Dear Alice,

I am a senior in college and experience major anxiety and stress before taking an exam, presenting to a group, or any other new situation. I quiver, have a very upset stomach, sweat, and cannot eat. I have been told that I inherited this trait of a “nervous stomach” from my grandfather. I am engaged and will be getting married in a year and a half. My question is, how common is it for a bride to take medicine to calm her nerves on the day of and the days leading up to the wedding? Would it be difficult to find a doctor to prescribe this for me if I had no other emotional problems?

Thanks,
NERVY

Answer

Dear NERVY,

People consistently rank public speaking and other forms of public presentations, like weddings, higher than death when polled about their worst fears. In fact, your mental and physical reactions are among the most universal of stress responses. While statistics on downing anti-anxiety meds on the way to the altar are not readily available, the fact remains that Valium, a tranquilizer, was at one time the most prescribed drug in the country. Therefore, you can bet your bouquet or boutonnière that some partners-to-be were and probably are chemically calming down.

Tranquilizers, anti-anxiety medicines, and beta-blockers have been shown to be very helpful to some people in feeling more comfortable in potentially anxiety-producing situations. However, even if you and a health care provider decide that a certain medication is right for you, it would be smart to practice other stress-relieving techniques to help ensure that pills don’t become your only way to relax.

Regular aerobic activity, a healthy diet, and sufficient sleep make up the first line of defense in reducing overall stress. Decreased intake of chemical stressors like caffeine and refined sugars can also help prevent exacerbation of everyday tension that you may carry around like a garter. In addition, it may be a good idea to meet with a therapist or counselor to discuss aspects of the wedding and marriage that might be making you anxious. A counselor can also teach you behavioral and cognitive techniques to help manage your anxiety. Your campus likely has a health services office with counselors on staff, or to see a mental health
professional off-campus, you could ask for a counseling referral from your primary health care provider.

Since you have about eighteen months until you tie the knot, why not bone-up on some stress- and anxiety-reduction exercises before finding a doctor to write you a prescription? Below is a deep-breathing exercise that works wonders to calm the nerves of students, professionals, performers, and of course, the wedding-bound, when faced with sudden and stressful situations.

1. Inhale deeply. Your abdomen and stomach should expand as you inhale.
2. Hold your breath for 3 to 4 seconds and think to yourself, "I am warm."
3. Exhale and think, "I am calm." Imagine all of the tension leaving your mind and body with each exhalation.
4. Breathe normally for 10 seconds.
5. Repeat steps 1 to 4 three or four times.

Did a teacher or parent ever tell you to take a deep breath and calm down? There's actually a reason taking a deep breath works. This technique pronounces the movement of your diaphragm (a muscle in the center of your chest cavity), which sends chemical signals to your heart (via the vagus nerve) to slow down. This results in a decreased breathing rate, reduced muscle tension, clearer thinking, less sweating, and a calmer stomach. It might be a good idea to start practicing right away, so that you can use it effectively when you really need it... like on your big day.

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [2]
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Dry mouth when public speaking [6]
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Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]
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