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In her book, *On Edge: a Journey Through Anxiety*, health and science reporter Andrea Petersen recounts her lifelong struggle with the mental health disorder, and how she's learned to manage it. Here, Petersen explains to Health how she finally got the right diagnosis, at age 20. I can point to the exact, pivotal moment when anxiety became a serious problem for me. It was a normal day in December and I was a college student, registering for classes for the following semester. I was in college before the Internet existed and so I had to go into the basement of this old campus building to choose my courses. I remember checking out sheets of paper taped to a cinder block wall and feeling fine. Sure, I was tired from studying late into the night and it was becoming chilly outside, but I was okay. And then, a second later, I wasn't. My heart started to race, I broke out into a sweat, and I started breathing rapidly, unable to catch my breath. All of a sudden, the words on the wall before me started to warp. There were gray blotches in front of my eyes and I was gripped with this overwhelming terror that I was going to die because something in my body had suddenly gone way wrong. What was happening, I now know, was a panic attack. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, panic attacks typically peak 10 minutes after they begin.¹ But my first panic attack experience ushered in about a month where I felt terrified—the racing heart, the shortness of breath—pretty constantly. The terror immobilized me so much so that I landed on my parents' sofa and hardly got up for a four-week period. When I did get up, it was so my parents could take me to a doctor who checked me out, took some blood tests, and did an electrocardiogram or EKG, a test that records the heart's electrical activity and is used to diagnose heart conditions.² I was diagnosed with mitral valve prolapse, which is an anomaly of the heart valve, and a generally benign disease.³ That was the end of that line of exploration. I took incompletes in my classes that semester because I was in no shape to take my finals. When the new term started, I went back to school. I spent the whole year on a medical odyssey, trying to figure out what was going on with me. Things got fairly better: I got off the sofa, I was able to take a couple of classes, but I was very impaired. Fear was my baseline and I was tired all the time—when your body is constantly on high alert, it's exhausting. My mom would periodically drive up and we would go to various specialists. Because my anxiety was a whole-body illness, I saw a specialist for every part of my body I felt symptoms in. A cardiologist checked out my heart, and a neurologist scanned my brain. Doctors speculated about what was wrong with me—saying it might be multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disease where your immune system attacks the protective covering of nerve cells⁴; Epstein-Barr virus, an incredibly common virus that typically does not cause long-term symptoms⁵; or myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS), a poorly understood health condition that causes unrelenting fatigue⁶—but never formally diagnosed me. Whenever an intense panic attack occurred, I ended up in the emergency room, but left every time without a diagnosis. A year later, I was desperate. I couldn't see how I could live like this anymore, or how doctors could possibly help me. After seeing another neurologist, who sent me to a psychiatrist, I hit my breaking point. "I'm not leaving your office until you help me," I told her. "I can't keep going like this." She said that she could prescribe me Prozac, an antidepressant that had been released three years prior, or she could send me to the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at the University of Michigan hospital. That was the first time anyone had mentioned anxiety. I finally received the proper diagnosis. The symptoms finally made sense. I had never heard of a panic attack until my diagnosis, and now I know that it's actually a threat response. Understanding that panic attacks were a haywire version of something my body was designed to do was hugely important. I wasn't dying or going crazy—the two things I feared the most. Before, I was worried my symptoms were the first steps in a psychotic episode, since my grandmother was mentally ill and had been in a psychiatric facility for three years before she passed. But I learned anxiety does not lead to psychosis—this was not a slippery slope that would lead me to an inpatient facility. My long road to a proper diagnosis had caused me to develop a lot of avoidance behaviors—which is common for people who go long stretches without being treated for their anxiety disorders.¹ My brain would associate panic attacks with the places and times they occurred, driving me to avoid many situations someone else would find completely safe. If I was standing in line at a coffee shop and had a panic attack, my brain would link panic with standing in line at a coffee shop, and so the next time I wanted coffee, I wasn't willing to go. I stopped going to coffee shops. I stopped standing in lines, going to football games, seeing movies. My world was getting smaller and smaller. If I had been diagnosed and treated sooner, I think a lot of the misery from those situations would have been averted. My illness was pretty entrenched in my day-to-day routine, and I felt so physically fragile that I refused to take medication, even though my therapist begged me to try it. I felt so out of control that I was too afraid to put something foreign in my body, so instead I went to cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), an effective method for treating anxiety disorders.⁷ CBT, plus the passage of time, are what got me to a healthier place in my college years. As part of CBT, I went through exposure therapy, and was gradually exposed to situations I was most afraid of.