

I Used To Be Anxious

I used to have terrible anxiety. Throughout high school, I had panic attacks so severe I felt like I couldn't breathe. At my worst, I would shut down, in tears, unable to take a deep breath, while my whole body shook. The pit in my stomach would get so heavy I was sure I would be sick. Sometimes, I did get sick.

Image credit: Antonioguillen/Adobe Stock

I remember the progression from being a nervous person to realizing I had anxiety, to being able to recognize I was having a panic attack. Yet, I didn't even realize how bad it was because I was used to living with chronic pain. But when I was 16, I had a severe panic attack, severe enough that I finally thought to myself, "This is not normal, and I am not okay. I can't live like this." It was another two years before I fixed the root of the problem.

For two years after that debilitating panic attack, I would practice deep breathing, and on rare occasions, take an anxiety pill to try and help calm my nerves. Unfortunately, my endocrine system was so messed up, there wasn't much I could do to quell the anxiety without fixing the root of the problem.

I also used to weigh 320 pounds. I woke up anxious; I went to bed anxious. Every moment of my life was full of anxiety. After graduating from high school, I began to learn about the endocrine system. I've learned how my toxic lifestyle (diet, prescription drugs, and poor sleep habits) caused my hormonal imbalance and was at the root of my anxiety and numerous other health problems. If you would like to take a deep dive into how hormones work and how to fix the endocrine system, check out the following article:

The endocrine system is the collection of glands and

glandular organs that produce hormones to regulate metabolism, tissue function, growth and development (which includes repair), sexual function, reproduction, sleep, mood, the immune system, and more.

HOLISTIC GUIDE TO HEALING THE ENDOCRINE SYSTEM AND BALANCING OUR HORMONES

My anxiety was caused by two major things that were totally within my control:

- Poor diet
- Poor sleep

I've learned that my endocrine system was functioning so poorly because of my diet and poor sleep, which was also affected by my poor diet.

Diet

Diet is imperative to fixing the endocrine system and getting rid of anxiety. Just like with most everything else, it starts in the gut. When I eliminated refined sugars, gluten, and processed foods, I felt better within days. When I started eating a salad and drinking a gallon of cranberry lemonade every day, my life changed for the better, irrevocably.

We have an excellent article about the hormonal system that I urge anyone to read if they want to learn how to balance and heal the endocrine system. It goes into why diet is paramount to healing the gut, the endocrine system, and chronic illness in general:

As OLM always says, it starts with diet. Supplemental therapies are much more effective with a healthy diet, and for most people, the right diet is all they need. But there are plenty of people who do not have access to healthy foods, and there are many who have such a depleted endocrine system

that the body is just plain going to need a lot of help.

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Two months after fixing my diet, I decided to fast for a week. Within days my depression was back. I wasn't as anxious as I had been, but the anxiety made it difficult to talk about how I was struggling. I had stopped eating vegetables, and I had stopped working out. I don't think my gut was healthy enough for me to reap the benefits of fasting. A week later, the first thing I ate was a salad. I felt better immediately. As I incorporated exercise back into my life, my anxiety continued to fade.

I start to feel a little anxious when I don't eat well enough as well as when I don't take time to get enough sleep. When I say I'm not eating well I should be clear. My idea of junk food is stuff like homemade pesto with brown rice pasta, or organic brown rice chips with a chunk of goat cheddar cheese. Sometimes we make raw food chocolate pie or sourdough bread. While the average person wouldn't notice any problems with these foods, and may even feel better compared to a typical diet, I get anxious when I eat wheat or pre-packaged processed "healthy" snack foods.

Sleep

Throughout high school, I would regularly sleep between 12-14 hours a day. I would often joke with my friends about how much sleep I got. While they were on one end of the spectrum, pulling all-nighters, I was on the other end, sleeping as much as possible. None of us were healthy. I struggled with depression throughout high school. I was always exhausted, no matter how much I slept.

Fixing your sleep schedule can be difficult or impossible if

you're not taking care of yourself in other ways. I sleep well when I eat well. Exercise helps, too. When I mess up my sleep schedule (which doesn't happen often, but it does happen), I find that exercise is the best way to help me get back on track. No matter how mentally tired I am at the end of the day, I can still have a hard time falling asleep if I don't go for a run or work out in some other way.

I also find that having a set bedtime and wake-up time helps. I generally go to bed by 9:30 or 10:00 every night. My wake-up time is not yet as consistent. Sometimes I'm up at 6:00 am, but other times, if my REM sleep is off, or I'm working out very hard, I can sleep past 8. I'm almost always awake by 9.

I find that my sleep schedule and my endocrine system are intertwined. It can be a vicious cycle when things aren't going well! An unhealthy endocrine system makes it difficult to impossible to fix one's sleep schedule, and a messed up sleep schedule makes it difficult to impossible to have a healthy endocrine system.

I find it interesting to pay attention to what happens when I don't get enough sleep, and I get to experiment with this regularly. I have friends in college who often aren't ready or able to talk or hang out until 8:00 or 9:00 pm when I'm ready to go to bed. And sometimes I can't help myself, and I find I've pulled all-nighters or had too many consecutive days running on 3-4 hours of sleep while sticking to my very healthy diet.

when I don't get enough sleep, the first thing that happens, obviously, is exhaustion. I have a hard time focusing and I feel very drained. Then I notice the anxiety. I notice a small pit in my stomach at the thought of doing something I don't want to do. Something as simple as going on a run when I don't want to can cause a slight twinge of anxious nausea.

The longer I go without sleep the worse my anxiety gets. It

goes from that small twinge of nausea to a constant knot in my stomach at the thought of the unknown. My heart rate will spike unnecessarily at any unease. Happy excitement can turn into anxiety very quickly.

After one all-nighter or 2 days with less than 6 hours of sleep, I notice the bags under my eyes. They're faint. Someone who doesn't know me might not even notice them, but they're there. Shortly after the sun comes up, I can barely see the purple-blue hues beginning to appear under my eyes.

I also experience dizziness when standing up if I'm not getting enough sleep. Recently, for two weeks, I did not get nearly enough sleep and was alternating between all-nighters and getting a couple of hours of sleep a night. Every time I stood up I would get lightheaded. I nearly fainted twice. There are multiple factors that go into this, but I believe that had I been getting proper sleep, it wouldn't have been a problem. Since correcting my sleep schedule, the issues have gone away.

Conclusion

I remember what it was like to have severe anxiety. I know how hard it can be to treat. I find that like almost all other things health related, it starts in the gut. Fixing anxiety can take time. My panic attacks went away within days of fixing my diet, but it took months of regular exercise and a healthy diet to fix my endocrine system enough to alleviate my anxiety completely.

- *The Effects of Anxiety on the Endocrine System*
- *Anxiety disorders are linked to inflamed thyroid glands*
- *10 Ways to Naturally Reduce Anxiety*