



HOLISTIC HEALTH CARE

- Naturopathic consults
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Empowerment over Anxiety

by Jayne Craig

It starts with that feeling of a million butterflies trapped in your stomach, or that nagging feeling in your brain and body that something just isn't RIGHT. Maybe it stays that way, in the background all day, following you around like an unwelcome shadow; making you second guess yourself and clouding your daily interactions. Or maybe it builds and peaks, so those butterflies in your stomach turns to the sensation of a pool of churning acid, you start to sweat, palms clammy, your heart beats like a trapped beast in your chest, your breath is shallow, whilst everything inside you screams RUN!! But run where? You cant unzip your body or out run your mind, and so you feel trapped, which escalates the feeling of panic and so the cycle continues. This is how I felt during the ten years I lived with anxiety and panic attacks, the memory of how anxiety affected my life is what fuels my passion and desire to empower other women who live with anxiety with tools to help them heal. If you're reading this and it all sounds way too familiar, know you're not alone...Anxiety is the most common of mental disorders, with up to one-third of the population experiencing some type of anxiety disorder within their life time.

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Before I outline some ideas you can try incorporating into your life to support yourself through anxiety, let's look at what anxiety is and how it manifests in your physical body.

- Anxiety can affect any one regardless of age, gender and race; although studies have shown woman are more likely to have anxiety and people in their 20-30s are likely to experience the highest rates of anxiety.
- Genetics can play a role in the likelihood of having an anxiety disorder.
- The amygdala, the central nervous system and the hormones produced (norepinephrine, serotonin, dopamine etc) are the main culprits in triggering anxiety.

Anxiety begins in the brain and the central nervous system. The amygdala is thought to be the start point of the cascade of reactions that cause anxiety.

Memories and the emotions associated with these memories, are stored in this small area at the base of the brain. It has been found that the left amygdala which is responsible for storage of traumatic memories (the right amygdala is responsible for action) is more active in individuals who suffer from anxiety disorders.

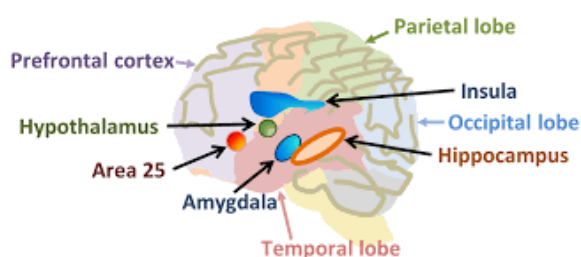
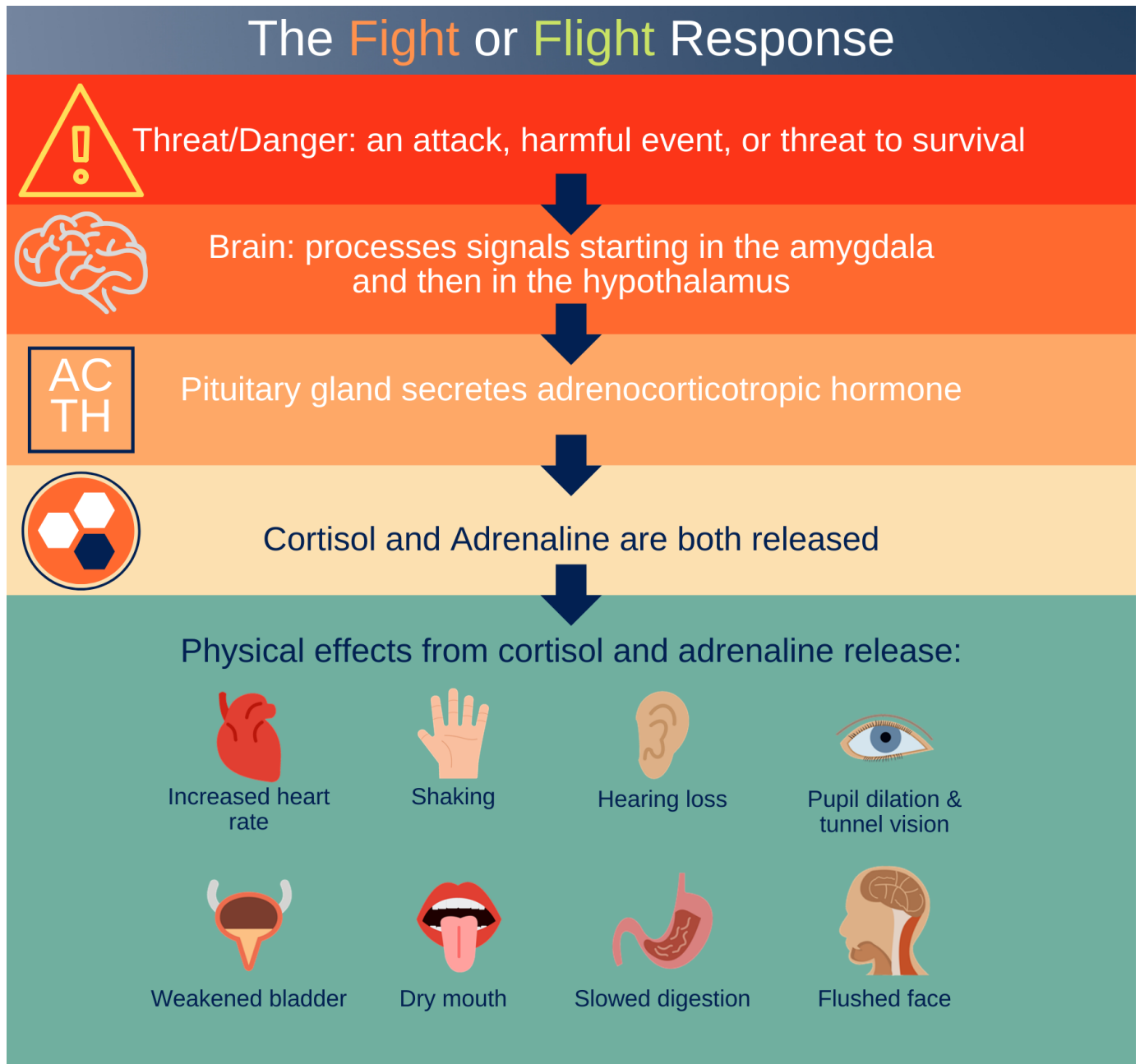


