

Anxiety and stress management: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

Medicine is known to be an anxiety-provoking occupation. It is not unusual for doctors to go to bed fretting about patients. Anxiety is absolutely expected when you enter a new life as a foundation doctor – and not just anxiety about clinical judgment and decision-making. There are other pressures such as dealing with patients, meeting new colleagues, making up your portfolio, preparing for postgraduate examinations, attending interviews and so on. To cope with all this at the same time can be stressful. However, it is all part of life. You will have to face it, learn how to deal with it, and eventually get over it.

Cavemen used to worry that they were about to be gobbled up by wild animals or would starve to death if they could not find food. In many ways, we have not moved on from those primitive fears.

Just imagine yourself more than a couple of decades ago, when you were learning to walk: you were probably apprehensive. You might, if a baby's cognition were sophisticated enough, have wondered if you would ever be able to walk, and yet look where you stand now. So, anxiety is important to progress in life. However, you should not get worried about something that is part of life, although it is absolutely possible and understandable when you have so much to do.

Most importantly, do not let your anxiety become stress. There is a very thin line between the two, and it is easy to get stressed. Anxiety is designed to gear you up for doing something – the fight or flight mechanism. However, if you are lying awake and not doing anything about

it, it will just prey on your mind without serving any useful purpose. On the other hand, to ring the ward when you are off duty or even to get out of bed and go back to check on a patient yourself is not helpful. If the patient is fine, you will be temporarily reassured, but it is now embedded in your brain that you need to know that nothing is wrong. This is called safety-seeking behaviour (Fennell, 1999). If you let it get out of hand, it can become obsessive-compulsive.

During the anxiety state, you are still in a positively switched-on mode, trying to find a way out in the midst of adverse flow. This can be constructive, so it is essential in life. In contrast, stress has a negative effect on individual performance, progress, health and the working environment. For instance, you might become hypertensive at a younger age when you are supposed to be at the peak of life and able to perform at your best. Sickness absence may be required, with financial and other implications.

A staff grade doctor in accident and emergency once said that everyone is scared, but some people are happier to be so than others. A consultant in occupational health said that her specialty is ideal for those who are frightened of clinical medicine. Some doctors are better than others at covering up how they really feel.

Identifying the cause

What exactly is worrying you? It may not be what you think. Write down:

- The date and time
- What you think is worrying you
- How severe it is
- Surrounding associated factors
- How you feel (including when you feel better)
- What you are doing at the time
- What you are planning to do
- What is coming up during the days or months ahead.

Try to maintain the diary over a period of time, perhaps a month, writing something every day if you can. By the end of the month, open your diary and read from the beginning. Examine what you have writ-

ten and identify a pattern. There may be a diurnal variation. Analyse whether you are anxious or stressed.

You may be surprised to find that factors that caused distress remain, but the stress you felt a month ago has disappeared. In fact, your capacity to deal with the problem may have improved a great deal and you no longer are feeling so stressed about it. However, new factors could have arisen, although that is part and parcel of life. Again, you are like a toddler who was wondering if they could ever walk, yet can run now. This reminds us how easy the task has become just by trying to face the problem.

You may find that:

- 'If it's not one thing, it's another'
- Every time something worries you, you try to sort out that particular thing and are sure you will be happy after that
- There is a recurring pattern and something else will come along to take the place of what was previously bothering you.

You may find you feel worse if there is something scheduled the next day, such as a consultant ward round. Many doctors dread impending night shifts or weekends on duty and feel that they will not be able to relax until these are out of the way. However, if you spend your whole life worried like this, you will not gain any fulfilment. You may find that you feel better once you are actually at work and feeling you can do something. Paradoxically, you may feel worse when you are off duty. You may feel under pressure to relax, and you may need a structure for your leisure time. What are the chances that what you are dreading will actually happen? Look back over something that has now resolved. Was your anxiety justified?

Worrying can be irrational and out of proportion to the severity of the threat. You may fear the worst outcome. For instance, when your supervisor says they want a word, you assume you have made a terrible mistake and will be forced to leave and give up medicine. You may find that something small feels as catastrophic as

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something big. It is often true what people say, that it is the little things in life that cause the most problems. Facing potential unemployment in a few months' time may be less of a worry than mislaying your stethoscope and being unable to get on with your work. Even if you have got nothing major to worry about, you may wonder when the next problem will come along. You may start worrying about silly little things, which prey on your mind till they are sorted out. Sometimes, if you have got something major to fret about, it almost makes you feel better, because it is a legitimate problem.

Solving the problem

Although it is easy to say: face and fight the threat, there may be a point in life when you really cannot do it any more. In that case, you have to find ways to overcome stress. From the diary, having identified the cause, discuss it with friends and colleagues to see what methods they may have used to overcome such problems. They may have gone through similar experiences at some stage in their lives.

It is always good to have a mentor with whom you can discuss your problems openly. This should be someone you feel comfortable with and have faith and confidence that they will give you good advice.

If, for instance, it is about a clinical scenario, then talking to seniors, reading texts or reviewing literature can give you confidence and satisfaction. Equally, when preparing for your portfolio, interviews or examinations, it is important to be open and ask others for help.

When dealing with colleagues and trying to solve conflicting issues, it might be worthwhile seeking a senior's opinion. Then you can discuss it with a fair mind rather than keeping it to yourself and feeling down about it and having it affect your life.

Set small goals in life and find ways to achieve them. Try and find time to relax, be happy and enjoy your hobbies or extra-curricular activities. Relaxation can be achieved from listening to music, meditation, shopping, meeting people, travelling and much more. Make sure you take your holidays after a long period of hard work and just chill out. Do not underestimate the refreshing value of annual leave or exercise. You may feel that they are not solving the underlying problem, but they can give you a different perspective and put you in a better frame of mind to tackle it. If you see a counsellor who teaches you relaxation rather than cognitive techniques, do not dismiss it out of hand.

The grass often seems greener on the other side of the fence, and you may think everything will be all right once you get

onto a desired specialist training path, become a consultant and so on. There are difficulties in all aspects of life, and the best thing is to get on and make the most of it.

Ultimately, you may need to go to an occupational health specialist or your GP to get advice and rule out something more serious, such as depression. You may be able to get counselling through an employee assistance scheme. Your organization may run stress management workshops.

Conclusions

A certain amount of anxiety is normal, but there is a fine line between normal anxiety and dysfunctional stress. If this is becoming a problem, keep an analytical diary and pick out recurring patterns. Make the most of your time off and try to relax and enjoy yourself. Do not be afraid to seek help, whether you are mildly anxious or on the verge of burn-out. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine

Fennell M (1999) *Overcoming low self-esteem. A self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques.* Robinson, London

KEY POINTS

- Anxiety is normal in medicine.
- Write down exactly what it is that is worrying you to determine if there is a pattern – it may not be what you think.
- Try to maintain a good work–life balance to prevent stress.
- There are many sources of help, including educational supervisors, friends, family or your GP.
- Learn to recognize when you are becoming stressed rather than merely anxious.