



WE'RE
LIVING
IN THE

AGE OF ANXIETY

COULD YOUR ANXIETY ACTUALLY
BE YOUR SUPERPOWER?
HERE'S HOW TO CHANNEL ALL
THAT STRESS AND WORRY
INTO MINDFUL MOTIVATION.

BY JESSICA D'ARGENIO WALLER

Let's talk anxiety realness: If you're feeling more stressed out and nervous than ever before, you're not alone.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 31.9 percent of teens have a diagnosed anxiety disorder, and, thanks to a reduced stigma around mental health, we're finally talking about it.

But while it may seem like anxiety is a full-blown epidemic, diagnosed anxiety disorders across the globe actually haven't increased during the past 30 years, says Dr. Danielle Ramo, clinical psychologist, director of research at Hopelab and adjunct associate professor of psychiatry at UCSF in San Francisco.

"What has increased, though, is the spread of information, online and through social media, that may make it seem like everyone has an anxiety disorder when that is likely an exaggeration," states Dr. Ramo.

So how can you tell if anxiety is your new normal, or if you're just having a really rough week?

Statistically speaking, girls are 38 percent more likely to be affected by anxiety than boys, according to the NIMH.

Here's how to figure out if your stress is shaping into something else...and how you can bring it back down to a healthy level. Turns out, according to our experts, some anxiety can actually be helpful. Ready to own yours?

A DISRUPTION IN THE EVERYDAY

Here's the litmus test for determining if you have an actual anxiety disorder or just some nervous/stressful feelings: "Stress is situational, while anxiety lingers," says Allison Gervais, a therapist based in San Francisco. "Anxiety causes a feeling of hopelessness, and may leave you thinking 'I can't handle this.'"

There's also a big difference between anxiety, a common emotion felt by everyone, and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), "which is less common and severely debilitating without treatment," adds Dr. Ramo.

GAD—and its accompanying hopelessness—may result in a significant disruption in school, sports or social situations. It's more than just a flicker of fear about performing your piano solo or that nudging nervous energy about being underprepared for your French exam. With GAD, anxiety may seep into every area of your life.

The primary symptoms of anxiety disorder include more long-term issues, like constant worry that doesn't go away, ruminating on the past or ongoing worry about the future, isolating yourself, missing school, stomachaches, headaches, weight loss or weight gain and difficulty sleeping. If you regularly

experience any of these symptoms, it's best to talk to your doctor about seeking help from a psychotherapist to determine if you have anxiety, Gervais suggests.

YOUR SECRET SAUCE

Whether you have an official diagnosis or not, it's still key to be aware of ways to combat any undercurrent of overwhelm, stress or anxiousness and bring those feelings down to a manageable level.

"Some anxiety is actually helpful," Gervais shares. "This can be surprising for people to hear, but it provides motivation to do well in areas that are important to you."

It's an intriguing concept: Instead of framing your anxiety as something else to stress about, transform it into a positive asset. How? By taking action around your anxious feelings, you'll start to learn the signs, recognize the thoughts and make way for a more clear-headed you.

"When you own your anxiety, you own your life," says Julian Brass, anxiety coach and author of the book *Own Your Anxiety: 99 Simple Ways to Channel Your Secret Edge*. "Our anxiety is always trying to tell us something about ourselves and the environment we're in so when we learn to embrace it and see it as

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our personal edge, we put ourselves in the driver's seat toward a more fulfilling and healthier lifestyle."

Anxiety symptoms can provide helpful red flags when we're in a dangerous spot or when our actions don't align with our values, adds Gervais. They also enable us to be competitive, perform well on a test and make a good impression.

"Learning to cope with anxiety gifts us the ability to make positive change, improve self-esteem, emotional stability and self-growth. Too much anxiety does the opposite—that's when it's time to seek professional help," says Gervais.

TAKE ACTION AGAINST ANXIETY

So, how do you wield your anxiety into a helpful tool? First, recognize that flipping the script on your anxiety isn't something that happens overnight...and may take a good amount of your attention. But if you consider it a form of self-care, it becomes less of a chore—and more of an investment in yourself. Here are five ways to channel your anxious attitude into an empowered, motivated, intentional outlook.

1. RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU NEED A BREAK

You know those panicky feelings that rise up when you're overwhelmed? Often, anxiety stems from trying to do too much, shares Brass.

We get it: You don't always have the option of saying no to things you *have* to do, especially school-related stuff. But if your calendar is starting to show less and less white space, you might need to carve out a little more free time.

Maybe that means skipping a spring-term sport or deleting Instagram from your phone for a week to stop the endless scrolling. Or maybe it's taking a weekend off from any holiday obligations that feel more like, well, obligations than enjoyable events.

Allowing yourself a bit of space will help make the things that fill you up feel that much more fulfilling. "Anxiety creeps in sharply when the person you are being isn't the person you actually want to be," notes Brass. "When we say yes to stuff we have no interest in, we show up—but not as our best selves, which isn't good for anyone." Recognizing when you need to take a step back is a powerful skill that takes time to master. If you're having trouble saying no more often, enlist a parent to help you prioritize.

2. EMPLOY DEEP BREATHING

Anxiety often manifests itself in physical ways. Your heart races, your shoulders tense up, your breathing gets shallower. Pinpointing these symptoms can be the key to stopping an anxiety spiral from getting out of control.

And the best way to stop the spiral? Try taking a deep breath. Purposefully practicing deep belly breathing actually can convince your body and your mind that you're safe and in control. You'll instantly go from high alert to relaxation mode—and learning

to do this *before* those anxious thoughts start can help you transform that frantic energy into a feeling of focused calm.

3. HEAR YOUR SELF-TALK

We all talk to ourselves nearly every minute of every day, whether we realize it or not. And *how* we talk to ourselves contributes heavily to how we feel every day.

Are you constantly criticizing or tearing yourself down? Use these mini internal monologues to transform any negative thoughts and nervous energy into something more productive.

The next time you catch yourself in commentary mode, pay attention to what's being said. This is the first step—really listening. Step two is shifting the dialogue to become your own cheerleader. Turn "I'll never..." or "I can't..." statements into their opposites: "I'm already doing a great job at..." or "I can take small steps to reach my goal by..." The more you change the conversation happening in your head, the more you'll be able to regulate your anxiety and mood, says Brass.

4. BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

When you trust, love and rely on yourself, you've got the freedom and strength to walk away from any toxic friendships or relationships that don't serve you, because at the end of the day—you've got you.

"Self-love doesn't just happen, it takes work," says Brass. When you're your own best friend, you're taking care of yourself first. Leave yourself love notes on your mirror. Take a solo stroll to see the sunset and be alone with your thoughts. Have compassion when you're cranky. If you mess up, quickly apologize, then forgive yourself.

Getting back to self-compassion crowds out feelings of anxiety or low self-worth, helping you feel grounded in your everyday decisions—and helping you be a better friend to others, too.

5. EMBRACE THE JOURNEY

Are you always looking for the next big thing? Regularly seeking movement or change or growth? It's possible that constant quests could be triggering anxiety, too.

Quell those feelings of what's next, new, bigger and better by slowing down, cherishing where you are and remembering you're exactly where you need to be. Acknowledging you're on the path means you're fully embracing the moment—and can be at peace with the present. Here's where mindfulness really shines: Learning to sit with feelings of anxiety and watching them pass is incredibly empowering, notes Gervais.

In doing so, you take away their influence over your thoughts and actions. "Knowing you can handle anxiety in the moment is half the battle," Gervais adds. Almost like a superpower, don't you think? 🦋



Should you try CBD for anxiety?

The short answer: No. Cannabidiol (CBD), an active compound found in hemp and cannabis plants, has been touted as an all-natural anti-anxiety aid—and is showing up in everything from mascara to coffee to honey.

But the results are inconclusive, says Gervais. "There are not enough long-term studies," she notes. There also can be confusion among the products. "If a teen uses CBD combined with tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC [the chemical responsible for cannabis' high], that may exacerbate anxiety—and could lead to substance abuse issues." Hard pass.



9 MINI WAYS TO WRANGLE YOUR WORRIES INTO POSITIVE ACTION

- Take care of a plant or pet
- Join a team sport
- Sign up for choir
- Do yoga
- Read a real book
- Make art
- Go to bed earlier
- Write in your journal
- Go for a walk every day