

# Managing Anxiety in the Modern World

By Cara Wirt, LMT CAMT

As a massage therapist, I find that many of my clients suffer from the effects of chronic anxiety. Common symptoms include insomnia, depression, headaches, upset stomach, and muscle tension. Part of the reason so many of us suffer has to do with the way our bodies were designed to deal with stress. When we are threatened or face intense emotional upset, the nervous system floods our bodies with cortisol and adrenaline. This rush of hormones is a safety net, causing a cascade of physical responses that prepare the body to respond quickly and get out of harm's way.

The original intention of this response was vital for the continuation of the species, as our ancestors needed to be alert and ready to run if a lion was chasing them. The problem in our modern society is that for many of us it feels like the 'lion' is everywhere, manifesting in the form of tight deadlines, family dysfunction, challenging co-workers, intrusive media, and cultural pressure. It can seem like there is no escape, and returning to a feeling of calm and safety is elusive. As a result of this constant state of fight or flight, adrenal fatigue leads to persistent low energy and a multitude of health issues that have become the new normal.



A multifaceted approach is required to combat this constant state of stress. Finding ways to activate the parasympathetic nervous system to bring your body out of 'fight or flight' and into a state of rest and relaxation is the first step. Massage therapy is an effective way to support the downregulation of the autonomic nervous system. That blissful and relaxed feeling you get after a massage is a good indication that stress is dissipating. Although regular massage is very useful as a stress reliever, most of us don't have the time or money to receive a massage every day.

So what can be done in between massages to alleviate stress and anxiety and extend the positive benefits gained with regular massage?





The following are a few easy and low cost (even free!) options that I suggest to help deal with the effects of anxiety and stress:

**Guided Meditation** - There are a number of free apps available to lead you through a guided meditation on a variety of topics. Insight Timer is an excellent resource. And it's free!

**Binaural Beats** - These ambient, relaxing tunes have been shown to decrease cortisol and increase melatonin in the body, decreasing stress while improving focus and sleep. I (and many of my clients) report a significant decrease in anxiety after listening to a playlist of binaural beat music. All you need is a set of stereo headphones and a quiet place. There are playlists to specifically target stress relief, deep sleep, concentration, energy, etc. Search for a playlist on Spotify or AppleMusic. BrainWave is a free app available on GooglePlay and the AppStore.

**Essential Oils** - Diffusing essential oils in your bedroom at night is a great way to induce peaceful sleep. Scents such as Lavender, Clary Sage, or Bergamot can produce an aromatherapeutic response to lower anxiety, reduce stress, and calm the nervous system. In a study reviewed by the NCBI, aromatherapy massage showed a significant beneficial effect on those suffering from depression and anxiety. At Balanced Massage, we use and recommend Essential 3 therapeutic grade essential oils.

**Exercise Outside** - Even a short walk in nature (or even just your neighborhood) can be beneficial, but more vigorous exercise such as running, biking, or interval training can really help you burn off excess cortisol and decrease anxiety.

**Yoga or Tai Chi** - Establishing a regular practice of a gentle form of restorative exercise can improve focus, mood, and overall health.

**Deep Breathing** - Many of us rarely take a long, deep breath in our busy days. Even a few minutes of slow, deep breathing can shift your mindset.

**Read or Relax** - Spend time reading an enjoyable book or doing a hobby that brings you joy.

**Socialize** - Hang out with people who have a positive outlook on life and make you feel good. Anxiety can be isolating, but making time for friends and family can make you feel more connected and less overwhelmed.

When combined with many of the useful tools mentioned above, regular massage can be an important part of cultivating and maintaining a healthier lifestyle. Let Balanced Massage become a vital part of your self-care. Book an appointment and start feeling better today.

