

Stress and Anxiety Podcast Episode 1

Podcast 1 – Introduction – 18 minutes

This is the first of a series of six podcasts on stress and anxiety. Stress and anxiety are something we can all experience to varying degrees, and most people are familiar with some of the tell-tale signs and symptoms, such as a knot or butterflies in the stomach, rapid, shallow breathing, a pounding heart, a feeling of unease, fear, or sometimes even panic and terror, and often difficulties with sleeping, eating, and relaxing, as well.

Before we start, then, if you're feeling stressed or anxious right now, you might want to try the following breathing exercise, to help you focus on the podcasts that follow. So, take a big breath in through your nose as far as you can, sniff in an extra breath, and then sigh a big breath out through your mouth. Why not give it a go now if you'd like to, like this [demonstrate]? This kind of breathing is something we all did naturally as children when we were crying, but we tend to forget about it as we get older. People often feel a bit calmer after breathing like this for about ten to twelve breath cycles – that's roughly 2 minutes - so feel free to pause this podcast and continue with this breathing exercise for a few moments now, if you'd like to [demonstrate].

What we've just done is one of the human body's most basic ways of self-regulating, both physiologically and emotionally, and in this series of podcasts, we'll be looking at various other, evidence-based techniques you can use to cope with stress and anxiety. These range from different kinds of breathing to going for walks in green spaces, and from reducing caffeine to practising daydreaming. These kinds of strategies can help us to deal with some of the small irritations and worries that tend to build up in our everyday lives, but as well as exploring some practical approaches, we'll also be asking some more fundamental questions about stress and anxiety. These will include what stress and anxiety actually are, where they might come from, and what's going on in our bodies, brains, and minds when we feel these emotions. We'll reflect on how we often blame ourselves when we're experiencing stress or anxiety, telling ourselves that it's somehow our fault that we're feeling this way. But what's far more likely is that the stress and anxiety we're feeling are linked to the interactions between our basic biology as human beings, any particular genetic predispositions we might have inherited, and to how we've learned to think, feel, and behave from previous experiences we've had in our lives. And whilst we might not be able to change our biology or genetics much, and won't remember some of our earliest and potentially most influential experiences, it is by recognising the impact

that they are likely to be having on us, and by giving ourselves other, more helpful, experiences in future, that we can start to have at least some choices over how we react to situations now. So as well as working with, rather than against, our basic biology, we'll also be attempting to identify our own particular personal stress and anxiety triggers, trying to link them to what we know of our previous personal experiences, and endeavouring to reflect on how we might be able to make some incremental changes in our current lives to regain some control over the reactions we might be having. So whilst we are often influenced by our previous experiences, then, this doesn't mean that we have to be determined by them.

So what do we mean by stress and anxiety?

Well, there are lots of different definitions of stress and anxiety, and in fact, these emotions are closely related and tend to have pretty similar symptoms. A working definition of stress might be that it's the physiological response of your body, brain, and mind to a perceived physical or mental threat. So when you're feeling stressed, you're probably finding something, or the thought of something, overwhelming or intimidating, and it's triggering a particular set of ultimately physical responses that are making you feel both physically and emotionally under pressure and uncomfortable.

A working definition of anxiety might be that it's the physiological response of your body, brain, and mind to a situation to which you're anticipating, either consciously or unconsciously, that you will respond badly. This might be because you feel that you had a negative response the last time this situation arose, and you don't want the same thing to happen again now, or because you are uncertain as to how you might react to a situation which is possibly as yet unknown.

Whilst major causes of stress and anxiety in life are thankfully relatively rare for most people, such major triggers might include, for example, you, or someone you're close to, experiencing a serious illness, chronic physical or mental health problems, severe pain, extreme financial difficulties, the anticipated or actual loss of someone you're close to, or the loss, or threat of loss, of your livelihood, your health, or your home. Feeling stressed and anxious under these circumstances is entirely normal and, depending on the situation, it might even be a cause for concern if you don't feel stressed and anxious at times like these, because cutting off from your feelings as more than a very temporary defence mechanism to cope with painful emotions might be unhelpful to you in the long run.

