

What began as an inner knowing that there was more to mental health than just talk therapy and cognitive work became an approach I wholeheartedly encompass personally and professionally: Holistic Counseling, which integrates all aspects of one's health: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social.

In 2011, one of my favorite professors gave us an American Psychological Association journal article, 'Lifestyle and Mental Health' by Roger Walsh from the University of California, Irvine, during a general psychopathology class. I don't think there was even an assignment attached to it, he just gave it to us as "food for thought." The article listed nine lifestyle factors (nutrition/diet, exercise, sleep, altruism/service, spending time in nature, recreational activities, relationships, spirituality, and relaxation/stress management) as significantly influencing mental health and urged clinicians to acknowledge these factors when developing treatment plans.

It validated everything I knew to be true, and it somehow gave me permission to pursue a holistic approach to counseling and healing.

During a very stressful period of my life, I decided to enroll in The Institute for Integrative Nutrition's Health Coaching Program, sanctioned by the state of New York. I received the degree in 2016, two years after receiving my Masters of Psychology, Clinical Counseling degree from The Citadel.

Since then, I have been creating an article on the factors I have found to significantly influence our overall health. This is not intended to be a 'to-do' list; it's meant to raise awareness on how these factors affect us. I hope you find it useful. I welcome and encourage any questions, thoughts, additions and constructive feedback!

Thank you always,
Christi

Integrative Approaches to Anxiety

anx·i·e·ty /aNG'zīədē/ *noun* a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome. "He felt a surge of anxiety as the plane was landing."

Also associated with: perfectionism, rigidity, control, hyper-alert, vigilant, readily prone to a stress-response, etc.

Anxiety symptoms may include: excessive worry and feelings of apprehension about everyday events and problems, obsessive thoughts, compulsive thoughts, feelings of fear, restlessness, frequent headaches/stomach aches, muscle tension, frequent absences from work/school, pounding heart or accelerated heart rate, sweating, shaking/trembling, difficulty breathing or shallow breathing, dry mouth, feeling dizzy or light-headed, dissociation, hot flushes or cold chills, numbness or tingling sensations, feeling keyed -up, edgy, difficulty focusing or concentrating, low motivation, irritability, and disturbed sleep.

First, please acknowledge your insight into anxiety symptoms and your desire to heal. Many of us go for long periods of time (often years) without any awareness of our anxiety or the will and courage to change. We may feel broken because of our struggle with anxiety; but I will tell you wholeheartedly, THAT YOU ARE WHOLE! Many times, we seek counseling because we believe we need to be fixed and that there is something wrong with us. The beautiful thing about revealing ourselves to a professional is that we quickly discover that we were never broken to begin with, that the only thing wrong was that we believed that there was something inherently flawed within us. Being human is an emotional and anxiety-provoking and hard.

Fear and anxiety may be so ingrained in our lives due to unresolved trauma and grief that they become automatic and serve as self-protection. The feeling of anxiety is a *defense emotion* that our body and mind uses to prevent us from experiencing *core emotions*, which are sadness, anger, fear, joy, excitement, sexual excitement. This can be self-protective and that is ok! When we stay stuck in the anxiety loop, we avoid experiencing core emotions which are much more tolerable than we may fear. It makes sense that we instinctively self-protect against discomfort or pain. Although it is when the destructive effects of avoidance and self-protection become intolerable that we are forced to grow and heal.

Secondly, healing anxiety takes time and work. It truly requires an integrative approach combining the emotional, psychological, psychosocial, behavioral and somatic components. You will address many of these components in therapy sessions.

Below are some somatic and behavioral strategies that may ease anxiety significantly.

1) Maintain stable blood sugar levels.

Maintain healthy nutrition throughout the day in order to maintain stable blood sugar levels. Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, many Americans are experiencing overall exhaustion and chaotic blood sugar levels due to undereating, overeating, overusing caffeine, or eating foods that spike sugar levels like processed simple carbs. When our blood sugar crashes due to any of the reasons above, our body secretes stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline), which tell the liver to make more blood sugar to keep us alive. The physical hormonal stress response cycle feels the same as anxiety or panic symptoms. When we are able to keep our blood sugar levels balanced, we can avoid the stress response and decrease anxiety symptoms.

Ways to stabilize blood sugar through food:

- Aim to include protein, fiber, greens, and healthy fats (e.g., avocado, nuts, olive oil, coconut oil, butter and ghee from pasture-raised animals) in the food you eat. This combination is a magic potion to keep blood sugar levels stable and feeling satisfied.
- Aim to limit sugar and refined carbohydrates as they cause spikes in blood sugar or pair what you are craving with a food that will stabilize blood sugar (healthy fats, protein, fiber, and greens).
- Don't restrict eating; carry snacks and intuitively nourish yourself to satisfy your hunger cues.
- Tip: Take a spoonful of almond butter or coconut oil upon waking, in the afternoon, and right before bed; this will serve as a blood sugar safety net throughout the day.

