



*Lesson Seven:
The Physical Realm*

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Food, Substances and Anxiety

Many people notice a strong connection between what they're ingesting and their anxiety levels. Just as parents must responsibly decide what goes into their kids' bodies, so you, as the parent of your body, must decide what makes you feel good, clear, connected, alive, and loved and, conversely, what makes you feel anxious. And I'm not talking about the temporary high that arises when you eat a chocolate bar! No, paying attention to what you ingest means asking yourself, "What makes me feel good in the long run? What helps me feel clear and alive and what makes me feel irritable, anxious and shut down?"

How do you feel when you eat, drink, or ingest:

Sugar

Caffeine

Alcohol

Nicotine

Marijuana

Chips

Soft drinks

Dairy

Grains

It's not hard to understand that stimulating substances will amplify your anxiety by amping up your nervous system. While caffeine and sugar don't have a negative effect on everyone, I've found with the vast majority of my clients that when they reduce or eliminate these substances from their diet, their anxiety lessens and they find themselves more available to connect with their partners.

It requires discipline to remove certain foods from your diet, but it's part of learning to be a loving parent to your body as you say, "I know you would like to eat cookies every day, but I can see that they're causing you to feel anxious or irritable, so we're going to have to take a break from them." Everyone has their own tolerance levels for toxins or allergens, so it's important that you stay connected to your body and notice the effect that different foods have on your emotional state. There are no blanket rules when it comes to food; there's only your particular relationship to food and your body.

Note: It's also easy for me to say, "Take a break," but if food/drugs/substances have become a replacement for true nourishment (connecting inside) or a way to escape your uncomfortable feelings, then it's no longer on the level of simply deciding to cut it out but has become more of an addiction. The work then is deeper and longer and requires committing to tuning inside consistently so that you stop abandoning yourself and learn about what it means to love yourself on all levels. This isn't something that will happen quickly, but perhaps another seed will be planted that will inspire to you to take more loving actions on your own behalf.

A Pause Before Meals

I talk a lot in my work about the importance of slowing down. We know that we move too fast, we work too fast and we keep every slot of every day filled up and accounted for. A big piece of this inner work is learning to carve out empty windows of time and space amidst the endless stream of doing to just *be*.

But the leap between insight and action is often as big as the Grand Canyon. As much as we know we need to slow down, sometimes just the thought that we have to slow down adds to the overwhelm.

With our pace of living at increasing alarmingly speeds, it's hard to imagine finding even ten minutes to meditate, journal, or practice yoga. But there is one simple way to slow down and it only takes a minute. It's an action that has been shown to improve digestion and mental well-being. You can do it anywhere and it doesn't require money, special clothes, or anyone else.

The action is to take one minute to become mindful just before you eat, to become fully present to the act that you are about to engage in.

This could be as simple as closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths — in and out, slowly and gently, with presence.

It could be offering gratitude for the food that sits before you, recognizing the people and machines and work required to transform a seed into a vegetable, transport that vegetable from farm to table, and prepare it for the meal you are about to consume.

It could be imagining, as Thich Nhat Hanh so poetically writes, that the entire universe exists in the food you eat — the sun, clouds, rain, earth, worms, fields and bees — and allowing that awareness to fill you with a moment of awe. It could be saying a simple prayer that resonates with you.

Whatever you do in that one minute, try to come from the heart as opposed to reciting a heady series of words or actions. This is your time to pause and be open to blessing, a built-in moment of mindfulness in the otherwise harried, hurried pace of your day.

If you want to extend your one-minute action, consider remaining present for the duration of your meal without the distraction of a phone, book, or screen of any kind. Consider what it would be like to slow down enough to taste each bite, to notice and savor the flavors as they meld and dissolve in your mouth, and to continue to offer appreciation for the miracle that this delicious, (and hopefully) healthy food has ended up on your plate and in your body.

If you're in the presence of others, put all screens away and focus on the opportunity to connect in conversation with the actual, flesh-and-blood human beings who sit in front of you (as opposed to the virtual ones that tend to populate more and more of our connections).

You might not think that one minute could make any difference. But when you realize that one minute three times a day becomes three minutes, and three minutes seven days a week becomes 21 minutes — you can see that it all starts to add up. 21 minutes of pause in your week is better than nothing. It's a wonderful beginning to allow this habit of pause to domino-effect into other areas of your life.

When you start to implement this new one-minute practice around mealtimes, you slowly create a new habit of pause, until eventually your mind and body start to crave those times of non-doing. And when you do it enough, you'll feel a bit strange when you begin a meal without taking a moment to pause — like you're tumbling over yourself.

You'll naturally and effortlessly carve out more moments of non-doing in the stream of your week, and notice the times in your day that naturally invite that sacred pause. The portals of pause are waiting for you to receive them; our days, contrary to what the culture encourages, actually include a natural rhythm of ebb and flow. One minute of ebb can lead to more ebb. It's the turning inward that creates the fullness of self that we're all seeking, and is one of the antidotes to the anxiety that you're struggling with.

This may sound like an easy task, but it's not. In fact, it's astonishing to me how difficult it is to pause long enough to come into our breath and bodies and connect to the heart. It's like we're running on automatic and we resist the putting on the breaks (more on why we keep running later in the course). But once you do it one time, it becomes a tiny bit easier. If you can do it for a day, you've broken ground on planting the seeds of a new habit. And then, before you know it, you can do it for two days, then three, then a week, and then a month. Bite-sized, manageable steps to form a new, healthy habit.

