

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

AN XIE TY

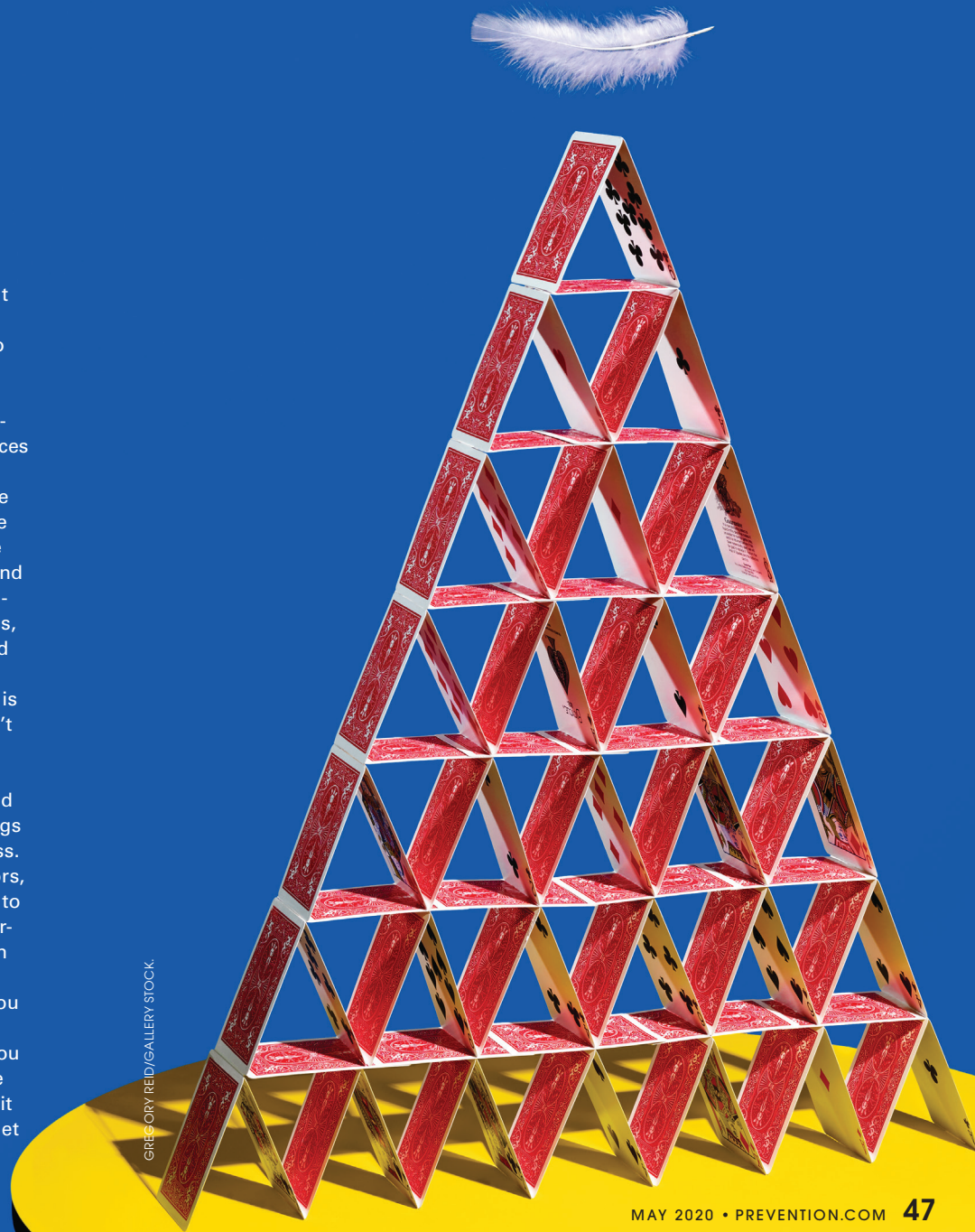
Got a racing mind? You're not alone. Anxiety is a part of life, but it shouldn't take over. Here's how to gain control.

BY ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE

1 ANXIETY CAN BE USEFUL

"People often say they want to get rid of anxiety, but anxiety is programmed into us for a reason," says Amy Przeworski, Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of psychological sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "We want to anticipate a threat and have our bodies respond when there's danger." Unlike stress, which is triggered by something external, anxiety is worry that doesn't disappear even

when stressors are gone. It overtakes your thoughts and causes you to dwell on things that may never come to pass. As was true for our ancestors, who required a bit of angst to survive (watch out for saber-toothed tigers!), anxiety can be motivating: It drives you to meet a deadline, helps you react to daily risks such as cycling in traffic, or spurs you to improve your health. The trick is learning how to use it to your advantage and not let it rule your life.



GREGORY REID/GALLERY STOCK.