- Introduce hydrolyzed collagen (also called gelatin and is much like bone broth) into your diet. It is high in glycine, an amino acid known for its calming effects. Watch anxiety, even insomnia, gently fade. Use in smoothies, liquids, etc.
- Aim to reduce and/or eventually eliminate caffeine, try one cup of “Bulletproof” coffee, or add a tablespoon of MCT oil to your coffee. Strong evidence correlates caffeine with anxiety symptoms. On caffeine, the nervous system is readily prone to a stress response (jittery, elevated, edgy). If an actual stressor is introduced, your body quickly goes into full-on stress response.
 - There are ways to gradually wean off caffeine, and you may be surprised to find that in addition to our anxiety decreasing, sleep is improved, and energy stabilizes throughout the day. You can start by drinking a quarter of decaf for a few days, moving to half decaf, moving to black tea, moving to green tea, moving to herbal tea, etc. Whatever amount of caffeine reduction you decide will benefit anxiety symptoms.

2) Sleep.

Sleep is our best protection against anxiety symptoms. Anxiety can cause insomnia and then sleep deprivation makes us vulnerable to anxiety. It’s a vicious cycle.

Sleep Hygiene:

- Reduce or eliminate caffeine especially after 12pm.
- Exercise in the morning.
- Keep consistent bed- and wake- times.
- Aim to eat no less than 2 hours before bed.
- Limit alcohol in general.
- Maintain stable blood sugar.
- Be aware of your exposure to light and screens especially within one hour before bedtime. Bright lights should only be experienced in the morning and dim light at night. Try black-out curtains/shades or a light-therapy alarm clock that gradually brightens.
- Keep your room completely dark for sleep.
- Consider a low dose of Melatonin and take 90 minutes before desired bedtime.

- Check your mattress and pillow; if they are older than 10 years, replace.
- Try guided meditations or gentle yoga poses before bedtime.
- If you suspect you grind your teeth, snore, wake up with a dry mouth, and are sleepy during the day, make an appointment with a sleep specialist.
- If you find yourself tossing and turning unable to fall asleep, after 15 minutes, get up and read or do a quiet activity (no screens) in dim light. When you get sleepy again, try again and go back to bed.
- Keep bedroom cool.
- Reserve the bed for sleep and sex only.
- Try a weighted blanket.

3) Heal the Gut

Recent research indicates a strong relationship between gut health and mood, especially anxiety symptoms.

- Aim to avoid what irritates the gut: excess gluten, sugar, industrial vegetable oils, artificial sweeteners, alcohol, and certain medications (antacids, antibiotics, oral contraceptives). Please address any concerns with your doctor first before changing or stopping any medications.
- Aim to add what soothes the gut: fermented foods (sauerkraut, kimchi, beet kvass, miso paste, apple cider vinegar, kombuchas, starchy tubers (sweet potatoes, white potatoes, plantain, taro, yucca), bone broth, and supplements (probiotics, glutamine and collagen).
- Add lifestyle changes that facilitate gut health by managing stress (also see below): get adequate sleep; practice mindful awareness, yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, and acupuncture; reduce/limit technology and social media; be outside and experience nature; use your creative energy; and foster connection with others in “real-time.”

4) Movement

Physical movement is the best anti-anxiety medicine and can be just as effective as an antidepressant.

If you struggle to move regularly, aim to simply sit less, walk more, stretch. It's not all or nothing. Short bursts 10-20 minutes of movement matter and help alleviate anxiety symptoms. There are many reasons to move your body: releases endorphins; builds strength; improves mood, builds healthy cells in your brain, lungs, and heart; increases energy; increases memory and brain function; increases mobility; increases connections with others, social skills, and teamwork building skills; increases quality time with yourself depending on what you choose to do; and lowers stress.

More tips:

- Aim for brief walks outside, biking, jogging, swimming, any type of forward movement, or anything that you enjoy.
- Shift the “purpose” of movement from burning calories/weight loss to feeling better overall.
- Yoga and Tai Chi are particularly beneficial for anxiety, but the most important thing is to find something you enjoy.

5) Magnesium.

Magnesium is nature's Xanax and many of us are deficient in magnesium, since our food is grown in magnesium-depleted soil. You can supplement with magnesium in a few different ways.