For more ordinary, everyday causes of stress and anxiety, however, such as starting a new course, problems with academic work, friendships or relationships, or not knowing what you're going to do when you finish your degree, we'll be trying to come up with a plan for

how to address these sometimes difficult, but not unusual feelings. Focussing on these emotions doesn't mean becoming preoccupied by or dwelling on them and going round in circles— a process people often refer to as 'overthinking'. Nor does it mean trying to distract ourselves from them, whether with work, social media, or other diversions, or trying to sweep stress and anxiety under the carpet to try and get rid of them altogether. Saying 'pull yourself together and just get on with it' or trying to divert yourself in this way doesn't really work, except perhaps as a very temporary measure, as what tends to happen is that the stress and anxiety just return again and again, often popping up at increasingly unpredictable or inconvenient times. And in a sense, you can't overthink something, in that you probably can't stop yourself thinking about something if that is what your mind wants you to do, but you can think about it in more or less helpful ways. So rather than going round in circles, brushing stress and anxiety under the carpet, or trying to cover them up in other ways, cutting straight to the chase and making time and space to attend to these emotions properly can actually be more helpful in the long run. And although this might sound a bit scary, once we realise that we can reflect on and reduce our stress and anxiety, it tends to give these feelings less power over us, so that they don't take up more time and mental energy than is necessary. So you might want to think of listening to these podcasts and starting to address your stress or anxiety as an investment of time and emotional energy now, to save wasted time and emotional energy later on.

Stress and anxiety are a normal part of our everyday lives, then, and we can't avoid them altogether. But whilst a bit of stress and anxiety can be helpful in certain situations, such as before an important exam or job interview, when it can help us to feel energized and focussed so that we can perform to the best of our ability, most of us consider excessive stress and anxiety as something that can get in the way of living life to the full. You'll also have noticed that we all have different reactions to stress and anxiety, so that for some people, a tight work deadline or loud music from next door might feel nerve-wracking or even unbearable, while for others, it's a minor irritation that doesn't particularly bother them. For some, a blood test or meeting new people might be something about which they feel apprehensive or by which they even feel stopped in their tracks, whereas for others, they're all just part of daily life. There's nothing intrinsically right or wrong about any of these feelings, and as with many mental health or wellbeing issues, whilst there might be a degree of genetic predisposition to stress and anxiety, if you've grown up witnessing important people in your life getting stressed or anxious about such things themselves, there will probably be an increased likelihood that you, too, will experience these emotions when faced with similar issues or situations. It's the classic nurture/nature dilemma, where it's not always clear what's more inherent and what's more acquired. There's also some evidence to suggest that the more you react in unhelpful ways to potentially anxiety

provoking or stressful experiences, the more specific neurological and physiological pathways can become reinforced. So trying to understand why you are reacting as you are, working at retraining your body, brain, and mind to respond in calmer and more thoughtful ways, and practising these responses until they become second nature, can be a much more helpful way of dealing with things than just trying to squash the feelings down, even if it takes a bit more effort and doesn't feel that comfortable to start with. Perhaps most importantly, trying to understand these feelings and where they might come from in our lives, and particularly our early lives, can be helpful in distinguishing which reactions belong where – in other words, which of our reactions relate to the past, and which belong to our current circumstances now.

So you might be in your first year as an undergraduate at Oxford, feeling stressed and anxious about navigating all the new experiences that Oxford has to offer – some perhaps welcome, others maybe less so. Or you might be in the middle of your undergraduate degree, feeling worried and overwhelmed about managing all the academic, social, and personal demands of student life here, and wondering how you're going to cope. Perhaps you are experiencing stress or anxiety about the climate, or about how you identify, for example in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. Maybe you feel stressed by contemporary political issues and the state of the world more generally, or perhaps you have concerns about how you perceive yourself or how others perceive you in terms of disability, religion or belief, or social class. You could be a finalist, facing the pressure of some big exams this year, applying for jobs or further study, feeling worried about student debt or future housing issues, and concerned about your future, and the transitions that lie ahead. You might be a Master's student, studying what is often a highly intensive course, at the same time as getting to know new friends and tutors, perhaps adjusting to an unknown city as well, and feeling apprehensive about how you're going to get everything done in such a short period of time. Or maybe you're a DPhil student, learning to run an academic marathon, not a sprint, dealing with a temporary doctoral crisis, adjusting to some of the demands of adult life, wondering if academia is really for you and what you might do if not, and feeling stressed and worried by the amount of work you need to get through and if it's all really going to be worth it for you in the long run.

