



## Stress and anxiety are normal — make them your friends!

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Dr Lisa Damour is an American psychologist and author of the best-selling books *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood* and *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*. She also writes a monthly *New York Times* column and co-hosts the podcast 'Ask Lisa: The Psychology of Parenting'.

Speaking at the recent Alliance for Girls' Schools Australasia summit on girls' education, Dr Damour asked how girls can take the stress and anxiety that they have been feeling lately, especially since the start of the pandemic, and turn these emotions into "fuel" — helping them to make sense of stress and anxiety, and learning how to use them in a positive way.

This is a very different way of viewing stress and anxiety, but Dr Damour argues that the definition of mental wellbeing that has taken hold in recent years — that you should feel calm, relaxed and happy *all the time* — is "hugely problematic" because it simply isn't possible to sustain these feelings for very long. In fact, most people are likely to feel stressed or anxious within twenty minutes of getting up in the morning. Therefore, she argues, we need to "reset" the definition of mental wellbeing.

Dr Damour believes that good mental health is "when you have the right feeling at the right time and you are able to manage it effectively". These 'right feelings at the right time' include tension, worry, sadness, grief and anger. On the other hand, she says, if someone has succeeded in convincing you that "you're not supposed to have these feelings" and that their scented oil or weighted blanket or 'wellness' app will help your negative feelings go away, "then that's where we have to be careful".

Humans are designed to have a wide range of emotions — "some positive, some negative, some light, some dark" — so thinking that we're supposed to feel good all the time will, ironically, make us feel bad. So what does Dr Damour believe that we *really* need to know about stress and anxiety?

The most important thing to know about anxiety is that psychologists are fine with it most of the time. We have always considered anxiety to be a normal, healthy emotion. It is a fundamentally protective emotion. It is an experience we have, it is an alarm that rings, when something's not right.

The anxiety response you have when something upsets you or gives you a fright is appropriate. It's an uncomfortable feeling and it gets your attention. That's anxiety "doing its job".

As an example, Dr Damour says that when a student is freaking out about an upcoming exam, she asks them, "Have you studied?" If the answer is "No" she says, "Good, you're having the right reaction! You *should* be very anxious if you have a big exam coming and you haven't started studying. As soon as you start studying, you will feel much better. Anxiety is doing its job to get your attention." In this way, she says, we can view anxiety as a friend: it's the right feeling at the right time. Our anxiety is telling us that something is off-track and we need to pay attention.

What are the exceptions? Not all anxiety, says Dr Damour, is good for us. There are two times when psychologists consider anxiety to be unhealthy. The first is if there is anxiety but nothing is wrong, like an alarm that rings for no reason. The second situation is when it makes sense to have anxiety under the circumstances but the anxiety is out of proportion to the situation. For instance, she says, we want students to be concerned about a big exam — to have energy and some tension, especially if they haven't done enough study — but we don't want them having panic attacks.



In both cases, psychologists can help get to things under control. However, there are also techniques that we can use to help us recover from stress and anxiety so we are ready for when they next occur. These techniques include relaxation and distraction.

Everybody's definition of relaxation is different. It could be hanging out with friends, reading a book, watching TV, having a bath, taking a nap, or going for a run. Controlled deep breathing is also another really helpful technique for resetting the body to its pre-anxiety state.

Distraction is another method of helping our minds to recover from stress and anxiety. In fact, there are two forms of distraction. The first is 'hard fascination' where you do an activity that's so absorbing that it crowds out all other thoughts. These types of activities can include lifting weights at the gym, playing a musical instrument, doing a difficult puzzle, going to the movies, or anything else in which you become totally immersed.

The second is 'soft fascination' where the activity is familiar or not particularly taxing. Because it only takes up part of your brain, there's room free to mull over problems or come up with solutions. For instance, says Dr Damour, have you ever noticed that you often get your best ideas in the shower? Other 'soft' distractions can include going for a walk in nature, gardening, knitting, or driving your car without listening to music or the radio.

We all feel stress and anxiety in our everyday lives. For the most part, these emotions are the right feelings at the right time, and knowing how to manage them effectively will work to our advantage. Being stressed about missing the bus can make us walk faster or break into a sprint. Feeling tense before a big exam might even improve our performance. Through accepting that stress and anxiety are normal and appropriate emotions, and rebalancing our lives to fit in more time to rest and recover, we can stop worrying about stress and anxiety or viewing them as 'bad'. Rather, stress and anxiety are our friends — designed specifically to warn, protect and help us.

### References

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