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Breaking Points

By Patti Verbanas



Last week not one, but two, of my friends called in sick from work, walked into a doctor's office, and emerged with three-week medical leaves of absence. Both are young (mid-30s), otherwise healthy mothers who work full-time. They exercise regularly, have strong familial support for their children, and fulfilling — albeit demanding — careers that give them flexibility to balance work and home. Their diagnosis: Anxiety.

In the current issue of Health + Beauty, I worked with Dr. Scott Greenberg of the Magaziner Center for Wellness to produce an article on the effects of stress on the body. We all know that stress can take a physical toll, but what I learned from my discussions with Dr. Greenberg is that stress can also affect every system, such as cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, and immune. Stress manifested itself differently in both of my friends' cases: While one suffered panic attacks, another had been finding that her vision was failing and even top specialists were unable to diagnose the specific cause. The recommendation for both: Temporarily stop working.

Tactics like leaving a stable job or taking medications to combat stress and anxiety are extreme — but you need not get to that point. Stress management is a lifestyle choice, decisions made minute-by-minute. It's a matter of winning a series of battles, rather than worrying about how you will win the whole war.

In Balance Beam No. 1, I detailed my personal strategy for managing stress and finding fulfillment in every precious minute. My list might be primitive, but it works — and like a living organism, it is evolving. I challenged you to write your own list. If you have one, post it on your bathroom mirror so you see it every morning. Reviewing your list is a simple measure that can help keep you from reaching the breaking point as my friends did.

The best tactics are simple acts that are long reaching. If anxiety is a concern for you, there are specific steps you can take that will make a difference. To help you form a list, I asked psychiatrist Naomi Greenblatt, founder of the Rocking Chair – A Women's Wellness Center (therockingchair.org), for her top tips for anxiety management:

Avoid or limit caffeine. Coffee, tea, caffeinated sodas, and energy drinks act as stimulants and can increase symptoms of anxiety as well as trigger a panic attack.

Avoid alcohol. Many people with anxiety may be tempted to drink alcohol as it may initially decrease the anxiety. Alcohol can actually increase your chances of having an anxiety attack and can trigger a panic attack.

Quit smoking. Nicotine is a stimulant and can lead to higher levels of anxiety.

Watch your diet. Eat foods high in magnesium, phosphorus, calcium, and potassium as these nutrients are depleted during times of stress. Also, try to decrease refined sugars and simple carbohydrates.

Get adequate sleep. Sleep deprivation can lead to an increase in anxiety. Good sleep is essential for maintaining health and keeping stress levels down.

Exercise. Working out releases endorphins, which are natural "feel good" hormones that can positively affect mood. Exercise has also been shown to decrease levels of stress, which can reduce the incidence of anxiety.

Learn to relax. Find a relaxation technique that works for you and use it to combat stress and decrease anxiety. Guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing techniques, and yoga are great methods to use to relax.

Talk with a friend. Talking about what is bothering you can help alleviate stress.

Today, I'm sharing this list with my two friends. It's been one week since they have been on medical leave. While one is feeling the benefits of a break in activity, the other is still experiencing anxiety and panic attacks spurred by common occurrences such as a change in schedule. Stress is an amalgamation of facets in our lives; you cannot simply cancel one stream and expect stress to dissipate. And at some point, perhaps, outside intervention is needed to teach us alternative techniques to manage anxiety.

After all, dropping out of life simply is not an option.