- Take an Epsom salt bath
- Take a chelated magnesium supplement (e.g., magnesium glycinate)
- Try a topical magnesium gel

6) Mindfully unplug.

Limiting screen time and social media exposure is key to reducing anxiety symptoms. Technology and social media have many positive benefits; but the negative consequences can outweigh the positives especially for those prone to anxiety or perfectionism. There are many reasons why overuse and misuse of social media and technology contribute to many mental health issues. Social media promises illusory connection and validation. Humans are hard-wired

for real connection -- physically, emotionally, and spiritually BEING with others.

True connection requires vulnerability, giving and receiving empathy, and staying present. We mistakenly believe social media and technology is a valid source of this much-needed connection. Many posts on social media (Instagram, Facebook, etc.) are filtered, edited, and limited to someone's best moments -- very much the opposite of vulnerability. Often these moments are contrived or staged much like a photo shoot for an advertisement or movie.

The more we use social media, the harder it becomes to truly connect with others. Every time we participate in an activity, the neural pathways become more ingrained and the activity becomes habitual and automatic.

Humans unconsciously and automatically compare themselves to others. It's human nature and we all do it no matter our age or education. It is often said, "comparison is the thief of joy." We must remember no one is perfect and no two humans or lives are comparable. Unfortunately, social media provides an addictive opportunity to unconsciously compare ourselves and our lives to others; not only celebrities and models, but also our peers.

When someone sees another's post, exemplifying a seemingly perfect and superior life or status, and isn't mindful of the inauthentic nature of social media or that posts may be the highlight reel of one's day, they may feel inclined to create their own post portraying themselves as perfect or superior. Whether this is in the pursuit of more likes or followers or fueled by unconscious but evasive feelings of inadequacy is irrelevant. This ceaseless cycle keeps many social media users feeling small, disconnected, fearful, and anxious.

Ways to Unplug Mindfully:

- Be aware of the dangers of social media and media culture overall and how it affects you.
- Edit who you follow so your exposure to content is positive, grounding, and/or inspirational (example: gardening, art, music, poetry, motivational thought leaders, authors, mental health experts, etc). If this feels too scary, create a second account purely for fostering emotional

intelligence and grounding. See resources page for recommended Instagram accounts to follow.

- Limit your use of screens and technology overall. Set rules for yourself, for example, “I will not scroll through social media when I am around others, I will put my phone away during meals, drives with others, and during family time. I will only check social media once a day.”
- Check your email/texts at designated intervals throughout the day versus constantly checking and responding as they come in.
- Aim to be present with the people you live with and work with and reach out and physically spend time with others. Make plans to spend time with others as we did 10 years ago when there wasn't so much technology helping us communicate.
- Stop taking pictures with the sole intention to post them on social media, and simply be with others in the moment. Be present and work to stay there! This is the first step to the real, fulfilling connection.
- Try taking a walk outside or a drive and leave your smartphone behind.
- Intentionally take a vacation from social media.
- Develop a habit of setting aside 10-15 minutes a day to sit quietly or walk without any external stimulation.
- Introduce a ten-minute period of silence or meditation into each school day for children.
- Have a “quiet room” at our workplaces, where employees are encouraged to spend time during the day without their smartphones.
- Turn all electronics off at least one hour before bedtime.

7) Manage Stress.

Practice meditation, deep breathing, mindful awareness, acupuncture, yoga, or intentionally do less overall. Chronic stress harms our physical and emotional

health in many ways. Anxiety, depression, ADHD symptoms, addictive behaviors as well as gut health and cardiovascular health have all been shown to improve with mindfulness-based strategies for stress-management.

- Yoga (try yogaglo.com or yogavibes.com or your favorite local studio).
- Breathing exercises.
 - Inhale for 4 counts through your nostrils from your belly, hold for 3, exhale for 8 out of the mouth as if you are blowing on a hot spoonful of soup. (5+3=8)
 - Left-nostril breathing. Gently block the right nostril with your thumb or finger of your right hand. Gently breathe in and out through your left nostril for one minute working up to three minutes.
 - Try apps like Breathing Zone and Breathe2Relax, learn various techniques (Wim Hoff) or take a class.
- Grounding Exercises. When you feel overwhelmed and anxious try this simple quiet grounding practice that you can do anywhere in public or private:
 - a. Shift from thoughts or images from the past or future to being in the present moment by sensing your feet on the ground. Literally and immediately focus on the soles of your feet, feeling the ground underneath them. This is called grounding. See if you can notice what the floor is made of. Feel the carpet, or wood, or concrete against the soles of your feet. It is as simple as feeling your feet on the floor. The purpose of this is just to get you out of your head and thoughts for a moment and allow you to connect to the earth. You are here, alive and well-enough! If you want to do more, go to step 2.
 - b. As you sense your feet on the ground, take 5 or more slow, deep breaths using belly breathing (Inhale slowly and deeply through your nostrils into the bottom of your belly. When you've inhaled fully, pause for a moment and then exhale fully through your mouth. Purse your lips and imagine that you are blowing on a hot

spoonful of soup. As you exhale, just let yourself go and imagine your entire body going loose and limp. It should take you twice as long to exhale as it did to inhale.)