2

**ANXIETY MAY BE A
DIAGNOSABLE CONDITION**

Anxiety that starts to interfere with your life may be diagnosed as a symptom of one of various types of anxiety disorders. These may develop from a complex set of risk factors including genetics, brain chemistry, and life events. One of the most common such disorders is generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), a persistent feeling that something bad is going to happen, even if the expectation is unrealistic or unjustified. It's like having a "worry track" constantly playing in the background of your mind, says Przeworski. If this sounds familiar, know that you're not alone: GAD affects about 6.8 million adults in the U.S. Other common anxiety disorders include specific phobias (such as fear of flying or of heights), panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder (fear of being judged negatively in social situations).

**ALL IN
THE FAMILY?**

Anxiety disorders have a genetic component that's not fully understood. However, as with many other medical conditions such as heart disease, you may have a genetic risk factor but never develop the condition—it's just something to keep in mind.

GETTY IMAGES.

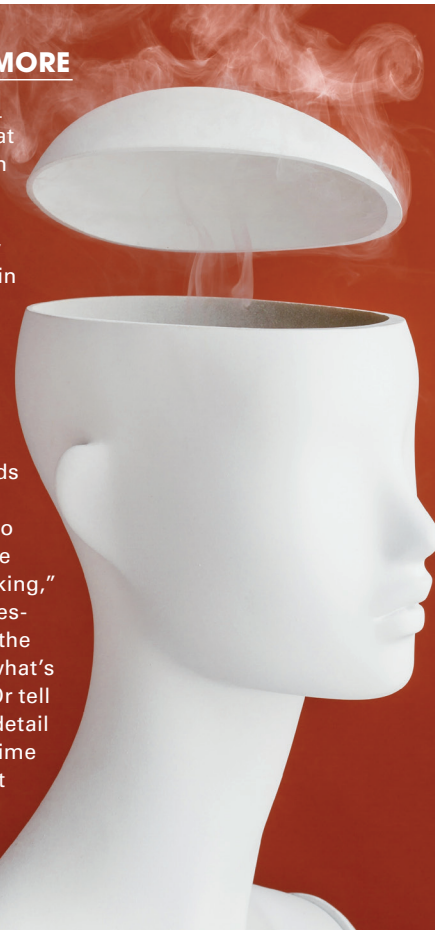
3 ANXIETY CAN RESULT IN PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

In this hurry-up world, we're not always 100% in tune with what's going on inside our heads. "Sometimes we don't recognize we're dealing with excessive anxiety until physical signs appear," Przeworski says. Common anxiety-induced symptoms: sweating; shaking; dizziness; a fast heartbeat; migraines; a headache that feels like a tight band is around your head; back, shoulder, or upper neck pain; feeling edgy; or not sleeping. "Sometimes insomnia is caused by temporary stress, but insomnia shouldn't be a chronic issue," says Przeworski. The key is to pay attention to your body and be on the lookout for signs (even subtle ones) that something isn't right.

**4 ANXIETY AFFECTS MORE
WOMEN THAN MEN**

Some research shows that about 23% of U.S. women have had an anxiety disorder in the previous year, compared with only 14% of men. Women tend to engage more in repetitive negative thoughts (rumination), which worsens anxiety. Fluctuating hormones may play a part too, causing you to feel more sensitive or irritable during certain times of the month, after giving birth, and during perimenopause. And of course women are often primary caregivers for kids and aging parents—there's a lot to worry about, and our brains aren't programmed to let things go easily! But you can combat the gender effect. "Get good at perspective-taking," says Catherine A. Sanderson, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Amherst College and the author of *The Positive Shift*. "Distinguish what's likely from what could possibly happen." Or tell yourself you can worry about a particular detail at 8 p.m. tonight for five minutes. "By the time 8 p.m. rolls around, you may not even want to worry about it," says Sanderson.

MARC BORDONS/STOCKSY.



5

LIFESTYLE CHANGES CAN HELP

There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but many kinds of stress-reduction techniques work for dealing with daily worries. For starters, be sure you're getting enough sleep. A recent study in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* showed that sleeping less than eight hours a night was associated with greater rumination. Exercise—walking, yoga, even sex (hello, endorphins!)—can also help you cope with the usual stressors. Or, learn mindfulness techniques to help you live in the moment instead of agonizing over what might happen in the future. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (adaa.org) offers links to reputable mental health apps. Pinpointing solutions will give you a sense of control.



ADAM VOORHES/GALLERY STOCK

FINDING SUPPORT

In some parts of the country access to mental health care is limited, but apps such as LiveHealth Online and Doctor on Demand allow you to video-chat with mental health professionals. Your primary care doctor should also be able to give you tools.