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The medulla oblongata, which is located on the lower part of the brain stem; governs the flight or fight response as well as other involuntary functions of the body, such as heart rate and breathing patterns. Because the medulla oblongata activates the fight or flight response it signals for extra circulation to be used by our muscles. As the body doesn't actually need to fight or flee, the rapid pumping of the heart and the quicker rate of breathing, overwhelms the body and results in the symptoms of a panic attack. At the same time the hypothalamus is also called into action by the amygdala and it activates the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is important in the fight or flight response as it co ordinates the heart, lungs and muscles; all the things the body needs to flee or fight. It also calls the adrenal medulla into play which releases adrenaline. This gives the body a huge surge of energy and is followed by a post adrenaline crash, resulting in body wide fatigue and tension.

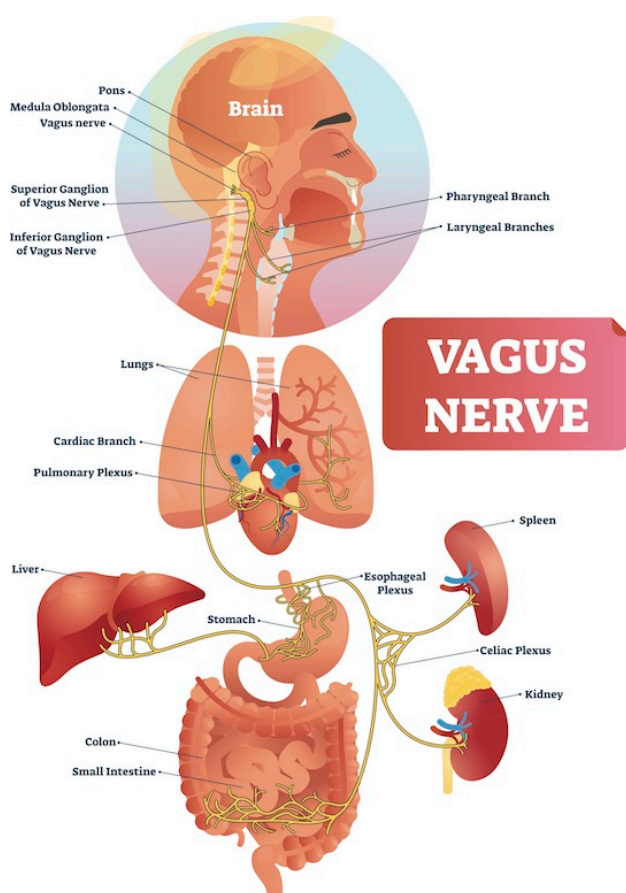
What was once a reaction to help keep humans alive and alert in the wilderness is now working against individuals with anxiety. In this modern world the need for fight or flight is very nearly redundant - Instead of being triggered by hidden dangers in the wild, we are triggered by repeated stressors such as, money worries, relationships or being singled out by the boss. The degree of anxiety that would occur when danger threatens, was once needed to keep us safe and alive, now causes an inappropriate reaction to non life threatening events and repetitive stress, resulting in anxiety disorders. Instead of it being an event that occurs every now and then, it becomes a state of being.



