

Unlearn Anxiety and Depression

Dr. Howard Schubiner's Unlearn Your Anxiety and Depression offers a concrete approach to fixing feelings of fear/anxiety and hopelessness/depression grounded in anatomy, physiology, and evolutionary science. He states that "genetics and/or chemical imbalance" provide an incomplete and misleading guide to diagnosing and treating these problems. He recommends the term Mind-Body Syndrome (MBS) rather than "disease," "Major Depression," or "Generalized Anxiety."

Naturally, all narrowly bio-medical concerns must be carefully examined and ruled out before MBS becomes the focus including "hyperthyroidism . . . sleep disorders (sleep apnea), heart disorders . . . low testosterone (in men), adrenal insufficiency" (p. 31). Misuse of "amphetamines, beta-blockers, alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine [as well as] withdrawal from many medications, including those used to treat anxiety and depression" must be addressed (p. 32). For example, benzodiazepines may be problematic as well as "certain hormones such as birth control pills and some blood pressure medications" (p. 13). As these explanations are discarded, a way forward is created for anxiety/depression to be understood as *chronic overreaction to life-stresses*.

But surely anxiety/depression are diseases. Despite fifty years of claims, it remains the case that no blood test, urinalysis, assay of cerebrospinal fluid, imaging study, or physical finding is diagnostic of these conditions. In no meaningful way is anxiety like strep throat. While true that carcinoid tumors of the thyroid, intestine, and adrenal gland may rarely be implicated, these contrast with fifty million in the U.S. diagnosed with depression and tens of millions of prescriptions written. Dr. Schubiner calls into question the routine prescription of anti-depressants. "There is emerging evidence that treating anxiety and depression as if they were diseases can actually worsen the condition" (p. xiii).

What drives chronic/repetitive overreaction to stress? Both immediate threats like an auto accident but also distant events such as mistreatment in childhood activate the fight/flight response. When chronic, *a current event roughly similar to a childhood stress may be enough to crank up both fight/flight and related responses. Over time, the connection with the origins is lost and only feelings of fear, anger and discouragement remain.* Dr. Schubiner notes "the more symptoms occur, the more they become wired into the brain and body. Over time, people may begin to notice that symptoms of anxiety occur even in situations that are not inherently fear-provoking or stress-producing" (p. 3).

In sum, fear, anger, and despair result from a mistake, a false belief something is dangerously wrong and that there is no escape. Fortunately, MBS can be cured! A whole science of the "new you" highlights the brain's creation of "plasticity proteins" in an area called the "medial prefrontal cortex" interacting with the "dorsal raphe nucleus" to create a "hope circuit" (Seligman, p. 373). How does the brain do this? *With the return of hope, your brain physically reorganizes and rebuilds.* What follows are sample exercises that chart the path forward. *Brain and mind correlate and together change towards health.*

- Reflect on *past or current* stressors and *thought patterns*. Do a writing exercise for each using this format. Stressors may include physical/sexual abuse, death/loss, humiliations, etc.:
 - Issue _____
 - Anger/Resentment about the issue
 - Guilt/Shame
 - Sadness/Grief
 - Love/Letting Go
 - Lessons learned
 - Action plans (p. 88).

- Use this strategy outlined in James Pennebaker’s book Opening Up (2016):
 - Write about what’s bothering you for ten minutes each of four consecutive days
 - Include both your thoughts as well as feelings about what happened
 - Go as deep as you can, focus on the upset, and write without pause
 - Keep or share the writing as it suits you (p. 116).
- Meditate five minutes a day, slowly increase minutes spent over time aiming for twenty minutes twice daily. Sit quietly and pay attention to your inbreath and outbreath, when distracted in any way just calmly return to focusing on your breath. That’s it! Just attend to your breath (p. 164).
- When pain/symptoms arise “stop and take a deep breath,” exhale slowly, then (p. 166).
 - Take a moment to remind yourself, “there is nothing seriously wrong”
 - “I am healthy and these symptoms are going away”
 - The symptoms mistakenly warn of danger/threat but are actually about underlying feelings of fear, guilt, anger, shame, etc.
 - The pain is mistaken “nerve pathways” you can override
- List “activities, movements, places, positions, thoughts, emotions, people, foods, weather changes, or *anything . . . that triggers your symptoms*” (p. 169). When triggers arise, again, stop and breathe, “*remind yourself that this . . . trigger is healthy and it will NOT hurt you, cause symptoms, or problems anymore*” (p. 170).
- *Write a series of unsent letters* to those who hurt you and a letter to yourself about the letter (p. 188). Note well: Forgiveness is not always feasible or necessary *especially at first* (p. 254).
- Create dialogues in which you express yourself to someone such as “a parent, another relative, current or former spouse, significant other, friend, etc.” These may include those to whom you’ve written “unsent letters” or they even include “body parts,” an “internal parent . . . or the internal child (who may become angry or afraid)” (p. 224). Wrap up with an affirmation “I am grateful to explore and increase my understanding of my relationship with _____” (p. 229).
- “Make a list of barriers or reasons why you might hang on to your MBS symptoms” or create new ones such as insomnia or pain conditions. Check the text for other examples (p. 258).
- If you get stuck or improvement stalls. Practice these:
 - “Erase doubt.” Constantly say, “*MBS is my true diagnosis, not tissue damage*” (p. 275).
 - “Be patient” as you continue working the program
 - Be honest with yourself about mistakes and matters about which you feel shame. Being honest and kind will quiet your stress response and resulting MBS symptoms
 - Create inner strength through spiritual practices that emphasize calm and contentment
 - “Do something!” Up your physical activity and create/act on that “to do” list (p. 278).
- Finally, *practice responding from the “New You” positions you have created* over the past month. Write these out. “_____ just happened (or will happen). How will you respond? What characteristics will you bring to this situation. *Write the story of the situation as you’d like it to play out with the new you as prime actor*” (p. 283).

▪ Schubiner, H. (2019). Unlearn Your Anxiety & Depression: A Self-Guided Process. Pleasant Ridge, MI: Mind Body Publishing (\$25).

▪ Seligman, M. (2018). The Hope Circuit: A Journey from Helplessness to Optimism. New York: Hachette.

