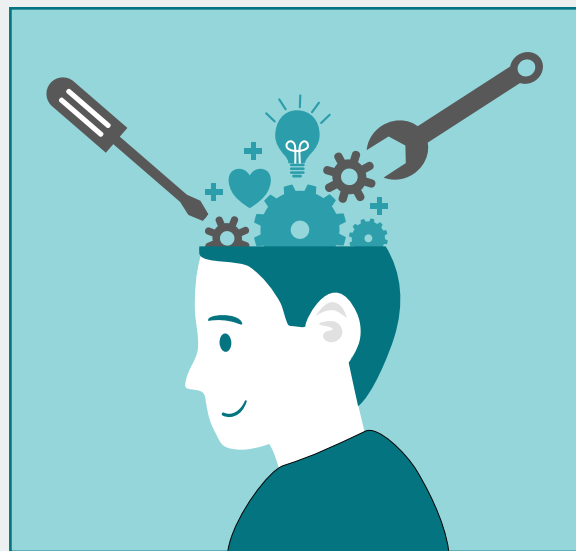




FILL YOUR TOOLBOX

Self-care is important when it comes to stress, anxiety and depression

By **Rebecca Fortner**



Nearly 20% of the adult population is affected by anxiety disorders, making it the most common mental illness in the U.S.

Dr. Debra Kissen, CEO of Light On Anxiety CBT Treatment Center and a specialist in cognitive behavior therapy, says the pandemic increased feelings of stress, anxiety and depression for many, but it also brought awareness to the idea that “it’s hard to be human.”

“It’s really opened things up,” says Kissen, who is also co-chair of the public education committee for the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. “I think it was building up for so long. I think there is a little more acceptance.”

It is important to know when to seek professional help, but also to have knowledge about self-care strategies we can use on our own.

Emotions on a continuum

There are differences among stress, anxiety and depression, and it’s important to note that the feelings are normal, Kissen says.

Stress is a physiological state, in which we feel “revved up, overcharged,” she explains. It is the opposite of rest. We have tension in our body and are “ready for action.”

Anxiety, Kissen says, “has some future connotation.”

Depression is feeling low-energy, uninspired, hopeless — the opposite of feeling engaged and activated.

“All of these things are different from disorders,” she says. “A little bit of anxiety, worry can be okay, a little bit of stress. We need these negative emotions. It’s all on a continuum, even if they’re uncomfortable.”

Dr. Rachel Goldman, a psychologist and clinical assistant professor in psychiatry in the NYU School of Medicine, says we can focus on what is in our control.

“There will always be things out of our control,” Goldman adds. “But there are also always things in our control, which are our responses to situations, how we manage our stress and our own behaviors.”

Fill your toolbox

Goldman says our “toolbox” should include behaviors such as eating healthy foods, staying active and hydrated and getting enough sleep.

“Many people don’t realize how our health behaviors impact

our mental well-being,” she says. “It’s all related. I recommend that we start with those basic health behaviors and focus on fueling our bodies with food that feels good, staying hydrated, moving our bodies, taking time out for ourselves and using stress management tools.”

One thing to avoid — for ourselves and others — is toxic positivity. This downplays what is actually happening and tells us to ignore our feelings and “just be happy,” no matter what we may be experiencing.

“Having a positive outlook can of course be good for our mental well-being, but life isn’t always positive, and ignoring those other emotions isn’t helpful,” Goldman says, and adds that toxic positivity may lead someone to not seek help when needed.

We can help ourselves and each other by knowing we are not alone.

“We are in this together and even though we aren’t all experiencing the same exact thing, we are all going through something,” she adds.

Not making assumptions and truly listening to others are ways to provide support. We can ask others how best to support them, knowing that everyone is different and may need different support at different times.

“Reach out to remind someone they matter and that you are here for them,” Goldman says. “We can also avoid toxic positivity and accept what someone tells us. If they say they are sad, hear them, and acknowledge what they are saying. Validate their feelings.”

When to seek professional help

But if and when the negative feelings increase in frequency, impair our ability to function and get in the way of enjoying life, “the more it can become a disorder,” Kissen explains.

Many people are able to “white-knuckle it” and continue to engage in healthy behaviors.

“Sometimes you can find your way to do these healthy things,” she adds. “Sometimes we can’t do everything on our own.”

Although anxiety disorders are highly treatable, fewer than 40% of those affected receive treatment, according to the ADAA. Kissen suggests starting with your primary care physician.

“They’re really great at the front lines of mental health,” she says. “Hopefully there’s more of an open dialogue. There’s a lot less pretending.”