



Looking After Anxiety

by Nadia Marshall

Nadia Marshall shares her experience with Anxiety....

Anxiety is a familiar friend of mine. The minute I become conscious each morning, Anxiety comes to visit and starts scanning through every facet of my life, looking for something to fix or worry about. When it finds something it holds on tight and freaks out. My heart starts to pound, my chest and shoulders tighten, my breathing gets shallower, I get hot and my head starts to ache. This continues until Anxiety has generated enough nervous energy in my body to get me out of bed and get active; to start 'fixing' my incredibly important problems. This nervous, panicked energy is the energy I run on all day long.... or at least I used to.

I've been anxious for so long that for most of my life I didn't even know it – I thought I was pretty normal (albeit a little shy). I guess my Anxiety hasn't been too externally obvious and has certainly never stopped me from achieving things. Quite the opposite. I am a high-functioning, over-achieving Anxiety addict. And I'm no scaredy-cat either. I face my fears whenever I can - I run my own business, have a tattoo, surf, have a motorbike license, have gone diving with sharks (no cage), occasionally speak in public and even do karaoke... sober! I'm like a duck – gliding smoothly on the surface, elegantly handling all that life has to throw at me (more or less)..... all the while kicking madly under the surface! It wasn't until I was 27 that somebody really noticed my Anxiety. My Naturopath saw it in my iris in the form of adrenal over-drive, gave it a name, helped me become aware of how it felt and told me about the harmful effects it was having on my body. Amazing!

But with this awareness, came Aversion. As soon as I was conscious of Anxiety and knew it wasn't 'good' for me, I wanted to get rid of it. For a while there,

when Anxiety scanned my mind for problems each morning, Anxiety itself became the biggest problem I wanted to fix! I was given potions for my adrenals and the odd acupuncture session and bought a truck-load of self-help books but without any idea of how to skilfully relate to the Anxiety itself, it just got worse....

In my intuitive wisdom, I made a few good decisions to try and chill out my now uncomfortable, increasingly insistent companion. First, I cut back my hours at work and I moved to the country. I started regular Yoga classes and began studying Ayurveda. Yoga helped enormously so I got serious about it, going to 6am classes several times a week for a few years with an intense teacher. I was completely hooked and in my enthusiasm to share it with others I began a full-on teacher training program. Unfortunately, I over-committed and thrashed myself. And so I became anxious about Yoga!

Through my studies of Ayurveda I began to understand why I was inclined to anxiety in the first place; what put me out of balance and how to bring myself back into balance through food and lifestyle approaches. But after a few years my Ayurvedic guidelines turned into Ayurvedic rules and I followed them with intensity. Following Ayurveda strictly in the Western world can be an anxious affair. And so Ayurveda became something to get a little anxious about too!

Throughout my life I've played little mind games to try and consol myself about my Anxiety saying, 'if I can just finish my course I'll stop being anxious'... 'if I can just quit my corporate job, I'll stop being anxious'..... 'if I can just get through this big event, I will stop feeling anxious'. You might be familiar with this little trick? But one day I realised I'd been playing this game for years. Yes I felt a little more

anxious when there was something big on, but even when there was very little on, Anxiety was still there! This was partly because it is a tendency of my constitution but mainly because it had become a deeply engrained habit.

Luckily in the final years of my Ayurvedic studies, I met Doko, my Buddhist Teacher... and everything began to change. After studying and living with him for many years I now understand why my efforts to get rid of Anxiety never worked. Although I had made some good decisions, the main problem was my quality of approach. I approached my Anxiety with Aversion and Intensity. If I could have, I would have surgically removed it and thrown it away like a cancer, such was my aversion. But now I understand that Anxiety is a part of me. It is a part of all of us. I cannot get rid of it. Ever. All I can do is change my relationship with it. To do that, I needed to meet with it in a different way and get to know it a little better. And to do that, I needed to turn down the intensity of my efforts a few notches....

Doko teaches a wonderful model of the mind that helps enormously with this meeting. Here is my simple interpretation of it! Imagine your subconscious mind as a fertile field full of seeds. There are the seeds of Anxiety, Fear, Anger, Hatred, Aversion, Judgement, Jealousy, but also the seeds of Peace, Contentment, Joy, Happiness, Relaxation, Fun, Love and so on. We all have all of these seeds in our mind. They are universal. Anxiety is not 'mine' or 'yours' it is just Anxiety. Within this subconscious field, the seeds that we water regularly grow stronger or bolder and move into our consciousness where we experience them as an emotion, feeling or thought. Those we don't water so much, remain weaker or shy and need to be invited in.... but they are all still there, present within us all of the time. If we quieten down enough we can even begin to sense them.

