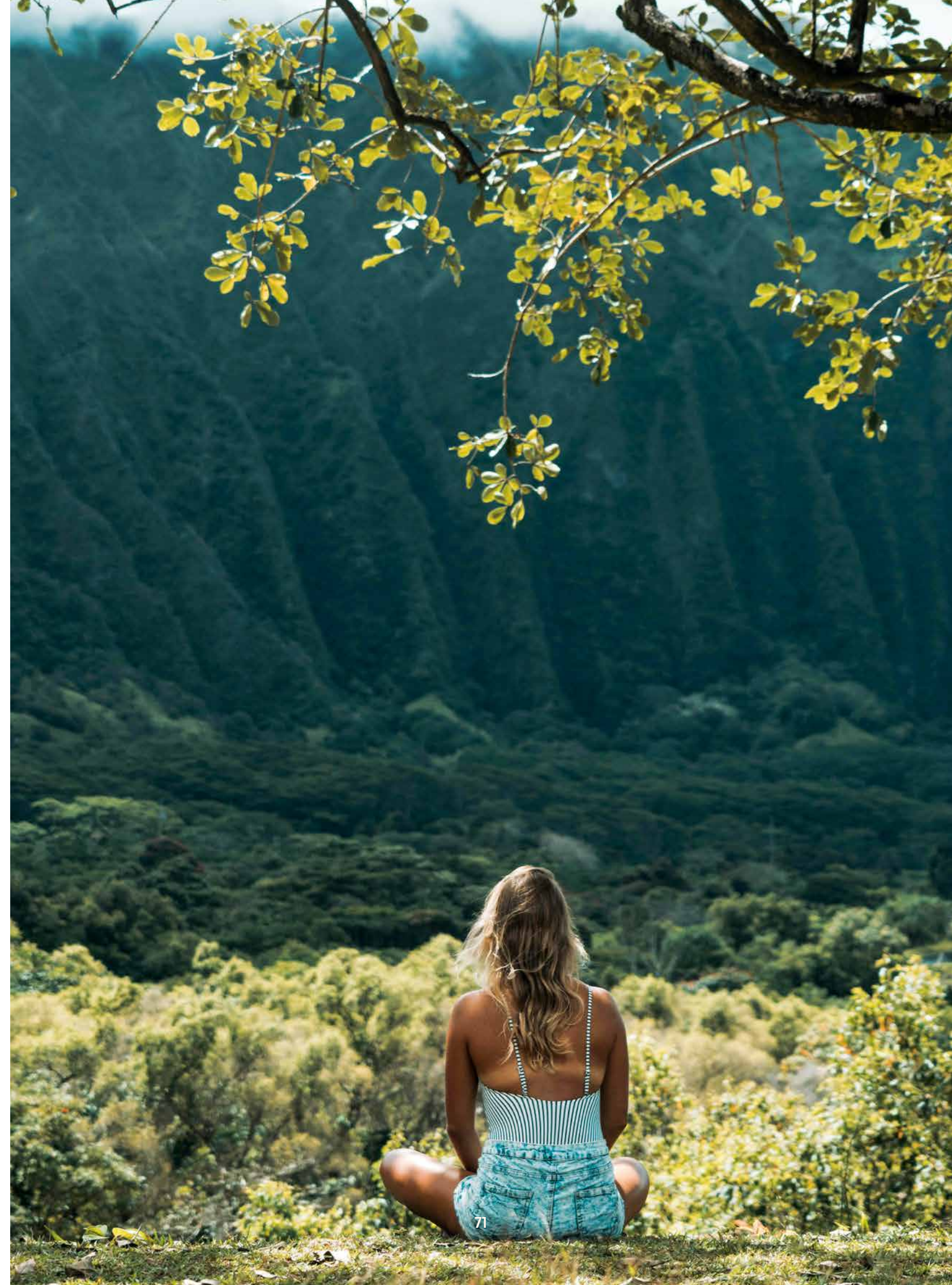


# Ayurveda for anxiety

Words by Caroline Robertson


**Anxiety is a peace thief, stealing your peace and power. India's holistic health system Ayurveda offers many effective suggestions to safeguard your serenity against this pervasive pilferer.**





