

Lifestyle with Dr. Z

Stress: Training Your Brain to Decrease Anxiety



Not all stress is bad. “Eu” stress is good stress that helps us grow. Think about lifting weights, learning a new language, or practicing the piano. “Dis” stress, on the other hand, is unhealthy stress, the “fight or flight” response from actual or perceived threat gives us discomfort. Over time, this “(dis) stress can lead to (dis) ease! The call is to help us look at most stress in a positive light, rather than in the negative way we typically think in Western cultures.

What happened?

Our brains are wired with an amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for the flight or fight response when we feel we are in danger. When a bear chases, we run quickly! When a car pins someone underneath, we can heroically help someone get free. When someone yells at us, however, research shows that our amygdala behaves in the same way. We are not physically at risk, but our brain tells us that we are.

Can we retrain our brain? How? Yes, we can. We can learn new ways of doing things. We grow new connections, and our neurons can work in better ways. Here are some methods:

1. **Focus on breathing.** Remind ourselves that we are actually safe. We are not in danger of being attacked by a bear. Breathing can slow down our heart rate. Take 5-7 seconds to breathe in, hold, then exhale 5-7 seconds. Repeat. This can help us improve anxiety and even avoid a panic attack.
2. **Soothing touch.** Either having a loved one or oneself practice this can help us retrain our amygdala. Touch for some is “taboo,” but is in fact a primary love or appreciation language, based on research from Gary Chapman in his book, “*The Five*

Love Languages.” Have someone give you a hug. There are now tools such as “Apollo,” a digital wearing technology that delivers vibrations that can improve energy, focus, and relieve stress (www.Apolloneuro.com).

3. **Empathy.** This is a skill that can signal to our brains that we are safe. Research shows that eye contact with someone, even when they are wearing a covid mask, can lessen the stress we are feeling. Talking with someone about our issues can give us perspective and center us, reminding us that an issue may not be as bad as we think.

What gets in the Way? When faced with anxiety or stressful issues, many engage in impulsive behaviors and instant gratification in order to try and deal with an issue.

We reach for the candy bar or cigarette, the video game, sex, or other distraction. Even work itself. All of these can lead to poor outcomes when we don't deal with stress in a healthy way.

Sadly, these habits often come with side effects that can lead to addiction. Alcohol use, marijuana, cocaine are also used to help us try and solve a problem, when in fact it often makes matters worse. Well-meaning doctors often give us drugs to try and help, but sometimes these drugs are nothing more than a band-aid that covers up the problem, rather than deal with the root issue.

What else can I do? Western medicine often suggests a pill for a problem. Pills can help but can also make matters worse. Plant medicine can be helpful. Psychedelic therapies like ketamine or MDMA are becoming more commonplace in society. Seek out healers well-trained and do your homework.

Practice Makes Perfect. The more we practice ways to retrain our brain to deal with stress, the better we will be able to manage issues that take us off guard. This practice actually changes the neuron connections in our brain, giving us resilience when we would otherwise have a bad day. We can truly help ourselves deal with many issues by using or retraining our brain.

Finally, seek out wisdom and counsel from experts and people you trust. Doctors, healers, therapists, and spiritual advisors can all augment the process and help us lead healthier, fulfilling lives.

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