Throughout my life the seed of Anxiety has been well watered and as a result, has a lot of energy behind it. So, in most situations (especially stressful ones), Anxiety is the first seed to come forward into consciousness. What I realise now is that it isn't evil or harmful. It has good intentions. It wants to help me stay safe, to help me solve problems and provide me with the (nervous) energy to do so. By desperately wanting to get rid of it I was increasing its energy and also creating a 'seed cluster'. Rather than just Anxiety coming to visit, a bunch of other seeds started coming along for the ride including the seeds of Aversion, Intensity, Fear, Frustration, Judgement, Over-Sensitivity, Defensiveness and Desire For Control to name a few....

But just because the seed of Anxiety has good intentions, doesn't mean it feels good or that I want it to be my default response to all situations. So I have learnt how to reduce its energy. And it is such a simple idea! To decrease the habit energy of mental seeds, you just need to 'touch' them. Like any vibrating, moving object, this will slow them down and reduce their strength, or make them less bold if you like. To touch a seed you need to acknowledge its presence in a warm, friendly, accepting way. You can also invite some other more wholesome, helpful seeds into consciousness to take care of the seed or seed cluster; the most important ones being Mindfulness, Warmth, Patience and Precision.

So how do I look after my good friend Anxiety now? When I wake-up in the morning and feel the presence of Anxiety, I take my attention away from scanning the list of things to fix and point it right at Anxiety instead. I say, 'Good morning Anxiety, how are you today?'. Then I do the following meditation:

- 1) I close my eyes and visualise Anxiety as a seed... as a shiny round sphere hovering in a wide open space in front of me
- 2) I breath in deeply into my belly and say 'I RECOGNISE the seed of Anxiety'
- 3) I breath out completely and say 'I ACCEPT the seed of Anxiety'
- 4) I then repeat this process for about 5-10minutes.

This usually pacifies Anxiety enough for me to relax and get up in a non-panicked state. If it doesn't, I think to myself... 'Okay, I have to care for Anxiety in other ways today.' I then get out of bed and carry out my Ayurvedic practices to pacify Anxiety. But rather than doing them with intensity and aversion, I do them with a sense of care and kindness for Anxiety, for myself. This is has been the critical shift.....

From an Ayurvedic perspective, Anxiety is directly related to aggravated Vata or the aggravated Air/Ether elements in the body. The main qualities of Vata (and therefore Anxiety) are Cold, Dry, Mobile and Irregular. So to pacify it, you need to cultivate the OPPOSITE qualities in your food and life – Warmth, Oiliness, Stillness and Regularity. Simple. In my experience, the most important ways to care for Anxiety are as follows:

Cultivate Warmth

Stay physically warm. So many people (especially women) get this wrong. Wear enough clothes. Even warm clothes can be fashionable! Get good heating in your house, especially your bathroom. Eat more warm, cooked food and fewer salads (if you want to lose weight, try soups instead of salads). Drink warm drinks and avoid cold ones. Do a little warming exercise everyday to keep your blood moving. But don't get too intense about it or you'll aggravate your Vata! Most importantly, treat yourself (and all of your mental seeds) with a little more warmth and kindness. Also... don't forget to have fun. 'Warmth therapy' in the form of a lovely book, good company or a funny movie/series helps to create a warm environment in your mind that, in turn, helps to pacify Vata and transform Anxiety!

Cultivate Oiliness

This may seem a little strange but it is what Ayurveda is best known for – the relationship between aggravated Vata in the mind... and WARM OIL... and lots of it! Vata is cold and dry so warm oil is the best antidote. It can also nourish depleted nervous systems. Getting regular Ayurvedic massage or Shirodharas (warm medicated oil poured on the forehead)... or massaging yourself at home with warm oil before a warm shower is very therapeutic if you suffer from anxiety. So is using oil in your food. Always include a

generous portion of healthy oils in your cooking – like ghee (ghee nourishes the nervous system and Ojas too), sunflower oil, olive oil, sesame or coconut oil. And try to avoid overly dry foods like salads, crackers and processed cereals. Vata (and Anxiety) will thank you for it.