6

ANXIETY IS TREATABLE

Only 37% of Americans with an anxiety disorder seek treatment, though the disorders are real medical conditions and not just “in your head.” “A common misconception is that if anxiety has been present for a long time it’s untreatable or unmanageable, but many effective therapies exist,” says Joe Bienvenu, M.D., Ph.D., an associate professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. One of the most well-studied and effective ones is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which teaches new ways of processing feelings and how to frame events more productively. “For example, with GAD we tend to overestimate the probability of a bad thing happening,” says Dr. Bienvenu. “CBT teaches you to look at how likely it is to occur.”

FREAKING OUT? ZAP ANXIETY QUICKLY

While not a replacement for conventional care, mind/body methods like the ones below can help manage anxiety. You can also learn strategies from a therapist or adaa.org.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION teaches you to tense and relax each muscle group, moving sequentially down the body from head to toe. For example, you’d first tighten and release muscles in the face, then the neck, then the shoulders, and so on.

SENSORY FOCUS helps you tune in to and bring your concentration back to the sounds, smells, and tastes around you when your mind begins to chew on things. These sorts of mindfulness exercises shift your brain to the here and now.

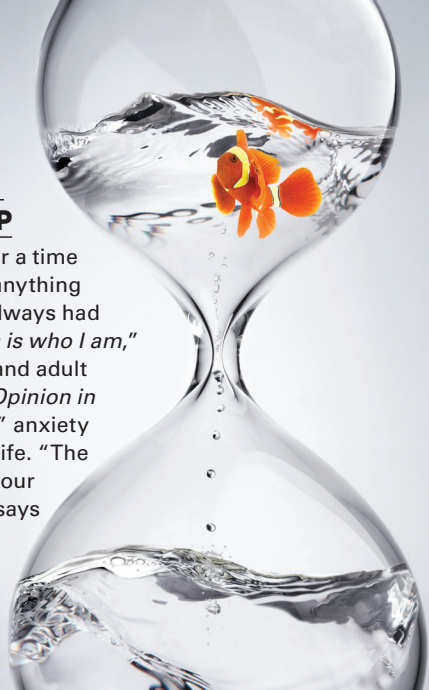
DEEP BREATHING relaxes the entire body as you fill your lungs slowly instead of breathing shallowly, which elevates your heart rate. Other helpful breath exercises include meditation and those in yoga and tai chi.

7

WHEN ANXIETY DISRUPTS YOUR LIFE, IT'S TIME TO GET HELP

Perhaps you can't remember a time when you didn't fret about anything and everything. "If you've always had anxiety, you may think, *This is who I am,*"

says Richa Bhatia, M.D., a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist and a section editor for *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*. But what you think of as "normal" anxiety may be keeping you from living your fullest life. "The question becomes when anxiety is harming your enjoyment of life or your ability to function," says Dr. Bienvenu. "We ask, is it getting in your way, messing up relationships, or keeping you from being productive and happy?" If you can't do the things you want or need to do, seek professional help.



8

IDENTIFYING TRIGGERS CAN HELP

Everyone's worry-meter is activated by different experiences. Even a happy event such as a job promotion can trigger anxiety as your brain shuffles through the what-ifs: *What if I'm not good at my new job?* Sometimes what sets this off is physiological, such as a lack of sleep, or psychological, such as spending time with a person who always pooh-poohs your concerns. But learning your triggers is crucial so you can understand and manage them, says Sanderson. To pin them down, start a journal and note your anxiety and what's going on in your life at the moment.

DON'T LET WORRIES INTERFERE WITH SLEEP

An hour before bedtime, turn off screens and jot down your concerns so you can think about them tomorrow, not at 3 a.m. To help drift off, picture yourself relaxing somewhere peaceful.

MARK LAITA/GALLERY STOCK.

9

A BREAK FROM SCREENS COULD BE KEY

Your smartphone may be to blame for ramping up your anxiety: A recent San Francisco State University study found that the heaviest users of smartphones were the most anxious, partly because the constant pings interrupted what they were doing and activated the same neural pathways in their brains that once alerted people to dangers such as lurking tigers. The relentless influx of news from

traditional and social media doesn't help. "A few years ago, only the people who lived through a traumatic event were directly affected," says Sanderson. "Now we can be part of the live experience and see things in a much more vivid way." Learn to protect yourself: Shut off push notifications, take a break from social media, or limit your exposure to news.



AUDREY SHTECIN/JO/STOCKSY.



10

SOMETIMES MEDICATION IS THE BEST TREATMENT

For some people, medications in conjunction with therapy are helpful. The most commonly prescribed anti-anxiety drugs are antidepressants, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). These have fewer side effects than other kinds, such as benzodiazepines, which can be sedating. It can take a few weeks or longer for medication to help, and you may need to adjust your dose or switch prescriptions before you find one that works. "Medications don't change who you are or remove all anxiety or keep you from recognizing dangerous situations," says Dr. Bienvenu. "But they may improve concentration, because you're not as anxious. You see the world more clearly, not as distorted by anxiety."

GETTY IMAGES.