



be affected) there is a marked difference between an anxiety disorder and the low-level feelings of anxiety that many people suffer as a result of living a demanding lifestyle ruled by electronic devices.

HIDDEN PITFALLS

Dr Harry Barry author of *Flagging Anxiety and Panic* (Liberties Press) says that none of us are strangers to being anxious. “Anxiety is a word we all commonly use. But just as depression with a little d is an emotion we all experience, while depression with a capital D is a significant mental health condition, there is anxiety with a little a, the normal emotion, and anxiety with a big A – the condition and it’s important to know the difference.” The world of everyday anxiety can be hidden and shadowy, to the point that we might not even realise it’s there, as it’s possible to function relatively normally despite it. In other words, you might not experience an obvious symptom like a panic attack that could alert you to seek help, so more subtle symptoms can be brushed aside – insomnia, emotional eating, IBS, poor relationships, poor performance at work, holding back in social situations for fear of being judged. Does any of this sound familiar? “At the heart of anxiety is worry, and more worry,” explains Dr Barry. “This can cause a mental and physical fatigue that can be underestimated. We can begin to accept the symptoms as normal and live in a twilight world of worry and exhaustion that often worsens with age, as the mounting stresses of life build up.”

GETTING TO THE ROOT

If constant low-level anxiety is a modern ailment, then the causes must lie in our modern lifestyles. Fiona Brennan, a Clinical Hypnotherapist and founder of Thepositivehabit.com says that

information overload has a lot to answer for. Brennan compares the need to constantly check our social media feeds, our emails or the news is linked to our primal hunt instinct. When we find what we’re looking for, say a notification on our timeline, it activates the reward system in our brain, which releases the happy hormone dopamine. Once that runs out, we look for our next hit immediately, not allowing ourselves a rest period in between. “Thanks to our phones, TVs and the general prevalence of technology, we are always plugged into the mainframe so to speak, therefore we are always on the hunt. Our brains are not actually able to process the level of information available to us, so we experience information overload and a sense of being overwhelmed.” Brennan explains this is because our brains are formed to know what’s in our immediate vicinity, but now we’re tapped into what’s happening all over the world, resulting in a constant barrage of information that is overwhelming, especially today with so many terror attacks occurring. Brennan also explains that this information overload can happen on a smaller scale as social media keeps us constantly updated with what other people are doing which in turn can make us feel pressure that we’re not quite keeping up in our own lives. “All of this can lead to this low-level anxiety, which drip feeds the stress hormone cortisol to your body, which can lower your immune system, make you tired and

can give you a feeling of constantly being on edge or uncomfortable in your own skin.”

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

The most important thing is to understand that this feeling that can be nipped in the bud with a little work. “The brain is very flexible, which means that you can actually rewire your brain. We call this neuroplasticity. But just like consistently going to the gym to keep fit, you need to devise a wellness self-care programme that can be maintained.” Firstly, Brennan advises that anyone with feelings of anxiety limit the kind of information that they expose themselves to. “It’s not that you should become uninformed about the world around you but do you need to hear or read a negative story 10 times a day? When you have anxiety, your mind starts to make connections as information is processed, and catastrophises the conclusions. For example, if your husband is late home and you begin to worry unnecessarily about his safety. These thoughts are irrational consciously, but rational subconsciously because you’ve been exposed to worrying stories in the news all day.” Brennan is also a big believer in the power of mindfulness, in particular self-hypnosis as it allows you to choose the information you feed to your brain as opposed to just being present. “Affirmations are very important too, for example: ‘I am calm, I am confident’. You might not feel them in the moment but consistently repeating them gets the message into your subconscious.” Research has also shown that taking the time out of your day to pamper yourself as part of your daily beauty routine has huge wellbeing benefits. The Unilever Personal Care 2016 Report revealed that in a survey of almost a thousand respondents over half said that their daily grooming routine had as much influence on their daily sense of wellbeing as diet and exercise. More than anything, Brennan says that awareness is key. “When you first feel any little signs of anxiety, that’s when you need to stick to your wellness self-care programme. Go for a walk or listen to a mindfulness app sooner rather than when it’s too late. The more in tune you are with your body you are, the sooner you’ll recognise the feelings of anxiety creeping in. When it’s not causing obvious problems people tend to just ignore, ignore, ignore until inevitably it results in burnout. That doesn’t need to happen.”

MAKE THESE SIX LIFESTYLE CHANGES TODAY:

1. BUILD 30 MINUTES OF REGULAR EXERCISE EVERY DAY INTO YOUR LIFE.
2. TAKE B VITAMINS/OMEGA-3 FISH OIL SUPPLEMENTS TO HELP FIGHT FATIGUE.
3. USE YOGA, MEDITATION, SELF-HYPNOSIS OR MINDFULNESS APPS AS WELL AS RELAXATION AND BREATHING EXERCISES.
4. COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY CAN RESHAPE MENTAL PROCESSES AND TEACH YOU TO PROBLEM SOLVE.
5. TAP INTO POSITIVE EARLY NEURAL PATHWAYS BY DOING AN ACTIVITY YOU LOVED WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER.
6. SET SCREEN TIME BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNICATE THEM TO FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES. FOR EXAMPLE, THAT YOU DO NOT CHECK EMAILS AFTER 8PM. ■