And whoever you are, you might also be dealing with some of the worries and strains of day to day personal or family life, too, perhaps having a lot of arguments with a particular person or people in your life, supporting a disabled sibling or unwell or disabled parents, possibly being estranged from your family, or even parenting children of your own. There might also be additional factors that you need to take into account, such as particular sensory or social needs, if you are autistic, or experiencing additional stressors to do with day to day organization and concentration, if you have ADHD, for example.

But although life can sometimes throw unexpected, unpreventable, and at times unreasonable demands at us, and there can be circumstances over which we genuinely have little control, there are nevertheless also usually some ways in which we can begin to make small changes to our everyday lives that will give us enough headspace to think about how we're going to cope with the more major challenges we might be facing. So whoever you are, and whatever it is that you're dealing with, there will hopefully be something in this series of podcasts that you might find helpful.

So how do we know if we're feeling stressed or anxious?

For some people, this might sound like an odd question, as they are acutely aware of when they are feeling worried or overwhelmed, but for others, it's a question worth asking, as they might not realise the extent to which the stress and anxiety in their lives is affecting them. They might need to sit down and identify the signs and symptoms of anxiety or stress in themselves, or even to talk to others such as friends, family, tutors, or peers about any changes that these people might have noticed recently in their behaviour or presentation.

Although the different sets of signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety can sometimes be difficult to distinguish, and one way of understanding stress is really just as a sub-set of anxiety, the three main categories we might consider here are physical, behavioural, and cognitive/emotional indicators.

The main physical symptoms of stress and anxiety can include issues to do with sleep, appetite, breathing, and other physical factors.

Sleep can include finding it hard to get to sleep, waking up a lot in the night, or waking up very early, oversleeping, or just feeling generally exhausted.

Appetite might include perhaps just not being hungry, or feeling nauseous, eating erratically, or sometimes stopping eating altogether, and experiencing rapid weight loss, or conversely, craving sugary or unhealthy foods, over-eating, and perhaps experiencing rapid weight gain; you might also find yourself drinking more caffeine or energy drinks than you normally do.

Breathing can include shallow or irregular breaths, breathing too fast, or intermittent breath holding, often without even realising it.

Other physical signs can include a rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, headaches, or gut problems such as a churning tummy, diarrhoea, or constipation; sexual problems, such as lack of libido or difficulty getting an erection, feeling aroused, or reaching orgasm; or feeling dizzy, sick, faint, or fatigued.

The main behavioural indications of stress and anxiety might encompass rushing around, working longer hours, neglecting hobbies, procrastination, perfectionism, social withdrawal, and increased substance misuse.

With **Rushing around**, you might find yourself constantly dashing about, trying to get everything done, always on the go, or always working against the clock to meet what might seem like impossible deadlines – you might even be so used to this way of thinking that you impose unnecessary or unreasonable deadlines on yourself, perhaps without even realising that you're doing this, or as a way of not thinking about something which you might be finding emotionally difficult.

With **Working longer hours**, you might find your working hours expanding as you try to keep up or catch up with a burgeoning workload, often working with decreasing efficiency or working to a much lower standard than you usually do.

With **Neglecting hobbies**, you might find yourself no longer engaging with enjoyable hobbies or exploring new activities, neglecting exercise (or occasionally doing too much exercise), or not making time for existing relationships with friends, perhaps a partner, or maybe with your family.

