

# Freedom from stress and anxiety

*The jigsaw puzzle of lifestyle and  
self-help strategies that work together  
for maximum emotional and mental wellbeing*

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Stress and anxiety in your world and mine

CHURNING OR BUTTERFLIES in the stomach, sweaty palms, heart pounding, mouth too dry; these are just a few of the physical symptoms of being extremely anxious. If the words anxious or anxiety do not come to your lips readily, about yourself, you still may recognize that you are often worried, nervous, on edge or 'stressed out'.

Those bodily symptoms of anxiety and stress are common but are by no means the only indications of stress and anxiety. Of thousands of people I have seen over thirty years, many complain of other issues. They report being unable to sleep, poor concentration and other health problems that they suspect are worsened by their stress and anxiousness. The patients themselves are not the only ones to suspect the connection between their health problems and stress. A good number are advised by their doctor to tackle their high blood pressure, heart disease, pain, insomnia and various ailments with strategies that reduce their stress and anxiety.

In chapter one, Stress and anxiety: what's the problem?, I set about unravelling and explaining these two related concepts. For now, it is worth remembering that they overlap each other

greatly; frequently one is overlaid by the other or one leads to the experience of the other.

Are 'stress' and 'anxiety' especially modern-day maladies? Both words have been blazoned across the front cover of Time magazine often over recent decades. I don't believe they are unique to our times; writers across several thousand years have described emotional distress that sounds much like our current day descriptions of stress and anxiety.

It is only in the last fifty years that health researchers have tried to measure how common anxiety is, country by country or worldwide. It is a research task full of difficult challenges and the results vary considerably. Nevertheless, the agreement among these experts on the prevalence of anxiety and anxiety disorders is that they are common and widespread. We are looking at something very much more than a few per cent of the population. The same can be said about stress, though it is less of a medical category measurable from doctor consultation data.

As a young, health professional in the 1980s I saw many hundreds of patients every year who sought help with stress and anxiety. The organisation where I worked was a newly formed foundation offering holistic support for people with cancer. As it grew the staff included doctors, naturopaths, counsellors and others. The founder, Ian Gawler, had by this time published a bestselling book about his most remarkable recovery from 'terminal' widespread bone cancer, when a young man in his twenties.

Gawler's recovery was achieved through holistic, self-help and lifestyle treatment strategies. Ian identified stress as one of the factors that needed addressing to enable his recovery, as did at least one of his treating doctors. In his subsequent writing and public speaking career he became an outstanding presenter of the

considerable body of research pointing the finger at the stress and cancer connection.

Cancer patients came from all across Australia, New Zealand and further afield to experience the support groups and health education programs we offered. Many of the patients brought personal stories of great stress over recent years, or across their whole lives. They also had their stories of cancer diagnosis, treatment attempts and sometimes the gloomy, hopeless predictions (prognosis) of a specialist doctor. Many of these patients responded extremely well to the stress-reducing and healing methods they found in our program, including meditation. Often they had a partner or support person with them who also found great relevance and relief in tackling their own stress problems.

One of the very first who unburdened her story to me remains powerfully fixed in my memory. She was a Polish woman in her sixties who was still haunted by vivid memories of lying hiding under her bed, not daring to breathe while Nazi troopers stormed through her house taking away her parents and a brother to never be seen again. Following our program her cancer growth slowed and general health improved. She learned to breathe again. Most important she loved learning to meditate and experiencing peace of mind like she had not felt since childhood.

Something else happened in my work through those years. Due to the developing reputation of that program a stream of people other than cancer patients began to present—people whose main issues were stress and anxiety. Originally we only had programs for cancer patients—then I took the role of offering one-to-one consulting and group programs for the general patients and clients. Soon I had groups running daytime, evenings and weekends and a regular stream of new clients for private consultation. I heard a

multitude of stories of broken down, unhappy marriages and of frustration, anger and resentment.

