aren't actually dangerous"

in the present moment."

◆ Take five minutes to meditate.

"Even if you're tied to your desk, there's still ways you can meditate," says Professor Sir Cary Cooper, expert in occupational anxiety and clinical advisor to Anxiety UK (anxietyuk.org.uk). "Close your eyes, breathe deeply and think about something that makes you happy or calms you and focus on that. Listen to relaxing music if you need to shut out background noise and close your mind. After five minutes, you should begin to feel

establish a rest pattern and stick to it. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, and even if you've had a terrible night, don't lie in as it will disrupt the pattern. If you are having trouble going off, after 15 minutes get out of bed and read. Only tuck yourself back in once you feel sleepy again. Developing a 'winding down' routine – putting your phone away, having a bath, listening to an audiobook – can help teach your body that it's time to rest.

◆ Do a 'tech check'. Screen time

How to find a therapist

Tips on locating the right help for you from mental health, self-development and wellbeing site welldoing.org

Type 'Find a therapist for anxiety' into Google and you'll get bombarded with adverts and promises of help and enough jargon to send your heartrate into overdrive. There are currently around 400 types of therapy available in the UK so finding the right one for you, in the right place and at the right price, can be guesswork.

Thankfully, welldoing.org is a mental health, self-development and wellbeing website designed to match patients with therapists. Users of the website can fill in a short questionnaire that determines not only location, but how urgent their need is, whether they'd like a male or female therapist, and if they'd prefer to talk in person or on email. It also asks questions such as whether you want to focus on the immediate concern or dig deeper into the reasons for it (or a mix of the two). Once completed, the site's directory of therapists is then filtered to find the best fit.

"People's needs can be very specific: their anxiety may have been triggered by a clash over religion, or cultural difficulties around rearing children," says welldoing.org's founder, Louise Chunn. "So I wanted to put people in touch with therapists who would be apt for their situations."

Yet, it's also important to remember that aside from impressive professional qualifications, it's vital that you *like* the therapist you've chosen. "The most important factor is not the model of therapy so much as the practitioner him or herself," explains psychotherapist Philippa Perry. "Therapy's effectiveness is in the common factors that all the talking therapies have, a safe space to talk and be, and your relationship with your therapist. Once you find a suitable therapist with whom you click, therapy has the best chance of working."

For more help, visit welldoing.org, mind.org.uk or anxietyuk.org.uk

