

Treating Anxiety Naturally

BY BIJANA KADAKIA, ND

One of the most surprising things I hear in my practice as a naturopathic physician is “I didn’t know you could treat that.” As Dr. Clark explained in his article last month, naturopathic physicians or NDs are trained and licensed to provide primary care, so there are few everyday conditions that we are not equipped to address in some way. Anxiety is a condition that I treat frequently at the clinic and which often elicits surprise from patients who didn’t realize that as a naturopathic physician and acupuncturist, there is a lot I can offer to help them.

The severity and expression of anxiety ranges widely with mild to severe symptoms, varying from a very internal and emotional experience to scary physical manifestations that often send patients to the emergency department. Thus, our approach to treating anxiety must be highly individualized. It may not make sense, for example, to treat someone who has severe anxiety only when flying to someone who suffers daily panic attacks. Conventional treatments are often medication and a recommendation of stress management with little guidance in specific practices.

Stress management is also going to be highly individualized and we work to find the combination of activities and choices that work best in an individual patient’s lifestyle. Here’s a technique that anyone can practice, though: after reading this sentence, close your eyes and take 3 deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth, feeling your belly expand with each inhalation. Go ahead, try it. How do you feel?

Deep breathing affects the vagus nerve and activates the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) which is responsible for our “rest and digest” mode. Activating the PNS can help calm you in the midst of anxiety, but practicing this regularly can also help calm your body’s stress response system to reduce anxiety over time. Another technique that activates this system is acupuncture.

When I work with a new acupuncture patient, I always introduce what they can expect during the treatment by explaining that the needles first act on the nervous system and seem to flip the switch

from fight or flight (sympathetic nervous system dominance) to rest and digest (PNS dominance). A feeling of profound relaxation is almost universal during acupuncture treatments and many people even fall asleep while receiving treatment! We have helped many people reduce their symptoms of anxiety with regular acupuncture treatment.

We can also provide additional support in the form of nutritional supplementation or herbal medicine. This can be particularly helpful when medication has failed, either due to ineffectiveness or unbearable side effects, or for patients who prefer not to use medication. Evaluation with lab testing can be particularly useful in guiding treatment and may include neurotransmitter testing, adrenal function testing, sex hormone levels and testing to rule out conditions or physiological imbalances that can cause anxiety.

Lab testing for neurotransmitter levels, for example, allows us to target treatment to address which specific neurotransmitters

are out of balance. The potential treatment options with this kind of information at hand are too numerous to list here, but can be targeted to specific neurotransmitter imbalances in several ways. And this is why I like to say that we have a never ending supply of tools in our toolbelt. As naturopathic physicians, we can utilize pharmaceuticals, nutritional supplements, herbal medicines, nutrition, lifestyle medicine and acupuncture, alone or in targeted combinations to address each person in their unique state.

I hope that this article has been useful in providing you some hope and information about treatment options you may not have known about. If you’d like to comment on it or contact our clinic, please visit our website at www.truehealthmedicine.com. Please seek treatment so that you can experience the fullness of life and true health.



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