

Stress in our lives.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk.

For many of us the pandemic has not only threatened our physical health, but also our emotional well-being. This means added stress, which could lead to anxiety. A disorder that research shows affects forty million American adults. As many as a quarter of all children between the ages of 13 and 18. An anxiety disorder is highly treatable, less than two out of five will suffer from it were sent to receive treatment. With us today to discuss stress and anxiety is Shirley Rodriguez, licensed clinical social worker and associate administrative director at SBH Behavioral Health Services. Welcome, Shirley.

Shirley, let's start out. Are you and your colleagues seeing more patients over the last year and year and half saying they've been stressed?

Absolutely. Most of the patients are still facing the pandemic, adjusting to the new normal. All this anxiety, stress and fear is over a pandemic that took over most of our lives for the last eighteen months.

How would you define stress and how does it tip over into anxiety?

So stress. When we think about stress, we ask questions like: What are stressors? What worries you the most? With the recent pandemic its finances. The overwhelming fear, the obsessive fear. Being ill and not being able to work, became a big stressor for people. Riding the subway. Everything we do that takes on a different meaning. It tips over into anxiety, when it interferes with our activities, being able to go out of the house, being able to participate. Even to run basic errands such as going to the grocery store. That's when you know it's kind of tipping over to a place where seeing someone may be an option.

Is stress always bad for you, or it's how you manage it?

That's a good question, it sort of depends on the individuals. We all have different coping mechanisms and we all have different strengths. If you learn how to develop strategies to address stress. Because stress part of life, it's inevitable. Anxiety is part of life. Some people talk, I work well when I have that anxiety. It gives me that extra energy. When that happens, it's a good thing, but then again it tips over to the place where you're engaging in more negative behavior, you're becoming withdrawn, stopping some of the things you do. That's when you know it's reaching a different point. Developing strategies, breathing exercises, taking time out for yourself, self-care and being able to sleep well. That's a big one, getting enough rest. It gives you the strength that you need to combat anxiety and stress.

So a lot of this could be for at least many people could be done on their own. I mean, there are self-strategies that you recommend?

There's one that is very basic, we call it the (four-four-four). It's where you breathe in four seconds, you hold your breath for four seconds, and then you let it out in four seconds. You could do this anywhere, no one has to know that you are doing this. I actually do this several times a day. It's kind of time to center yourself, center your thoughts. Listening to your breathing also tells you where you are with your anxiety. Just be more mindful of yourself.

When we say mindfulness. What do we mean by that? What does mindfulness mean?

So mindfulness is what I just described. It's really being in touch with your body and your environment, and drawing those connections, and taking the moment to really observe. For most of us, we're always on the go. We learn how to block out certain sensory things. Hear the subway. We don't smell the bad air when we're out in certain parts of the city. We have to stop and really take in usually all our senses, our environment. It's impacting us. Does it impact our breathing? Does it impact the way I'm walking? The way I'm thinking? All of these things, because you know we're very connected to our environment.

Whether we realize it or not our environment could really trigger things in our body, mentally and physically for some people.

So stress and anxiety could lead to physical ailments?

If you already have some medical conditions. If you're already an asthmatic. If you have GI problems. Could stress and anxiety exacerbate those things? Absolutely. Could it bring on an actual ulcer? No. It can make existing medical conditions more difficult to manage. We know now, more than ever than ever that there is a connection between mind and body. How we feel, could affect how we heal. That's why it's important to be in touch with how you feel, because it will affect how you feel both physically and mentally.

What are some of the obvious physical signs of not coping well with stress?

These are symptoms normally labeled as a panic attack. A lot of people do visit the ED with these symptoms. You start breathing rapidly, you feel light headed. You can't catch your breath. Some people feel physically ill and their stomach. They feel a tingling sensation in their arms and body, and often times they visit the ED and say I think I am having a heart attack. They get an EKG, their heart is fine, it's actually a panic attack.

Is that the time when it's right to seek professional care, or you should seek it before it gets to that point?

Ideally, you want to seek it before it gets to that point. The truth is this is really when the person decides to go see somebody. When a professional see you, you look ok, but emotionally you need to take care of ABC, and that point it's usually the introduction to some form of therapy. It doesn't have to be traditional therapy, it could be anything, it could be meditation, it could tai-chi, and it could be yoga. Whatever you could do to reduce the stress. It reduces the stress, and then it minimizes any kind of physical reaction your body may have due to anxiety and stress.