Images: Top left: Saffu, Top right: Valeria Ushakova, Lower: Katherine Hanlon

**An Ayurveda practitioner may apply counselling, purification, grounding, nutrition plus tailored therapies to pacify and reset the nervous system.**

 Anxiety disorders affect one in four Australians in their life, according to healthdirect.gov.au. The WHO (World Health Organization) states "anxiety disorders are the world's most common mental disorders, affecting 301 million people in 2019."

The word anxiety originates from the Latin *angere*, to choke, and the condition can cause a slew of strangling symptoms from mild apprehension to recurring dread, even escalating to persistent panic. The symptoms of anxiety are recognisable but will differ from person to person. Which anxiety signs affect you or someone you know?

Avoidance	Memory loss
Belly butterflies	Nausea
Compulsive behaviour	Numbness
Difficulty concentrating	Obsessive, intrusive thoughts
Digestive issues	Over-preparing
Dissociation	Panic attacks
Disturbed sleep	Uncontrollable, intense fear
Dizziness	Palpitations
Dry mouth	Repetitive worries
Chills or coldness	Restlessness
Constricted throat	Shallow breathing
Fatigue	Social isolation
Headache	Sweating
Hot flashes	Tight muscles
Incoherent speech	Trembling
Irritability	
Loss of appetite	

Whatever way anxiety manifests for you, try sitting with the sensations, sending them a loving smile, tenderly touching the area affected saying, "I'm aware of you, I'm looking after you, I let you go."

**Jitter triggers**

Nature and nurture both contribute to anxiety. Ayurveda attributes anxiety largely to mental trauma or *mano abhighata*. *Samskaras* or mental impressions of past trauma, including in utero, intergenerational and past life, affect all aspects of your being if left unattended.

These things can get on your nerves, according to ayurveda.

- Depletion through poor eating or sleeping
- Emotional or physical shock
- Excess pressure to perform in career, relationships etc
- Exposure to weather extremes
- Internal toxins
- Irregular lifestyle
- Stimulants
- Substance abuse or withdrawal

- Unresolved issues such as external stressors or internal illness.
- Weak organs and tissues – particularly the endocrine and central nervous system.

**What's your anxiety type?**

There's a vast array of ways we express anxiety including:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)** – GAD sufferers are far from glad. Worry is their default setting with anything potentially triggering anxiety.
- **Health anxiety** – This may lead people to extreme regimes, a sea of supplements and stress at the slightest sniffle.
- **Obsessive compulsive disorder** – Intrusive thoughts and repetitive compulsive actions.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** – Persistent trauma from past experiences.
- **Panic disorder** – Sudden and repeated episodes of extreme anxiety leading to panic attacks.
- **Performance anxiety** – Anxiety when having to relate to a group.
- **Phobias** – Specific fears like coulrophobia, fear of clowns.
- **Social anxiety** – Anticipating being bullied, criticised, humiliated or unable to meet expectations feeds this fear.

**Anxiety according to Ayurveda**

Ayurveda, India's 5000-year-old science of life and longevity, recognises anxiety as a condition called *chittodvega*. Anxiety or the tendency for disturbing thoughts, *mano-dushti*, is attributed to an imbalance in physical, psychological and spiritual spheres including:

- **The mental channel** – *manovaha srotas*.
- **The energy channels** – *pranavaha srotas*.
- **Mental modes** – *tamas* (apathy) and *rajas* (attachment)
- **Elements** of air, ether, fire, water and earth.
- **Elemental pairs** including *Sadhaka Pitta* (governs emotions and intelligence or *Buddhi*), *Udana Vata* (regulates thinking) and *Tarpaka Kapha* (healthy brain function.)

