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Bag of nerves

Worried, anxious, panicky? You're not alone. Shane Watson on how anxiety has overtaken stress as the new affliction of high-flyers

Shane Watson Published: 15 April 2012

Some people experience anxiety during takeoff and landing. Others get a stab of it when they open their monthly bank statement. And still others — a not insignificant number — feel anxious quite a lot of the time, or all of the time, for no particular reason. Anxiety, an emotion that we have previously dismissed as trivial, the natural precursor to exams, job interviews or first dates, has morphed into something bigger and more serious. Move over, stress, we have a more insidious enemy in our midst, and, finally, we're ready to talk about it.

This month, two high-profile women have outed themselves as anxiety sufferers. Alexandra Shulman, the editor of *Vogue*, revealed in an interview that she carries Xanax all the time as a precaution in case of panic attacks, and Plum Sykes, contributing editor at *American Vogue*, writes in the April issue about checking herself into an “anxiety retreat”, a kind of rehab for the chronically anxious. Kerri Sackville's new book, *The Little Book of Anxiety: Confessions from a Worried Life*, will be published later this year; since blogging about living with the condition, the Australian writer has been “inundated” with messages from fellow sufferers. “So much has been written about depression, drug addiction, eating disorders — anxiety is the last thing we talk about. It's not seen as a disorder, it's seen as a failure to cope.”

Anxiety is often confused with stress, but stress is a natural response to pressure, whereas anxiety (or problem anxiety) is irrational fear. “You go straight to the worst-case scenario,” Sackville says. “Finance is a bit tight, so we are going to be out on the street. In my case, my husband is late home, so he is dead. He dies all the time.”

Sackville has undergone years of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to cure her of panic attacks, while Sykes, who was virtually housebound for months, cured herself by using Charles Linden's method. Shulman, on the other hand, says: “I know about trying to breathe properly and I have Xanax, which I take everywhere with me in case — it's my lucky charm.” Their stories are at the extreme end of the scale, but they strike a chord because anxiety, albeit not to panic-attack level, is something a lot of us are familiar with. In the past year or so, I've noticed waves of it welling up from nowhere.

Sitting in front of the TV on a Sunday evening, sunbathing on a beach, walking across the park — there it is, the breath-catching sensation that I am not in control, that my small problems will

become insurmountable. What am I anxious about, precisely? Nothing and everything. And I'm not alone. Girlfriends will call up and say: "I feel a bit panicky, what's wrong with me?" It's hormones, we agree. Or lack of sleep. Or a hangover (and hangovers do make you anxious, in a nonspecific way), but secretly we all know it never used to be like this, and something has changed.

"I think people have always had anxiety," Sackville says. "In our mothers' day, women were prescribed Valium and men drank. In the 19th century, women were always taking to their beds with nerves." Yet the general perception that anxiety affects more people more severely is backed up by statistics. In America, more people are now treated for anxiety than for depression. Andy Puddicombe, a clinical mindfulness consultant, says: "Anxiety accounts for at least 60% of cases I see. Not that everybody is at panic-attack level. For many people, there is just a really strong undercurrent of anxiety that runs through their life."



Plum Sykes and Alexandra Shulman (Dave M. Bennett/Nick Harvey)

He believes the pace of life makes us more agitated and susceptible to anxiety, but insists that isn't the root of the problem. "Five or six years ago, I would have said a lot of it was driven by consumerism, the pressure to achieve. Now I feel it is driven by a general feeling of insecurity. I think the financial crisis has made people feel vulnerable, and when you start to feel vulnerable, it isn't just in one area of your life."

Sackville, as a wife and working mother, is conscious that life for her and her friends, recession or no recession, is less nurturing than it used to be: "We have so much more to juggle and, on top of that, the world has become a much smaller place, and our perception is that it is a much more dangerous place. I have a close-knit group of girlfriends, but we are all working and raising kids. We don't have the time to look after each other."

Even so, what's noticeable about anxiety is that it appears to exist in spite of life experience. We all know it's as likely to strike when you're relaxing in a beautiful place as rushing to catch a plane. "Working at Vogue, there were girls who would get incredibly anxious about booking a pedicure," Sykes says. "You can be anxious about anything, and it's different for everyone." For her, it wasn't her frenetic pace of life that triggered anxiety, but a debilitating attack of vertigo that lasted for 18 months. She stopped working: "I couldn't drive my car, or cook, or look after my children."

In desperation, she contacted Charles Linden, who himself had suffered from anxiety for 27 years before he developed his method.

Linden believes that anxiety is "100%" to do with people who have creative brains that they are not channelling properly, which leads to overthinking and neurosis. "My father, for example, has no creativity, and his chances of developing anxiety are zero." You don't have to be in the music business or a fashion writer to have a creative intellect — you might be a secretary who never fulfilled her desire to paint, or a high achiever who has taken time out to have children. Sykes, a busy working mother in a pressured industry, fits his high-anxiety profile to a tee.

Crucially, Linden's cure for her involved doing more, not less, and keeping to a rigidly structured

daily timetable of activities, measured in half-hours. “The CBT people say, ‘Manage your thoughts,’” Sykes explains. “He says you ‘do’ yourself out of it, you don’t ‘think’ yourself out of it. The minute you feel anxious, get busy. Do more. Keep a scrapbook. Sew. Get a dog and walk it. Turn on the radio and sing along.

All the domestic chores that are thought to be beneath us, I actually now think are the soul of life.”

The methods of curing anxiety are as varied as the forms it takes, but the good news is that mindfulness, a meditation-based technique, has a high success rate. “I rarely see anybody for longer than 10 weeks,” Puddicombe says. Linden has cured 150,000 people and counting; and Sackville is doing very well on CBT. Anxiety may be on the increase, but it is manageable, and it doesn’t mean you have to retreat from modern life. “I am busier than ever,” Sykes says. “I feel great. I’ve learnt a lot, too. I’m more accepting and less controlling. You know — my philosophy now is, shit happens.”