

# FITNESS MANTRA



by Luke  
Coutinho

HOLISTIC LIFESTYLE COACH -  
INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

## Is anxiety playing with your health?

ANXIETY can affect our day-to-day activities. It is natural to experience mild anxiety, for example before an exam or presentation. This is short-lived and necessary because it helps us perform our best. It is the persistent anxiety one should be wary of. If we are always anxious, our body perceives it as a danger or threat. It reacts the same way it would if a sabre tooth tiger came in front of you, turning on the flight and fight response (or the sympathetic mode). This mode sets off a series of reactions such as raising our blood sugar, triglycerides, blood pressure levels, shutting down immunity and digestion, suppressing fertility and thyroid hormones, shallow breathing, in order to overcome the stressor.

### CHRONIC STRESS

Ideally stress should be short-lived and so the flight and fight response. But in today's world where we are moving from one stressful situation to the other, our body's stress levels are constantly high, cortisol levels are chronically elevated and sympathetic mode is turned on forever. This is a problem. Our body is not designed to handle the amount of stress we are dealing with.

Here's how chronic stress and anxiety could affect our basic activities and health regime:

**SLEEP:** Anxiety can mess up sleeping patterns. It can either make the process of drifting to sleep very difficult or can lead to disruption in the quality of sleep. Our body and mind need to be in the state of "rest and digest" to fall asleep.

**DIGESTION:** Our body is least interested to digest food when it experiences anxiety. Since our digestive system takes about 80 per cent of the energy to perform its functions, it shuts down to provide our body the energy it needs to cope up from the stressor. This is why anxiety levels are linked to symptoms like acidity, bloating, indigestion, reflux and food allergies. The effect on digestion is immediately felt



because our brain and gut are directly connected. What affects our mind, also impacts our gut and vice versa.

**FOOD CHOICE:** It is likely that our food choices also go for a toss, mainly due to:

1. Less blood flow to the brain, which weakens our decision-making capacity. So, chances are we may reach out for foods full of sugar and salt.
2. It can make us overeat or under-eat.
3. We tend to reach out for things that give us the quickest energy – sugar, caffeine – and make us feel good (although short-lived).
4. Chances of resorting to alcohol, drugs and smoking are much higher.

**EXERCISE:** It can either lead to over-exercising in order to numb our emotional pain and discomfort or under-exercising, because of lack of motivation and energy. Over-exercising is most detrimental as we are adding more stress to an already stressed body.

Anxiety shallows our breath and most of us are shallow breathers anyway. This means there is less oxygen going into our system and oxygen is literally the life force or prana. Even 3-4 deep breaths are a great way to calm down our anxiety.

Deep breathing goes a long way in lowering cortisol (stress hormone) and shifts our body from a sympathetic (flight and fight) to parasympathetic (rest and digest) state.