The Counseling Hut

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# Preventing Anxiety and Depression

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Revised July 1, 2011

Feeling sad or worried is a normal part of everyday life. There are times, however, when these feelings become a "mood" that begins to color the way we look at everything, even things that do not typically cause sadness or worry. Such a mood may have a physical cause—hormones, medications, fatigue, lack of sleep, pain, blood sugar, etc.—or it could be a feeling that somehow became hard to shake off. Either way, prevention can play a large role in not letting the mood "stick".

Signs of depressed mood include:

- feelings of sadness; tearfulness
- feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- irritability and anger
- losing interest in doing things; indecisiveness
- avoiding contact with people
- not being able to get started or being too agitated
- eating too much or eating too little
- sleeping too much or sleeping too little
- thoughts of death or suicide

Signs of anxious mood include:

- excessive worrying about things that are beyond control
- excessive worrying about things without enough information
- worrying about worrying too much
- restlessness; being "keyed up"; irritability; muscle tension
- difficulty with falling asleep or staying asleep
- easily getting tired
- difficulty concentrating
- mind going blank; panic attacks

When these symptoms come as a reasonable response to a stressful event, it is nothing to worry about. In most cases, they pass with time, usually within two weeks. However, take caution when:

- there are so many stressful events that there is no time to recover
- the symptoms last for weeks and weeks
- the symptoms come without any clear reason, or are disproportionate
- things that didn't used to stress you out now stress you out

There are many things to try and many things to avoid when your "feelings" start to become a "mood". The first thing to try is to manage the sources of your stress. Got too much on your plate? Prioritize, and focus on a few things at a time. Stop worrying about tomorrow. Stop worrying about what other people think. Separate the things you want to do from the things other people expect you to do. Be clear about what *you* think is right and wrong; you cannot always do what is right, but it is important to always know what you truly believe.

Ironically, we need some stress in our lives to do our best, and so it's easy to just keep pushing ourselves to get things done; sometimes, that is necessary. However, too much stress decreases our ability to get things done. We start making mistakes, and start working against ourselves. Taking some time off to rest can actually improve our productivity, since we will then be better prepared to:

- gain a realistic sense of what is happening and what can be done,
- consider our options, and
- do the things we need to do.

When in doubt, breathe. A few minutes of deep, slow, deliberate breathing can clear the stress hormones out of your body and give your brain some time to plan things out. Practice taking short breathing breaks even when you are not stressed out; it will work better when you are stressed out.

The next thing to try is exercise. It doesn't have to be anything strenuous; a simple walk around the block can make a difference. If you would like to join a gym and just cannot get yourself to do it, try this trick: walk to the gym, and walk back.

Here are some things that are *not* helpful; it really helps to stop doing these things:

- Thinking *only* of the worst case scenario.
- Worrying about things too far in the future.
- Seeing one thing as an example of everything.
- Thinking it's all bad or all good.
- Thinking it's all for you, against you, about you, or because of you.

In general, any time you find yourself using words like "never", "always", "should", "oughta", "must", "cannot possibly", "I just have to", "I gotta know why", etc., it is likely time to think about different ways of looking at things. It could turn out that you are right; even so, you'd be in a better mood to know that you have made an informed assessment of the situation rather than simply reacting.

Also, any time you find yourself doing things because "that's how I always do it", it may be time to try different ways of doing things. Think about what you are trying to achieve, and consider many different things you can do to get what you want. This is especially true with how you interact with people.

People often resort to alcohol, marijuana, and other substances to cope with depression and anxiety. Ironically and sadly, these substances can make depression and anxiety worse and harder to fight off in the long run. Caffeine in any form—coffee, tea, chocolate, energy drinks, soft drinks—also contributes to anxiety. When you stop taking alcohol, marijuana, or caffeine, you may feel worse at first. It may take up to a week, even a month, before you start to get better. Give your body some time to get used to living without the stuff—at least a month—before worrying about how you'd live without it.

If you've tried everything and just cannot shake the mood, make an appointment with a professional counselor, especially if:

- the mood lasts for more than two months
- the mood lasts even though you have no reason to be sad or to worry
- the mood starts to get in the way of getting things done