

Anxiety: Contributing Factors and Possible Solutions



By Dr. Michael E. Portman

We live in an increasingly anxious age. There are an abundance of self-help books and articles, in both professional journals and newspapers, on the topic of anxiety and related conditions. Despite this, some would argue in response to the claim that the 21st century is seeing more anxiety than ever, that all ages have their own unique anxieties and stressors. There may be some truth to this assertion, but having worked in the mental health field as an anxiety specialist for close to 20 years, I submit that anxiety is now considered the most prevalent diagnosis seen in primary care and mental health clinics.

The purpose of this article is twofold: 1) to highlight the contributing factors that have led to the rise of anxiety conditions that set our current times apart in relation to other periods in history and 2) to offer some strategies to decrease the anxieties in our lives in order to optimize our true potential.

One of the biggest culprits that most professionals, and the general public, point to as the leading cause of anxiety is **social media** and, in particular, the internet. Many of us spend our lives on cell phones, iPads and computers preoccupied with Facebook, Google, Instagram, texting, WhatsApp and email. This creates a culture of “hyper-individualism,” where communication is impersonal, quick and not deep or engaging. Walk into any restaurant or coffee shop and one can find that people are consumed by mobile devices. Without passing judgment, even in synagogues cell phone use during prayers is commonplace. This rampant overuse of technology has toxic effects on anxiety. Another contributing factor is our **fast-paced society**. It appears, at least on the surface, the hurried and harried lifestyles

we lead do not lend themselves to what one great philosopher referred to as a “culture of leisure.” What he meant is taking a break from the chaos of being busy without purpose and enjoying such pursuits as meaningful discourse and capturing the moments of life. We have become so task-centered, we find little time to decompress and enjoy one another and the larger world around us. Another factor is that the **pursuit of a livelihood** has turned into a form of worship. We are living in highly affluent times, yet means/money without meaning will neither help us find balance or peace of mind. Viktor Frankl in his outstanding book “Man’s Search for Meaning” reminds us that we are meaning-oriented beings and we need to tap into our rich spiritual lives. Last but not least, and this list is by no means exhaustive, is the **breakdown of our most cherished social networks**: family, friends and community. With the rise in divorce, and many having challenges even finding a mate or communal infrastructure to garner support, family members often not living in the same country and friendships being devalued in place of online relationships, ultimately loneliness and feelings of alienation can turn to anxiety.

Since I am a cautious optimist by nature, it is important to first identify a challenge and then offer some possible means to help resolve it. I have listed below a few ways to combat these sources of anxiety. My next article will, ideally, address different types of anxiety (i.e., generalized anxiety

disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety disorder) in more detail and ways to tackle them:

1) Less time spent preoccupied with social media in all its manifestations.

2) Slowing down and being more mindful of the present moment. In addition, to be busy with purpose.

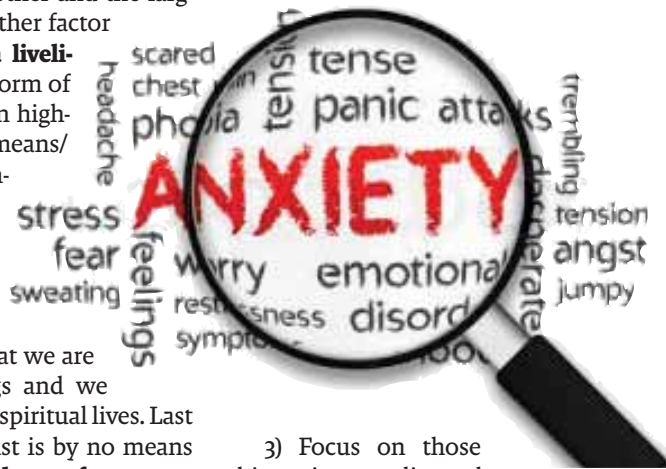
3) Focus on those things in our lives that bring meaning and better balance work and leisure time.

4) Connect “in person” with friends, family and look to other social support systems (i.e., rabbis, mental health professionals if necessary) to offset loneliness, feelings of alienation, stress and anxiety. Help others less fortunate and in need.

5) Self-care, which includes exercise, good sleep hygiene, balanced diet, psychotherapy and medication if needed.

Anxiety is clearly a serious individual and societal problem that takes a huge toll on all of us. The road may seem bleak at times for those in the grips of anxiety. Yet there is hope. Anxiety, both milder and more severe types, can be adequately addressed and resolved with patience, fortitude, resilience and treatment if required. It demands our best personal and collective efforts to move from these more restless times to calmer ones.

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