

Do You Ever Feel Anxious?

Part 3: Ignoring the Physical Signs of Stress

By Lynette Sykora

Excerpts from *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*

“Jennifer” is constantly thinking. She does well at her job, she is a good cook, she keeps up with friends, she is a Christian, she is creative, and she likes to shop. Her life would appear to others as happy and to be going well. But about every two months, Jennifer develops a sore throat and fever. And in between, she suffers from regular headaches. She also finds that she often overeats, before she realizes what she is doing. Jennifer lives in her head. Her mind is busy. It is always evaluating things, always thinking about what’s next, always on edge.

Jennifer is struggling with anxiety, but she doesn’t realize it. She hardly pays attention to her body, and so her body is in essence “shouting” at her. Her fever and sore throat can be a way to try and slow things down, or it shows a weakened immune system because the body is too taxed with stress. The headaches can reveal on-going tension, without release. The eating is often a reflex, a coping mechanism for stress. Grab a candy bar, numb the pain.

Can you relate to this at all? Do you find that you often live in your head, unaware of what is going in your body from the neck down? Are you taken by surprise with pains, digestive problems and the like (that are not easily explained by illness). Below there is a list of physical symptoms that can be connected to high-stress living. Take a moment to evaluate yourself; are you someone who needs to learn to be more aware of physical signs of stress? Afterwards, we will look at a few suggestions for what to do about it!

Are you experiencing any of the following physical symptoms or have you experienced them in the last month?

- Headaches
- Back aches
- Nervous stomach
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea/constipation
- Teeth grinding
- Skin condition (rash)
- Appetite change
- Weight gain
- Allergies
- Digestive upset (cramps, bloating)
- Muscle cramps
- Neck and shoulder pain
- Jaw tension
- Cold hands or feet (but if you’re engaged, this is normal)
- Hypoglycemia
- Colds

How about these psychological symptoms?

Anxiety
 Depression
 Feeling “spacy”
 Irrational fear
 Compulsive behavior
 Mood swings
 Hyperactive-you can’t slow down
 Loneliness
 Frequent guilt
 Frequent worrying
 Dissatisfied with work
 Problems with relationships
 Nightmares
 Apathy
 Sexual problems

Evaluate your stress level:

Number of Items checked	Stress Level
0-7	Low
8-14	Moderate
15-21	High
22+	Very High

I’m sure with the busyness of life and the high demands on many of us, you are probably experiencing some symptoms of stress. The focus here is on being aware of the symptoms in you. Truly, knowing is half the battle! Once you realize that you are living at a high stress level, you can begin to consider some programs for relaxation, exercise and nutrition to help you physically. And for the psychological aspects, you can begin with working on mistaken beliefs and perfectionism (remember our previous article on perfectionism?). Let me highlight these various stress remedies for you. But if you are interested in more information for you or someone else, let me know and I can get you more detailed information as well as references for books on the subject.

Exercise and Nutrition

First, let me say that I am neither a nutrition nor physical fitness expert. So I would refer you to the information you already have, or can obtain from health experts. But working on getting 20 minutes of cardio exercise a day and getting more of the necessary nutrients found in fruits, vegetables and lean proteins will improve your health at all levels, including psychological! (And as Larry Winckles told me, eating some dark chocolate every day helps too!)

Relaxation and Tuning into Your Body

I didn’t just turn into a yoga master or whatever, this is actually something Christians can and should do! Ok, first things first, you should learn what progressive muscle relaxation is. In

its basic form, it is progressively relaxing your muscles from head to toe or toe to head, one muscle group at a time.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

1. Sit in a comfortable chair and take off your shoes if possible. Try to eliminate interruptions or distractions (phones, etc).
2. Begin with taking your pulse, and noting your heart rate at the beginning and at the end of this exercise.
3. Take 3 deep breaths, focus on exhaling out negative emotions, bad experiences, etc.
4. Begin either with the toes and work up...feet, ankles, calves, thighs, lower back, stomach, chest, shoulders, neck, face, head...or go the other way. Take a moment with each muscle group to tense the muscle and then relax it. You can do it twice for each one.
5. After you have gotten through all the muscles, take 3-5 more deep breaths.
6. Take your pulse again and see if there is any change in your heart rate.

You can do this anywhere! You can do it while sitting in the airport, on a plane, in a classroom, at the dinner table. This is your little trick!

Tuning into Your Body and Feelings

If you find that you are often staying “in your head,” preoccupied with worries and you are out of touch with your body and with your feelings, you can get in touch with them again!

- a) Begin with relaxation, like the above activity.
- b) Afterwards, ask yourself, “What am I feeling right now?” or “What is my main problem or concern right now?”
- c) Tune in to the place in your body where you feel emotional sensations like fear or anger or sadness. Maybe it is in the area of your heart or gut.
- d) Wait and listen to whatever you can sense or pick up on in this place.
- e) Where is this feeling? What is the shape of this feeling? What is the color of this feeling?
You may need help with describing the feelings, like a feeling list.

I would offer that this can be combined with meditation and prayer. Take time to relax physically, and meditate on a psalm, for example. Then ask the Lord to reveal to you what is going on in your body. “Search me Lord and know my heart...”

Once you can identify the feeling, the source of stress or tension, you can work at expressing it. Perhaps you need to talk to someone or to take time to write or journal about it. Perhaps you want to just sit and have a cry. Maybe you realize it is anger and you need a way to get that emotion out: try hitting a pillow or screaming into a pillow or hitting your bed with a tennis racket or breaking eggs in the bathtub. Then you will see if you need to express these feelings to someone who wronged you, this can be done best with expressions such, “I feel angry when you do _____” rather than accusations.

So if you realize you are someone who is constantly overextending themselves and trying to fit too much into too little time, while at the same time living in your head and unaware of your body. And you see that you are experiencing both physical and psychological signs of stress, the first step is to identify the symptoms and the second step is decide not to ignore them any longer. Your body will find a way to let you know it is overtaxed-you can't ignore it forever!

I find that I often want to retreat, to sleep, to hide, when I feel stressed. Perhaps it is a way for my body to manage the stress. But the result is usually that I feel more stressed because now I have to make up for time I lost, or explain why I was hiding or something like that. It is better if I can own up to feeling scared or angry or sad, and try to express it by writing or talking or playing piano or going for a walk...even hitting the bed with a pillow! Often I realize that it is connected with my relationship with God, as well. Do I believe He cares? Can I trust Him to help me or to understand? Did he allow this bad thing to happen to me? If I can move towards God, and experience His mercy, I find I am softened, I am accepted, I am understood. This enables me to find release and to move forward, instead of staying stuck. But I am really still working on this!

God bless you all in your lives and work and I hope this is helpful in some way for you.

Your friend,

Lynette Sykora
MAC, NCC