When it comes to **Procrastination**, you might find yourself putting things off because it all feels too much and because you feel that you'll be unable to do things as well as you'd like to.

With **Perfectionism**, you might set yourself unreasonably high standards as you try to make up for feeling out of control in other areas of your life, or in order to try and gain the love and attention that you feel you want or need but don't have currently, or maybe didn't get previously.

With **Social withdrawal**, you might find you can't face seeing people, or feel inadequate or rivalrous as you compare yourself unfavourably with others, or you might find meeting new people unbearable and find yourself struggling to make new friends; conversely, you might find yourself socialising excessively, but in a very superficial way.

And with **Increased substance misuse**, you might even find yourself misusing alcohol, perhaps drinking too much or too often, maybe misusing prescription drugs, or using non-prescribed drugs, as a way of attempting to self-medicate and calm yourself down; you might recently have taken up smoking or vaping, or you might find that you are smoking or vaping more than you usually do.

When it comes to cognitive or emotional signs of stress and anxiety, the main symptoms might include difficulties with concentration and processing information, forgetfulness, excessive worrying, being negative towards yourself, experiencing irritability, frustration, or

conflict, or feelings of worry, panic, or fear, and even possibly of feeling out of touch with reality.

So with **Difficulties with concentration**, you might be finding it hard to focus, or finding you can't focus for as long as you used to or as long as you'd like to.

Difficulties processing information might include finding it hard to take in and/or sequence information.

Forgetfulness might mean it's hard to remember important information or things you need to do.

Excessive worrying might result in your finding yourself going round in circles, ruminating, experiencing racing thoughts, or 'spiralling'.

Being negative towards yourself might include noticing that you are 'shouting' at yourself or denigrating yourself in your head, being too self-critical, or constantly down on yourself, perhaps denying yourself treats or self-praise, or just generally being mean to, or wanting to punish yourself.

Experiencing irritability/frustration/conflict might include snappiness, feelings of anger with yourself or others, finding yourself picking arguments or fights, feeling 'on edge', blaming others excessively or perhaps feeling they are blaming you, being more critical of others, complaining a lot, or maybe finding fault with people about minor situations that wouldn't normally bother you.

Experiencing feelings of worry/panic/fear can mean that tell-tale knot or butterflies in the stomach, feeling overwhelmed, unable to face things, or possibly even feeling frightened or generally fearful; you might experience narrowed or reduced thinking, or emotional numbness or 'cut-offness'.

And with **Feeling out of touch with reality**, you might even find yourself not really knowing what day it is, what time it is, or occasionally even where you are, or perhaps having other dissociative experiences and feeling disconnected from your own body.

So what can we do if we have noticed these signs and symptoms in ourselves, or others have alerted us to them? Well, once we've considered some of the ways of categorising stress and anxiety in the next two podcasts, we'll go on to think about practical strategies we can use to address these emotions. If you feel that you need some practical strategies to reduce stress and anxiety right now, then please feel free to go straight to Podcast 5. You can always go on to listen to the other podcasts in this series later, when you're feeling a

bit calmer and less preoccupied. If you are feeling really anxious and overwhelmed to the point where you feel unable to function, and particularly if you feel seriously out of touch with reality or that you are at a risk to yourself or others, then please do make an urgent appointment to speak to your GP or College doctor, or in case of life threatening risk, go to the Accident and Emergency Department ('A+E') of your nearest hospital.

If you feel able to now, however, I'd encourage you to listen to the remaining five podcasts in sequence, starting with Podcasts 2, 3, and 4, in which we think about what stress and anxiety are, some of the different ways in which they can be categorised and understood, and what might be triggering these feelings for you. Then in Podcast 5, we'll try to understand what is going on in our bodies, brains, and minds at a physiological and neurological level when we're stressed and anxious, and we'll explore a range of practical strategies to counteract these basic biological responses. And finally, in Podcast 6, we'll conclude with thinking about making a plan for how to start reducing the stress and anxiety you are currently experiencing as much as is possible right now, so that things can feel a little bit more manageable in future.