⁸ Having an accelerated heart rate scared me, so my therapist made me run up flights of stairs, urging me to welcome that feeling, rather than fear it. It's a way to prove that what you fear—in my case, death from a racing heart—isn't going to happen. After doing it over and over and over, that logical belief becomes sturdier. I went through exposure therapy for every situation that scared me, every situation I was avoiding because of my anxiety. It was certainly not fun. But ultimately, it worked. Sources American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). doi: 0.1176/appi.books.9780890425596 Sattar Y, Chhabra L. Electrocardiogram. StatPearls. Shah SN, Gangwani MK, Oliver TI. Mitral Valve Prolapse. StatPearls. Filippi, M., Bar-Or, A., Piehl, F. et al. Multiple sclerosis. Nat Rev Dis Primers 4, 43 (2018). doi:10.1038/s41572-018-0041-4 Hoover K, Higginbotham K. Epstein Barr Virus. StatPearls. Kitami, T., Fukuda, S., Kato, T. et al. Deep phenotyping of myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome in Japanese population. Sci Rep 10, 19933 (2020). doi:10.1038/s41598-020-77105-y Loerinc, Amanda G., et al. "Response rates for CBT for anxiety disorders: Need for standardized criteria." Clinical psychology review 42 (2015). doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2015.08.004 Meuret AE, Wolitzky-Taylor KB, Twohig MP, Craske MG. Coping skills and exposure therapy in panic disorder and agoraphobia: latest advances and future directions. Behav Ther. 2012;43(2):271-284. doi:10.1016/j.beth.2011.08.002 Thanks for your feedback! We admit it — sprinkled into our Good Housekeeping wellness wisdom over the years have been a few clunkers (sorry, spot training doesn't work). Can you guess which tips are as good as the day they were published — and which should go the way of the cotton ball diet? (We never recommended that, by the way.) 1900s: 'Mother's instinct' is real A mother 'wakes when the baby is uncovered, is aware of his need of food before he has expressed it and senses when he is in danger.' (February 1907) The verdict: LEGIT New mothers' senses are definitely heightened, likely thanks to greater amounts of the stress hormone cortisol, says Robin Edelstein, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. Cortisol levels increase quite a bit during pregnancy and stay somewhat elevated postpartum, which may help women be attentive to their infants, says Edelstein. There you have it, mums: proof of your superpowers! 1910s: meat is the perfect protein 'As a practical, everyday all-the-year-round source of protein, there is nothing like MEAT!' (May 1913) The verdict: LAME Make more room on your plate for plant-based proteins like beans, lentils, tofu, nuts and, yes, even veggies, urges our nutrition director. Since plants also serve up fibre, phytonutrients and antioxidants, swapping them in for meat in meals at least once per week can lower chronic-disease risk. RELATED: 5 WAYS FRIDAY: ANTI-AGEING 1930s: the best source of calcium is milk 'The body appears to absorb calcium from milk or milk products more efficiently than from other sources.' (March 1935) The verdict: LAME True, milk and other low-fat dairy products, like cheese and yogurt, are great for upping your calcium intake. But don't forget about fatty fish (sardines canned with bones, anyone?), which also provide vitamin D — an important nutrient for optimising your body's absorption of calcium, says GH Nutrition Director Jaclyn London, M.S., R.D. Eating veggies like broccoli and kale can also help meet your needs. 1940s: margarine is healthier than butter 'Practically all the margarine sold is made from vegetable oils churned in a culture of skimmed milk... both children and adults may use [it] safely in place of butter.' (April 1943) The verdict: LAME Be careful with margarines. Some may still contain partially hydrogenated oils, the sources of heart-harmful trans fats. Until the FDA mandate to remove partially hydrogenated oils from the food supply takes full effect, check labels! 1950s: you can shiver your way slim 'Wrap your torso in towels chilled in water clinking with ice cubes' between workout moves. (August 1957) The verdict: LEGIT Sounds crazy, but there is some science behind this idea. When you're cold, your body taps into its brown-fat stores, burning extra calories to maintain a healthy temperature, says George King, M.D., research director at Joslin Diabetes Centre in Boston. No more excuses for skipping winter workouts! RELATED: HOW TO LOSE WEIGHT: ONE SIMPLE TRICK 1950s: you can stretch your way taller 'Stand with back against edge of door. Stretch left arm up and back in swinging motion.' (1959) The verdict: LEGIT Good posture does help you look longer and leaner — plus, it can ease tightness in the neck and back. The stretch we offered on our 56-year-old record doesn't stray far from the updated version from GH trainer on call Latreal Mitchell. How to do it: • Stand with back pressed against a wall, arms flat against wall, elbows bent and hands at shoulder height. Keeping elbows, wrists, and backs of hands touching the wall, reach fingertips up toward ceiling until arms are straight. Slide elbows back down toward sides, squeezing shoulder blades together. • Do 15 reps, three times a week. 1980s: sugary snacks help you snooze 'Drinking the proverbial glass of warm milk may not be the best way to get to sleep at night. You'd be better off eating a sugary or starchy snack.' (February 1984) The verdict: LEGIT Surprise! Sugary, starchy foods trigger the production of serotonin, the 'happy hormone' in your body that induces feelings of calmness. (The protein in milk, on the other hand, might not hasten sleep.) If you're peckish before bed, top a slice of whole-grain bread with 1 tsp of jelly. Sweet dreams! 1990s: stress causes stomachaches 'The everyday pressures of life can hit below the belt — literally. Doctors say stress can be the cause of such problems or at the very least the trigger for flare-ups.' (May 1997) The verdict: MOSTLY LEGIT Stress can intensify symptoms of painful irritable bowel syndrome, but new research says it doesn't actually cause it. More likely, IBS is the result of a past infection, possibly food poisoning, that triggers the production of antibodies that impair the nerves in the gut, says Mark Pimentel, M.D., of Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre. A new blood test can reveal whether you carry the antibodies, and two drugs recently OK'd by the FDA may help: Viberzi eases the stomach contractions that contribute to diarrhea, and Xifaxan, an antibiotic, alters gut flora. (via goodhousekeeping.com) RELATED: WHAT THE COLOUR OF YOUR NAILS SAYS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

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