I heard about people's unpleasant, stressful jobs, failed businesses, bankruptcy and seemingly impossible financial commitments. Men and women with runaway anxiety, guilt, tense bodies and inability to relax or sleep came seeking help.

I was employed as a teacher of meditation, healthy nutrition and other lifestyle factors in which I was well versed; only some years later did I also undertake postgraduate training in counselling. A striking observation from the beginning was of how much relief and improvement people could experience by developing a physical and mental relaxation practice. I taught a range of approaches to meditation, mindfulness and relaxation and took to the challenge of helping diverse clients find something that suited their makeup. At this time in my life I had already trained with several excellent meditation teachers in the USA, India, Australia and New Zealand.

In common with many meditation instructors before and since, I found it hugely gratifying to see the tension and stress on people's faces transform and to hear how good that felt. The challenge on top of this was to equip them with the skills and confidence to take the learning home and employ it on a regular basis. That too happened for many people and was fulfilling and eye opening for me. There were others who did not make the leap to bring the new learnings into their routines and lifestyle. The distractions and unhealthful elements of modern living have their own pull. The social culture of family and friends can sometimes be unsupportive when you want to make healthy changes, and that is a serious matter.

A second, striking observation in those early days of working in the field, both with the cancer patients and others, was of the holistic, multi-faceted nature of improving health and overcoming stress. I observed and supported clients putting into place new,

healthy eating regimes, exercise programs and creative pursuits that were regenerative. Some found ways to bring the medicine of humour and laughter into their lives and developed new, more nourishing social relationships. I got to understand the way this approach to recovery involves a network or web of factors that support each other and work together. In chapter two, Pathways to freedom, I explore this network of factors as being like a jigsaw puzzle of health.

Some six years after starting at Ian Gawler's foundation I moved on. It had been an enormous grounding in working with both life-threatening illness situations and with people seeking effective, user-friendly ways of finding freedom from their stress and anxiety problems. I moved to work in a holistic medical centre in the city of Melbourne.

The director at the Whole Health Clinic asked me to seek a 'general practice' grant from the Commonwealth Government to set up group support programs for patients with serious, lifechallenging illness. We succeeded in obtaining grant money, in creating a structured, multi-faceted program, having a steady flow of patients and seeing outstanding results over a seven-year period. Patients came with illnesses including cancers, AIDS, chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple sclerosis. Much like at the Gawler Foundation there were many inquiries from people with less pressing physical illness but urgent problems with stress and anxiety. I set up extra programs for those people and continued to learn more about types of people, their stress and anxiety issues and what works to restore quality of life.

Following those years with the Whole Health Clinic I worked in other areas of community and mental health, particularly with people with serious, psychotic-type illness. In these roles neither health education nor therapy were the primary focus of what I was doing. Opportunities did arise though to assist people with stress.

Families and carers of a mental illness patient were often those in most need, and appreciative of some support and skills in managing the overwhelming stress in their lives.

In 2009 I took an opportunity to serve on the Board of the newly formed Australian Teachers of Meditation Association (more recently named Meditation Association of Australia). The association's purpose is to be a peak body supporting professionals to bring meditation and mindfulness into their work in health care, education, business and other fields. For me this became a time to refocus my career on the challenges of stress and anxiety and how people can find freedom from the tyranny of these conditions.

I brought fresh vision and some newfound understandings into my return to this field of work. This book is one result of that experience. Writing this makes me feel very thankful to my more recent clients and students, as well as those from some decades in the various settings described above. I am grateful for all that I have learned from them.

Chapter two is an overview of the broad network of health-building factors available to us for building resilience and wellbeing in the face of stress and anxiety. It includes looking at doctors and medication, psychotherapies, nutrition, exercise, rest, sleep and much more. The entire scenario is presented pictorially in a 'jigsaw puzzle of health'.