Cultivate Stillness

Vata is also aggravated by excessive mobility. Another way of saying this is... rushing all the time makes you anxious. So, you need to mindfully and deliberately slow yourself down. In every way possible. Stop speaking so quickly. Stop moving so quickly. Stop multi-tasking. Start mono-tasking. Do one thing at a time and keep doing it until you have finished the task. This will pacify your Vata but it will also tick a few things off of your To Do List – which will directly decrease Anxiety. It will make you more efficient and effective. Stop being late all the time. This makes you rush. Arrange to leave early, especially if you have a long commute. And... try stopping moving altogether once in a while. Some people call this rest. For about 15mins every afternoon try saying 'good afternoon anxiety, would you like a cup of tea!.. and then sit down and drink your afternoon tea... and do nothing else. Don't jump up to make a call or check your email. Just sit, rest, smile and relax.

Next, consider your commitments. If you have a tendency to over-commit to things because you like to be super-human... STOP. Anxiety doesn't need any more things on the to do list. Prioritise. Choose the things that are really important to you and let some of the other things go. The world won't fall apart if you don't personally do everything! Also, try feeling into the simple things that make you anxious and attend to them first each day. For me, it's a messy house, a full inbox and unpaid bills so I look after these first, quickly... so my mind is more relaxed to contend with the bigger stuff. And don't forget that if you need to... you can always ask for help. (A big hint for the ladies here - you need to ask. He is unlikely to work it out on his own, no matter how much you wish it so.)

Cultivate Regularity

No, this is not about bowel movements (although they'll get regular too, if you cultivate this quality!). This is about creating a daily routine of some description that works really well with your lifestyle. The important elements include – getting up and going to bed and eating your meals at a similar time each day. Please note that if you're an early riser, 2am-6am is a Vata time of the day so if your Vata is aggravated, Anxiety will be more active at this time than any other. The best thing to do is not stay in bed for too long after waking... get up and get active, with warmth and mindfulness. Eating breaky, lunch and dinner at a regular time each day is particularly important. It will help to pacify Vata (and Anxiety) but it will also improve your physical and mental Digestion (Agni) and intelligence so that you have the capacity to make better decisions and to feel into the subtleties of your mind.

Some of the best advice I ever received from an Ayurvedic Practitioner was the importance of creating a little stability in life. I mention it here because it relates to routine. If your family situation, relationships, work, career, living situation and spiritual seeking are all up in the air, your Vata will be aggravated. You need at least one 'anchor' to keep you stable. So commit to one thing; be it a place to live, a field of study, a good relationship or a good teacher/practitioner. Take a leap of faith, even if you're not 100% sure (because you'll never be entirely sure when your Vata is aggravated!). In my experience, this one anchor can stop aimless drifting and help the other pillars of life fall into place, in time...

And that's it! Just four qualities to remember and try to cultivate. So, back to my experience with all this stuff.

After working with these ideas and practices for many years (as well as some additional help in the form of awesome Ayurvedic herbs and treatments), how do I feel? What's changed? Well, I still wake up every morning and feel the presence of Anxiety. The difference now is, I know how to relate to and care for it in a way that calms it down and helps it recede back into subconsciousness. It rarely hangs around all day and I'm no longer fueled entirely by its energy. More often than not, I am fueled by the energy of

Relaxation or Excitement instead... which I must say feels A LOT better... and lasts a lot longer. Plus, I don't spend my energy as quickly as I used to!

I still have a To Do List and I still get things done – but I try to do them one at a time and am generally more efficiently... so I have more time to relax. I still get anxious when there are big events coming up or stressful situations, but I can see Anxiety coming, as if in slow motion... and I see the other seeds coming with it. So I can recognise Frustration, Fear and my desire for Control... and I can smile at them too. I don't want to get rid of them any more. I know they're just trying to help and I can respond to them better as well. Maybe not at first, but I certainly 'recover' a lot faster than I used to.

Overall, I feel much more peaceful, relaxed, warm and free. I feel like a much nicer, easier person inside. Not so uptight, sensitive and tense. I don't know about anybody else, but I certainly like hanging out with myself much more these days.... and the best news is, THERE IS SO MUCH LESS TO FIX!!

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