So how do we support ourselves in a holistic manner?

First of all it's important that you take back your power, by identifying yourself as a person currently living *with* anxiety, rather than identifying as an anxious person. Do you see the difference? All too often we see our anxiety as something within us, a trait, or a character flaw, framing it this way can lead to feeling helpless and hopeless. Reframing the way you talk to and about yourself, allows you to feel more optimistic and empowered, which in turn helps support you in your healing.

Just as our bodies turn on the chemical cascade that causes anxiety, it may also have the key to shutting it off. The vagus nerve runs from the base of our brain, down the neck, branches out in our chest and continues all the way down to our abdomen. The role of the vagus nerve is to feed information between the brain and the gut (often called our second brain), it regulates breathing, heart rate, muscles, digestion and circulation. Which, if you remember from the information outlined above, are all areas effected by feelings of anxiety or panic. Vagal nerve stimulation is thought to help switch the body from operating in the sympathetic nervous system (prepares the body for intense physical activity - the fight-or-flight response) to the parasympathetic nervous system (which relaxes the body and inhibits and/or slows many high energy functions).



You can stimulate the vagus nerve and improve vagal tone fairly easily, just by picking a few of the following activities. Short term stimulation works in the moment and is helpful to incorporate into your daily routine, whilst long term vagal stimulation helps to improve your vagal tone (and your overall health) in the long run.

Short term vagal stimulus:

Embrace Cold: It is thought that exposure to cold temperatures, such as a cold shower, cold plunge pool, briefly dipping your face into cold water or even drinking a glass of ice cold water stimulates the vagus nerve.

Massage: You can improve your vagal tone by gently massaging your feet, which you can easily do your self or you could pamper yourself with a visit to your local reflexologist! Massaging the foot is thought to help lower your heart rate and blood pressure, whilst a massage with gentle, but firm pressure will also activate the vagus nerve.

Singing, humming And Chanting: Even if you're not a wonderful singer, singing along to your favourite songs is great for stimulating your vagus nerve and heres why; singing initiates the muscles in the back of the throat and this in turn activate the vagus. As a bonus singing has been found to increase oxytocin, which is relaxing and helps people to feel more connected. So turn up the music, sing or hum along to your favourite songs, chant as you meditate or attend a kirtan (music based on chants) event to get that vagus nerve stimulated.

Laugh: Watch a comedic movie or TV programme or joke around with friends and family. Taking life more lightly and with joy, will not only help you to feel better in the moment (as it releases endorphins) laughter will also stimulate the vagus nerve.

Long term stimulus:

Exercise: Exercise has a whole host of benefits for your health and wellbeing, such as increasing the brain's growth hormone and supporting brain's mitochondria, releasing feel good hormones, toning the bodies muscles and increasing circulation. Exercise can also help tone and strengthen our fascia - the connective tissue that runs through our entire body, enveloping our organs, helping give us form and structure. It is thought that exercises that stretch our fascia can also allow us to release stored emotions in the body..goodbye stored nervous tension and anxiety!

Exercise has also been shown to stimulate both the vagus nerve and gut flow, which is mediated by the vagus nerve.