If you want to do more, go to step “c.”

- c. Without casting judgment, but radically accepting what you find, try to name each and every core emotion under the anxiety. Don't search up in your head using logical thoughts. Instead, search your emotional world, which is in your core or rest of your body. Literally ask yourself, "Am I sad?" "Am I angry?" "Am I scared?" "Am I disgusted?" "Am I joyous?" (Yes, Joy can cause anxiety!) "Am I excited?" "Am I sexually excited?"
 - d. Name and validate each emotion you find. There can be more than one emotion and often there is when anxiety is very high. These emotions can be in conflict like when you love someone and hate them at the same time. Just validate each emotion and let the opposite feelings exist together.
 - o Practice grounding as much as possible. Soon it will start to make sense that this is the way to stay connected to your core, authentic Self in a very physical way.
- Meditation. Transcendental Meditation has been found to be highly effective in managing stress, healing past traumas, and increasing cardiovascular health, brain function, creativity, productivity, focus, and overall clarity (look up TM.org to find a local teacher). There is a reason why Jerry Seinfeld, Oprah Winfrey, Paul McCartney, Howard Stern, and many others practice TM. The Deliberate Method, created by Hallie Buchanon and Lynn Talley is another effective meditation method (look up www.deliberatmethod.com to learn more). There are also many meditation apps (HeadSpace, Insight Timer, Calm) that are great way for beginners to start as well as visiting a meditation studio in the area (Still Soul Studio, Charleston, SC). Please see the resources page on my website for more.
 - Mammalian Diving Reflex. All mammals have the reflex that when diving into cold water 40 degrees or less, as the water hits the bridge of the

nose and cheeks, respiration and heart rate automatically resets. Splashing cold water on your face, holding a frozen water bottle, or frozen ice pack/face mask on the bridge of the nose and cheeks will bring relief to panic symptoms.

- **Anchoring.** This is a stress-management tool to help stay present in times of difficulty by engaging the five senses: holding an item that is indicative of the present (a necklace or a watch or a ring that turns) or holding a piece of ice; eating a mint, lighting a candle or spraying perfume; playing music or listening to affirmations or empowering words; and looking at a calming picture.
- **Mindful Awareness.** This is an evidenced-based practice that can be taught during your counseling sessions and allows for the ability to recognize distorted thinking and change the emotional response. The definition of mindful awareness is the self-regulation of attention in the present moment that allows for an increased recognition of mental events in an open and non-judgmental fashion. Mindfulness allows us to become aware of the causes impinging on us, aware of the way things manipulate us. The manipulation lies in the space where feelings can give rise to behavior. This is the space where mindfulness can critically intervene (Wright, 2017).
- **Ways to integrate mindfulness into your lives and your children's can include setting aside a few minutes each day to practice with your children. Pay close attention to breathing, body sensations, thoughts, and emotions with kindness and curiosity. Here are some ideas:**

Centering- Use all five senses and name three things you see, hear, feel, taste, smell and describe.

Go on a Listening Walk- where you notice and talk about what you hear and what those sounds remind you of.

In the car, play I spy- which keeps children in the moment and noticing their surroundings.

Apps- there are several apps and videos (see resources page on my website) that promote mindfulness and meditation practices. If you or your child is prone to anxiety, implementing these steps is crucial to reduce anxiety and ultimately train their developing brains on new ways to respond to perceived stressors.

Ways to stay calm in the moment: attune to yourself, where do you feel stress in your body? Your shoulders? Forehead? Is your heart rate increasing? Can you ground yourself and get out of your head? Deep breaths, pause, tactile calming strategies, imagine the emotional waves under you; intense emotions usually last about 90 seconds and fade. Use positive self-talk, "I allow myself to slow down. I slow down. I am ok in this moment. I am capable, competent, and I can handle anything that comes my way." Come up with a mantra or statement to say to yourself when you and your child are struggling, "What is she really trying to tell me right now with this behavior? What is underneath the water (in the iceberg analogy? She is working out a developmental skill right now that she has yet to master. To her, this is a big deal."