This article first appeared on MindBodyGreen.com.

Alcohol and Anxiety

"I had so much anxiety this weekend," a client will share with me during a Monday session. "I had been feeling so good for the past couple of weeks, but this weekend I seemed to have taken five giant steps backward."

"Tell me about your weekend," I say.

"Well, my boyfriend and I went out with some friends on Friday night and I had a couple of drinks. Then we went to a wedding on Saturday and drank a bit too much. I woke up Sunday morning feeling pretty crappy. And I spent the rest of Sunday with the familiar pit of anxiety in my stomach. All of my familiar mental obsessions and ruminations came barreling into my brain: What if I don't love my boyfriend enough? What if I'm gay? You know how it goes."

"Yes, I do. Any idea what triggered it?" I'll ask, although I already know the answer.

"Probably the alcohol."

"Yes, probably."

It's astonishing to me how many times I've had this conversation with countless clients. And the solution seems simple: if alcohol is scientifically known to stir up anxiety, then eliminating or significantly reducing its consumption would reduce anxiety. Yet when I offer this suggestion, I'm often met with resistance.

It's not like when I suggest reducing or eliminating sugar, gluten, or grains, all of which are also known to contribute to anxiety and depression for some people. Those aren't easy to eliminate, but they don't occupy the same social status in our culture that alcohol does.

We live in an alcohol-addicted culture. Alcohol is used as a social lubricant, and has become such a crutch for most people to feel comfortable socially that they would feel lost without it. The paradox is that while alcohol serves as a social lubricant and works in the moment to stave off anxiety, the aftermath of alcohol consumption, especially for highly sensitive people, is an anxiety hangover the next day, and often for several days.

Is it worth it? Is it worth it to sacrifice your mental well-being for a couple of drinks? Many of my clients share that they feel better when they eliminate alcohol completely from their lives. "I really shouldn't have one single sip," they say. Others feel fine with modified use of alcohol, meaning a half a glass of wine every few weeks. But in order to make these changes they first have to get past their resistance.

Some of the resistance has its roots in the fact that they've always struggled socially and have self-diagnosed as having "social anxiety." When I hear this self-diagnosis I'll ask the following questions: Do you struggle when you're hanging out in a small group of people or just in large gatherings? Just in large gatherings.

Do you struggle socially when you're with a group where there is a common interest and partying isn't the focus? No. What's your favorite way to socialize: with a small group, or one-on-one? One-on-one.

Then I'll offer my new "diagnosis:" You don't have social anxiety; you're a highly sensitive person!

When you know yourself and know where you thrive, you can stop trying to squeeze yourself into the culturally prescribed model for "cool" and "fun." Clients will often share with me that when they stop drinking and partying on the weekends, their friends or roommates will poke fun at them for being boring. "So what?" they respond. "I'm not bored with my life."

It requires courage to step outside the box. There can be no doubt that we live in an extroverted, drinking culture, and when you step out of that model you're stepping out of the mainstream. But in making the choice to party less or not at all, which greatly supports your decision to reduce alcohol consumption, you're making a very loving choice for yourself, one that not only honors your wiring as a highly sensitive person — and likely an introvert — but one that places your desire for an anxiety-free life above your desire to fit in.

Is it choice worth making? If you're seeking more wellness, I would think the answer is an unequivocal yes.

This article first appeared on mindbodygreen.com.

Natural Remedies for Anxiety

People often ask my opinion on medication. It's a loaded question, and I'm not one to give categorical answers as I don't believe in the one-size-fits-all approach to healing. I have seen medication prove beneficial in the short term, and I've also seen it cause more harm than good. My approach is to try everything you can without altering your body's chemistry with medication, and if, after applying the four-realms model that I teach here, you still feel like medication would be the helpful to you, trust yourself.

One way to address the physical symptoms of anxiety and create more physiological balance is to work with a licensed and skilled naturopath. A skilled naturopath can often dramatically help you feel calmer in your body.

These are remedies that course members have used with success. There are several threads on the forum on natural remedies for anxiety as well:

Calm Thoughts by Source Naturals - "Helps reduce anxiety and stress. Supports calm focus."

<http://www.sourcenaturals.com/products/GP1053/>

SAM-E (prescribed by an ND – naturopathic doctor).

GABA (amino acid)

[http://www.webmd.com/vitamins-supplements/ingredientmono-464-GABA%20\(GAMMA-AMINOBTYRIC%20ACID\).aspx?activeIngredientId=464&activeIngredientName=GABA%20\(GAMMA-AMINOBTYRIC%20ACID\)](http://www.webmd.com/vitamins-supplements/ingredientmono-464-GABA%20(GAMMA-AMINOBTYRIC%20ACID).aspx?activeIngredientId=464&activeIngredientName=GABA%20(GAMMA-AMINOBTYRIC%20ACID))

Holy Basil

<http://medicinehunter.com/holy-basil>

Bach Flower Essences: Rescue Remedy: homeopathic remedy for anxiety and stress

<http://www.bachflower.com/rescue-remedy-information/>

Bach Flower Essences: Rock Rose – “Adds courage and presence of mind in the face of terror or extreme fear”

<http://www.bachflower.com/original-bach-flower-remedies/>