Try Yoga And Tai Chi: Both of these activities are not only incredibly great for helping you relax, de-stress and be present in the moment, they also increase vagus nerve activity and your parasympathetic system in general. Some research has shown that yoga increases GABA, a wonderful, calming neurotransmitter in your brain, whilst other studies have shown that tai chi also can be useful in enhancing vagal tone.

Breathe Deeply: Focusing on breathing through the belly rather than the chest, is one of the best ways to lower stress, improve mood, reduce inflammation and cortisol levels, as well as encourage relaxation. Try to start with 5 minutes a day and build up to 30 minutes or longer. The length of time spent in mindfulness and breath work is not important, the benefit comes from incorporating it into your daily routine. Choose a spot where you will be undisturbed and lie or sit in a comfortable position. Make sure you are warm. Take a normal breath. Then try a deep breath: Breathe in slowly through your nose, to the count of four - allowing your chest and lower belly to rise as you fill your lungs. Let your abdomen expand fully. Hold, count slowly to four. Then exhale allowing your belly to sink back in towards your spine - again to the count of four or even better, slightly longer to the count of six.

Slow breathing, with a roughly equal amount of time breathing in and out, increases the sensitivity of baroreceptors (neurones in your heart and neck, which detect blood pressure) and help vagal activation. Practicing deep breathing helps to ground and centre you, helping you stay in the present moment instead of worrying about the past or projecting about future worries.

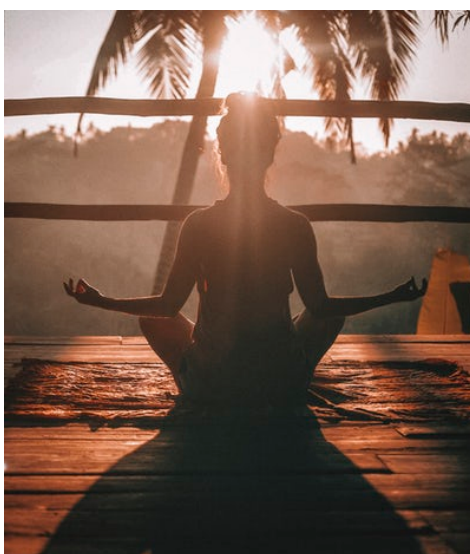


Image from Unsplash.

Bio feedback hack for panic attacks:

Bio feedback is an amazing tool to help gain insight into our bodies and what is happening during periods of anxiety vs calm and coherence. Essentially it is a mind-body technique that involves using visual feedback (usually via a computer) to gain control over our bodily functions; such as heart rate, muscle tension and blood flow. For example; sensors are attached to your fingers so you can see your heart rate on the computer screen. You then use breath work or relaxation techniques to control your heart rate and bring yourself into calm.

A really simple way you can use bio feedback at home is with that childhood favourite novelty ring, the mood ring.



Mood rings contain liquid crystals inside the stone/band of the mood ring.

These crystals react to changes in your skin's temperature. As your skin's temperature changes the crystals react, changing their molecular structure. This change in structure alters the wavelengths of colour that are reflected or absorbed. A mood ring is helpful because when you are anxious or experiencing a panic attack, your blood is directed to the internal organs and away from the skin, making your skin cooler. The mood ring will detect this change in temperature and turn a darker colour (Green, Brown or Black). Once you become calm, blood returns to your skin and the ring will warm up. The ring's colour will change to a more vibrant colour such as; Pink, Purple, Dark Blue or Blue. This is a helpful tool to help redirect your attention, as when you become anxious or panicked you can focus on the ring and it will prompt you to practice the breath work outlined in the previous pages. As you breathe you can watch the ring change colour and see how you are bringing your body back into coherence, which is an empowering feeling!

Hopefully this PDF has given you some tips and tricks that you now feel inspired to try out in your life. There are of course many more naturopathic ways to support yourself when you are experiencing anxiety or panic attacks eg; nutrition changes and many medicinal plants and supplements that are extremely helpful. If you would like to know more and would like to book a naturopathic consult to receive a wellness plan tailor made just for you, please check out my website www.alchemyclinic.co.nz





Im Jayne Craig, a Naturopath and Medical Herbalist based in the sunny Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. Im a busy mother of four children and have previously battled with my own anxiety and depression issues. My journey and skills I have learnt along the way has led to my area of focus and passion; helping empower women to take charge of their mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Id love to work with you in person or online.

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