If you need to, remove yourself from the situation, say something like this to model emotional intelligence: "I need a breather (or a calm-down or break)." Or "I need to take a second here to figure this out. Let's talk about this in in about ten minutes." This is ok and tells your child that you are not perfect and everyone needs time to regroup and center themselves in certain situations. This communicates to your child that this is healthy and ok to do when stressed. When you feel calm, you can come back to the situation and respond.

- **Mindful Self-Compassion Practice.** This is an evidenced-based treatment for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, addiction, and many other debilitating issues. Learning more compassion and adaptive ways to speak and respond to yourself and others during times of struggle is healing. This can be taught and practiced during your therapy sessions. Self-compassion is different than self-esteem, which is evaluative and

conditional. Self-compassion is learning how to give yourself what you have always needed, but may not have received throughout your life, in order to thrive and be well. Imagine the differences in how you speak to yourself and how you speak to a close friend in times of struggle.

- Gratitude practice. This is another evidenced-based practice to treat depression and anxiety and can be taught and practiced during therapy sessions. Try Sean Anchor's Happiness Habits. Studies show that after 21 days, people's brains begin to retain a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative but for the positive first, making them much happier. So, each day for 21 days:
 - Recall three things you are grateful for, new ones each day.
 - Journal about one meaningful experience you had over the last 24 hours allows your brain to relive it.
 - Do one random act of kindness. Examples could be buying the next person in line a tea, sending a positive and thankful email or card, volunteering, or sharing your appreciation to someone.
 - Exercise teaches your brain that your behavior matters and it helps you solidify the connection between your actions and their rewards. It's also a great way to increase focus.
 - Meditate. We find that meditation allows your brain to get over the "cultural ADHD symptoms" that we've been creating by trying to do multiple things at once.
- Acupuncture.
- Do Less – We're all chronically busy, overscheduled, under-slept, stressed out and burned out. What is really important? Reflect on priorities and re-evaluate what you think you have to complete. Sometimes, this is the best stress-management strategy you can do! Allow yourself time with absolutely NOTHING planned or intended, literally piddle, do nothing. Go to bed early. (When you reduce your caffeine intake, you will want to!) Devote weekends to being in nature, reading a book, spending time creating art or playing, visiting with family or friends, cooking, taking a bath, etc. Consider making

countercultural career and lifestyle choices. If you are able, take on less responsibility - even if this means earning less money, and/or living on less. Emotional health trumps all else. What does a luxury car or home matter when you are too anxious or depressed to enjoy it?

8) Altruism/Service.

Multiple studies, including those that control for prior health factors, suggest that those who volunteer or contribute to others are psychologically happier and healthier. During a family meeting, ask each family member to write down what they value and what matters to them in order to identify an altruistic project for the family or the individual? Altruism is said to reduce egocentricity, greed, jealousy, while enhancing qualities of joy, generosity, and love. Can't ask for ask more!

9) Time in Nature.

Being outside in nature and breathing fresh air is vital to our emotional and physical health; studies show that immersion in natural environments appears to reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and ADHD.

10) Creativity.

Being creative in any way shape or form is essential to emotional health. Being creative can be a sort of meditation or flow as some call it. Creativity does not have to look like painting a Picasso piece, it can be any type of creation, coming up with a new way of doing a challenging work project, creating a yoga posture sequence, or even building a snow-cone stand in your neighborhood. Allowing ourselves the time and space to create releases the stress valve in our lives.

11) Rest and Play.

Play (aka fun) is described as time spent without purpose. Other characteristics include not wanting the time to end, losing track of time, lack of self-consciousness, and does not involve competition. According to Brené Brown, rest and play are vitally important to our emotional health and at the core of creativity and innovation. Research indicates play is essential to healthy human development. For some of us, play feels very scary as we think we should be using every last moment being productive- whether that means laundry, work, writing thank you notes, or taking our children to soccer practice. Play is unique to each of us, it can look like scrapbooking, reading, play swimming, tag, watching your favorite show, crossword puzzles, cooking, gardening, sitting on the beach or on your deck, etc. During a family meeting, ask everyone what their own idea of what “play/fun” is for each member, then come up with play ideas for your family as a whole.

As parents, we must protect unscheduled unproductive downtime for both ourselves and allow our children to play, let loose, piddle-without anything to “show for it.” If we watch young children and let them roam, they will create glorious bakeries and grand castles within their bedrooms. I know my children do. Brené Brown calls this “white space or piddling.” This time give us space to reflect, create, and recharge. It’s essential and it is important to schedule this into your day.