We move in chapter three to a thorough examination of meditation and mindfulness. The practical application of these two concepts has been the heart and soul of many hundreds of journeys I have witnessed, through and out the other side of anxiety. The chapter brings clarity, simplicity and practicality to meditation and mindfulness as key parts of your path to freedom and wellbeing. The explanation of meditation is followed by guidelines on learning how to do it. Equally important, there is advice on how to skilfully approach the types of troubled thinking and 'racing mind'



that an anxiety sufferer will know all too well and will confront when trying to meditate.

The practice of meditation can also be effectively injected into everyday life in smaller, shorter doses. Chapter four, Brief stress and anxiety busters, shows you some powerful ways of getting the benefit of meditation anywhere you are and with whatever time is available. It even introduces you to 'The mindful cup of tea' (or coffee), a mini-meditation using that most well known of all rituals for taking a restful time out.

Chapter five presents understanding and guidance rarely put together in other books on mindfulness, meditation or anxiety. It is about the metaskills—the attitudinal stance or 'spirit'— that you bring to meditation practice. Metaskills are qualities that go beyond and above the basic knowledge of meditation techniques. They can enliven your practice and have the greatest impact upon your progress toward freedom from stress and anxiety. Indeed these kind of metaskills or 'spirit' can enrich your everyday life well beyond meditation practice.

Chapter six takes another important piece of the jigsaw of health and makes a plea for you to value it as potential medicine: humour and laughter. I look at what we know about its medicinal potential and present hints and ideas on the widest possible approach to getting your daily dose.

There are many activities beyond formal-type meditation that can play a real part in releasing you from stress and anxiety. Some of these can be activities you do regularly, as simple as walking to the bus or the shops, or stepping out into your garden. Chapter seven, Mindfulness and meditation everywhere, unfolds the mindful and therapeutic possibilities in all the hours and moments of our lives. It also goes further into a range of recreational and creative activities that you may want to try out; types of activities

that can become an important part of your overall, holistic path to wellbeing.

Chapter eight, the conclusion, draws all of the threads together. It sends you forward with the understanding and confidence that you do have the resources to make a successful journey out the other side of difficult stress and anxiety. Here is a message to you that will bear repeating at other places through this book: freedom from stress and anxiety can be found, others have done it and you can do it too.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Stress and anxiety: what's the problem

PERHAPS YOU SOMETIMES FEEL 'stressed out' or that you suffer from the stresses in your life. Maybe you often feel anxious and nervous about things or feel very anxious without knowing why. Stress and anxiety, while closely related are two lenses for viewing emotional distress. When we talk about stress we are putting more focus on the situational factors involved in the distress; with anxiety the focus is upon our mental and physical experience of being distressed in a particular way.

Someone who feels anxious frequently, or to an extreme degree, may well receive a medical diagnosis of an anxiety disorder. Stress, on the other hand is usually more of a common usage term than a medical one, though there are also several stress disorders that can be diagnosed.

Stress and anxiety can hardly be discussed without mentioning depression. Depression is that very common mood disorder or mental suffering that includes lowered enthusiasm and interest in many areas of life, extended periods of feeling sad or 'blue', feelings of worthlessness, poor concentration and other symptoms.

Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common mental health problems occurring in Australia, USA and many parts of the world. Anxiety and depression will very often occur together. The great majority of people with depression have significant anxiety. The converse case is also true, that the great majority of those with severe anxiety experience some level of depression.

In writing this book, I have chosen to focus upon the anxiety side of mental suffering because across the last three decades I have seen many more people in my classes or consultation complaining of stress and anxiety. In my experience most of the healing factors I describe in this book have a more obvious application to helping with anxiety but are likely to assist with depression as well. Research seems to support this—the body of published research on the effects of meditation and mindfulness shows considerable benefits for both anxiety and depression.

Medical science tells us that both prolonged stress and anxiety can be harmful for our health and our enjoyment of life. The rest of this chapter outlines the nature of stress and anxiety, what we know about them and their impact on people's wellbeing.

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