If someone comes to you seeking treatment, is it very possible they just suggest coping skills like you just mentioned? Should they work on their own?

You have to assess what their history is, what their symptoms are? How severe they are? How long have they had them? Then a treatment plan, a traditional talk therapy, meditation. There are some cases where anxiety has risen to the case of panic. If it interfered with the patient's activity of their daily living. We may recommend seeing the psychiatrist or a discussion about medication.

Why do you think many people don't seek help for this?

The old age stigma of seeking any type of mental health treatment. As much as we see more about it in the media. More people are talking about it. There is still a lot of stigma attached to going to see a

therapist and going to see a psychiatrist and not being able to manage on your own. I'm hoping now that's changing, because as I said before there is a lot more openness about it. We have a lot more discussions. Thank you for having this discussion. We normalized the fact that everybody experiences anxiety. Everybody experiences stress, and everybody needs help from time to time managing a bad patch. You could go see someone for just a short period of time until you get through that bad patch. The skill set that you developed during that time, something that you should do for ever, next you have anxiety it might not have to be a therapist. Why, because you learned some strategies that you will continue to apply.

Are there some people that do ok with stress, and something sort of tips them over and it's like I just can't deal with it anymore? Is that typical?

It's not typical, but it does happen. If I'm going through a high stress period of time, and I get something traumatically. It could be something like a loss or something happens at work. Because I am not at my best emotionally, I may not be able to manage that kind of shift, because of the level of stress. So, it can happen, depending on where the person is at.

A lot of people, we hear them say because they are feeling stressed out, gee I need a drink or something like that. Does that help, or it's counterproductive?

It could be very counterproductive, these are mood altering substances which could interfere with your natural ability to deal and cope with stresses. I'm not saying that having a glass of chardonnay is going to throw you over the top. If you have two glasses of chardonnay a week and that has grown to five or six, you're not managing your stress in a healthy way. You're really heading in the wrong direction. To your question very concretely, substances do not assist, they could sometimes injure your ability to self-heal.

Do you believe that holistic treatments like acupuncture or holistic therapy, stuff like that?

Absolutely, what I stated earlier, what works for one person doesn't necessarily work the other. Whatever works for you, it could be yoga therapy, it could be aromatherapy, and it could be tai-chi. All of these things could help a person reduce their level of stress, which reduces anxiety, which reduces any physical response to that anxiety. So, it's finding what works for you. So part of therapy sometimes is just unpacking that, and discovering what works for you. That's why, trying different things is important, being open to the experience, finding out what really helps you reduce your anxiety, understanding that we are all individual creatures.

Right. Different strokes for different folks.

Yea. That's what they say.

I'm sure you're familiar with St. Barnabas hospital, they opened up a recharge group for staff, and where people who are feeling stressed out could come to this room. You got beach, mountain, and what have you.

A factory and visual all three. Fantastic.

You think it's a good idea?

It's a wonderful idea. For those who haven't been able to visit the recharge room, it's a fabulous way to recharge. You don't have to meditate a whole forty-five minutes to regenerate yourself. There's a 10 minute or 15 minute exercise like going to the recharge room is enough to get you through.

Question. Do children respond to stress differently than adults? It seems to be a high number of children according to research. Do they respond differently to stress?

They do and they usually manifest it in behavior. Children don't have the language or capacity to verbalize something like this, something like that. We don't understand what's going on. The one way children express feelings and emotions is through behavior. If you see that your child's sleeping patterns changed. Their eating habits changed. You're getting reports in school that they are less attentive, they become disruptive in any way. These could be indicators in a shift in the child's emotional state, and need to be assessed.

Are they harder to treat than adults?

I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

Are they more difficult stress related than adults?

I wouldn't say more difficult. You just have to be more creative. Children can't engage in verbal therapy like an adult can. With children we do more play therapy. We use arts and crafts to help a child navigate emotions and talk about fears, and being able to put words together to explain what those things are. What happens with children also is when they don't know the answer to something, they usually fill in the blank with the worst case scenario. So it's kind of doing that reality testing with the kids to help them realize that everything is not such a big deal, and making them confident in their ability to do that.

Shirley, thank you for your time.