women's WELLNESS
NATURAL STRATEGIES FOR STAYING STRONG AND HEALTHY

BEST FOODS AND SUPPLEMENTS FOR BONES
MAXIMIZING METABOLISM • A GLUTEN-FREE FEAST
ANXIETY Rx
NATURAL STRESS SOLUTIONS

What does your morning look like? Up at dawn, answer a few work e-mails, get the kids moving forward, prepare meals, check online to see what the commute is going to be like. It's not even 8 a.m. and the day is already hectic.

If you're feeling a little bit anxious, it's really no surprise. Given daily schedules like this, it would defy belief if you weren't. But the question is, what to do about it?

First of all, here's what you shouldn't do: keep moving at breakneck speed without taking the time to address stress with healthy measures. Chronic stress and anxiety raise levels of cortisol, the hormone associated with the fight-or-flight instinct. Cortisol, and other stress reactions over time, can influence cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, weight gain, autoimmune disorders—the list goes on. What's more, anxiety can deprive us of sleep, which causes more stress.

Tools to cope
What's the best approach to anxiety? My first suggestion would be to slow down, but that can be difficult for many people. The perception is if you slow down, things don't get done, which can produce more anxiety. But in truth, if we just slow down a little bit, say with a ten-minute morning meditation session, we can actually get more done. That's because stress can impair the brain, making us feel frazzled and less effective in our tasks. Conversely, regular meditation and other mind/body practices that help us slow down, even momentarily, are shown to increase brain power over time. These cumulative effects allow us to function from a calmer and clearer state of being.

But there's no substitute for taking care of ourselves physically as well. In a rushed state, we can neglect to eat properly or exercise, both of which mitigate stress.

I cannot exaggerate the importance of eating right. Stay away from high-glycemic-index foods that rapidly boost blood sugar, leading to an equally rapid crash. Stick with whole, unprocessed foods emphasizing high-quality protein, healthy fats, and lots of green vegetables. These foods can boost brain power, help stabilize moods, support detoxification of stress hormones, and provide the body with optimal nutrition to better address anxiety.
Supplementing with adaptogens
Adaptogens are botanicals that armor us against stress and illness. They work by helping us adapt our internal responses to external influences, as their name implies. A variety of studies have shown that specific plants can reduce our biological response to stress on the cellular level. Here are two excellent examples:

**Ashwagandha root**
Also known as Indian ginseng, ashwagandha has been shown to reduce stress in a number of studies. In one, people with chronic anxiety experienced a significant reduction in symptoms, as well as lower cortisol levels, after ingesting ashwagandha for 60 days. In another, ashwagandha reduced evidence of anxiety in animals. Another study found similar anti-anxiety effects. Traditional use and recent research show ashwagandha to be free of unwanted side effects, including dependency.

**Schisandra**
Highly prized in traditional Chinese medicine, schisandra is a powerful antioxidant that can help defend against acute and chronic stress and related imbalances. Its traditional name, wu wei zi, means "five tastes seed," reflecting its ability to benefit and balance the five elements and all the major organ systems.

**Using calming herbs**
Some herbs are prized in traditional, natural medicine for their abilities to calm anxiety through a variety of mechanisms. Here are some particularly effective herbs and extracts that can support natural calm without causing dependency, mental fog, or unwanted side effects. In fact, these herbs can also boost other areas of health as well—a win-win situation.

**Passionflower**
Low levels of the neurotransmitter GABA are associated with a number of conditions, including anxiety. Passionflower has been used for centuries to control anxiety, and recent research has demonstrated that it works by modulating GABA receptors in the brain to support increased GABA activity.

**Lavender**
A recent study found that lavender is a potent sedative, making it especially useful to overcome anxiety as well as insomnia.

Many people find relief just smelling the essential oil; it's also available as a tea and in some supplements. There's nothing like fresh lavender, so if you can, consider growing some near your home to have on hand whenever stress takes hold.

**Honokiol**
One particularly useful botanical is honokiol. Extracted from magnolia bark, honokiol has a variety of beneficial attributes. In addition to powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, honokiol also modulates GABA receptors, supporting natural relaxation. It works gently and doesn't cause side effects.

Anxiety is like background noise. We become so accustomed to the feeling, we hardly notice it anymore. Yet, over time, it has cumulative effects on our physical and mental health. But if we pay attention to our stress triggers, do what we can to mitigate the underlying causes, and take measures to alleviate it using targeted natural solutions, we can experience greater health and happiness, not to mention more productivity.

"Comparative Assessment of the Anxiolytic-like Activities of Honokiol and Derivatives" by H. Kuribara et al., Pharmacol Biochem Behav, 12/00; "Is Lavender an Anxiolytic Drug?" by R. Perry et al., 6/15/12; "Pharmacological Studies on the Anxiolytic Effect of Standardized Schisandra Lignans Extract on Restraint-Stressed Mice" by W.W. Chen et al., 10/15/11, Phytomedicine; "Nutritional and Herbal Supplements for Anxiety and Anxiety-Related Disorders" by S.E. Laihan and K.F. Viera, Nutr J 10/7/10; "A Prospective, Randomized Double-Blind, Placebo-Controlled Study of Safety and Efficacy of a High-Concentration Full-Spectrum Extract of Ashwagandha Root in Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Adults" by K. Chandrasekhar et al., Indian J Psychol Med, 7/12

*Isaac Elias, MD, LAc, is medical director of the integrative health center Amitabha Medical Clinic in California.*