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“Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health conditions in the UK - one in five people report feeling anxious a lot or all of the time; and more than 45 million working days have been lost due to anxiety (combined with depression and stress) in the past three years,” says Nicky Lidbetter, CEO of Anxiety UK. What helps?

Anxiety can be treated with medication, but experts agree that three other approaches may also be effective.

Professor of Psychiatry, Hans-Peter Volz says “Doctors can be quick to medicate people who are experiencing emotional distress, without exploring alternative options. It is important that we look at alternative treatments to prescription drugs for anxiety such as **talking therapies, mindfulness, and traditional herbal remedies**.”

Lavender – alleviating the anxiety

Evidence suggests that lavender [4] (when swallowed as a specially-prepared capsule) may be as effective as lorazepam in ameliorating generalised and persistent anxiety: it’s thought to boost levels of calming brain chemicals. Lavender has no sedative effects and no potential for drug abuse, making it a safe alternative.

Whether simply smelling lavender *[5]* alleviates anxiety remains to be seen. Researchers at Kagoshima University in Japan found that the aroma seemed to help mice relax, allowing them to explore brightly lit and unfamiliar territory; mice not exposed to lavender preferred to hide in the dark, presumably because they were more anxious.

We are though men not mice; findings from animal studies don’t always apply to humans.

Talking therapies – approaching anxiety with a kind and courageous attitude.

“Cognitive behavioural therapy [6] (CBT) teaches us to become aware of the thoughts and body sensations that make up our anxious experience,” explains psychologist Dr Jennifer Brickman.

“It takes courage and can feel counter-intuitive, but when we approach anxious thoughts and body sensations (tension in muscles, knot in the stomach) with curiosity and kindness – rather than trying to fight them - we give anxiety less power.”

“CBT also encourages us to experiment with letting go of some of the behaviours that keep anxiety going. One such behaviour is worrying: repeatedly chewing over what might happen. This is a very common way of responding to the discomfort of uncertainty. We worry for many reasons, convinced that worry prepares us for the worst, but it just serves to fuel the anxiety as we agonise over all the possible ‘what ifs’. One well used CBT technique to help us let worry go, is to notice worry but delay engaging with it until a permitted ‘worry hour’ later in the day.”

Mindfulness – attending to the present

“Mindfulness meditation [7] can be an excellent way of returning our anxious mind back to the present. The object of our focus may be the sensations in our body as we sit or walk or breathe or it may be some external stimuli such as sound or an object.”

"When the mind wanders from the object of focus with worrying thoughts (as it will), our ‘mental muscles’ flex as we practise gently but firmly pulling our thoughts back to the present. Mindfulness helps us see what is here in the present moment without the unhelpful judgements and fears that can otherwise infuse our experience.”

In this age of anxiety, it’s worth trying a multi-pronged approach to treatment.

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