An Ayurveda practitioner may apply counselling, purification, grounding, nutrition plus tailored therapies to pacify and reset the nervous system.

Ayurveda aims to ease anxiety through a three-fold approach encompassing:

- **Spiritual therapy** - *Daivavyapasraya Chikitsa*
- **Physical therapy** - *Yuktivyapasraya Chikitsa*
- **Mental therapy** - *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa*

Ayurvedic psychotherapy or *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* enlists skills similar to cognitive behavioural

## Peaceful mind mantra

Silently recite three times or out loud when feeling overwhelmed: *Tanme manah shiva sankalpam astu*

“May my mind have beneficial thoughts.”  
~ Rig Veda

therapy and yoga therapy. Dark fears can disperse with the light of consciousness cultivated through:

- Discernment (dhi) of what is healthy, unhealthy, real and illusory.
- Knowledge of one's eternal self (atma vijnana), apart from the anxious state, and what illuminates it.
- Recalling past challenges one has overcome (smriti)
- Cultivation of courage, patience and forbearance (dhairya)
- Faith (sraddha) in oneself and support to survive and thrive through challenges.
- Staying connected to a pervasive, peaceful presence through self-study (swadhyaya) and the eight-fold yoga system with emphasis on breathing (pranayama) and meditation (dhyana).

Jennifer Mullen is a psychotherapist, somatic integration therapist, yoga therapist and Ayurvedic lifestyle consultant. According to Mullen, “Ayurveda views anxiety as an authentic message emanating from who we really are and what is calling for change. People with anxiety may feel ungrounded and sleep deprived (Vata); angry and burnt out (Pitta); and hopeless and worrying about symptoms (Kapha). Minimising what doesn't serve us and maximising what does serve us is our path to health and usually involves identifying errors and embracing opposites.

The initial goal is to create safety and grounding in the sensations of the body and breath. Ayurveda uses food, herbs, breath, movement, sound healing, mudras and meditation as entry points to calm.

The ongoing goal is to encourage daily rituals that help one to be fully grounded in sensations of the body and breath without fear. The gift of therapy is then to discover what is calling for change using therapeutic tools.”

### Do things differently

*“Every time you are tempted to react in the same old way, ask if you want to be a prisoner of the past or a pioneer of the future.” - Deepak Chopra*

Anxiety may manifest in the following imbalances. Embrace opposing qualities to beckon balance into your life.

#### Imbalance > Increase

Absent-minded > Mindful  
Anticipation > Surrender  
Coldness > Warmth  
Depletion > Nourishment  
Dryness > Hydration and oleation  
Fear > Courage and faith  
Isolation > Connection

Pressure > Self-compassion  
Scattered > Focus  
Restlessness > Still  
Thinking > Feeling

Here are six simple steps you can employ when anxiety strikes. Some or all of them will help you face your fears.

- Note what you're anxious about.
- What helps you to prevent or address this anxiety?
- Has this happened before?
- What have you worried about in the past and has it worked out?
- Can you handle the worst-case scenario and how?
- Recognise associated emotions such as anger, blame, shame and guilt. Feel and free them.

### Tranquil treatments

Along with self-help tools to smooth inner wrinkles, Ayurveda advises muscle-melting therapies including:

- **Abhyanga** – Oil massage with sedating and strengthening oils.
- **Deha dhara** – Herbalised oils poured over the body.
- **Kizhi** – Herbal poultice massage.
- **Nasya** – Nasal drops to promote prana.
- **Shirovasti** – Pooling oil on the head contained by an open topped cap.
- **Shirodhara** – A continuous stream of medicated oil or milk over the forehead and scalp.

My client Sarah shares, “Shirodhara has a profoundly grounding effect on me. It takes me to a quiet space where I experience my true self and emerge with crystal clarity.”

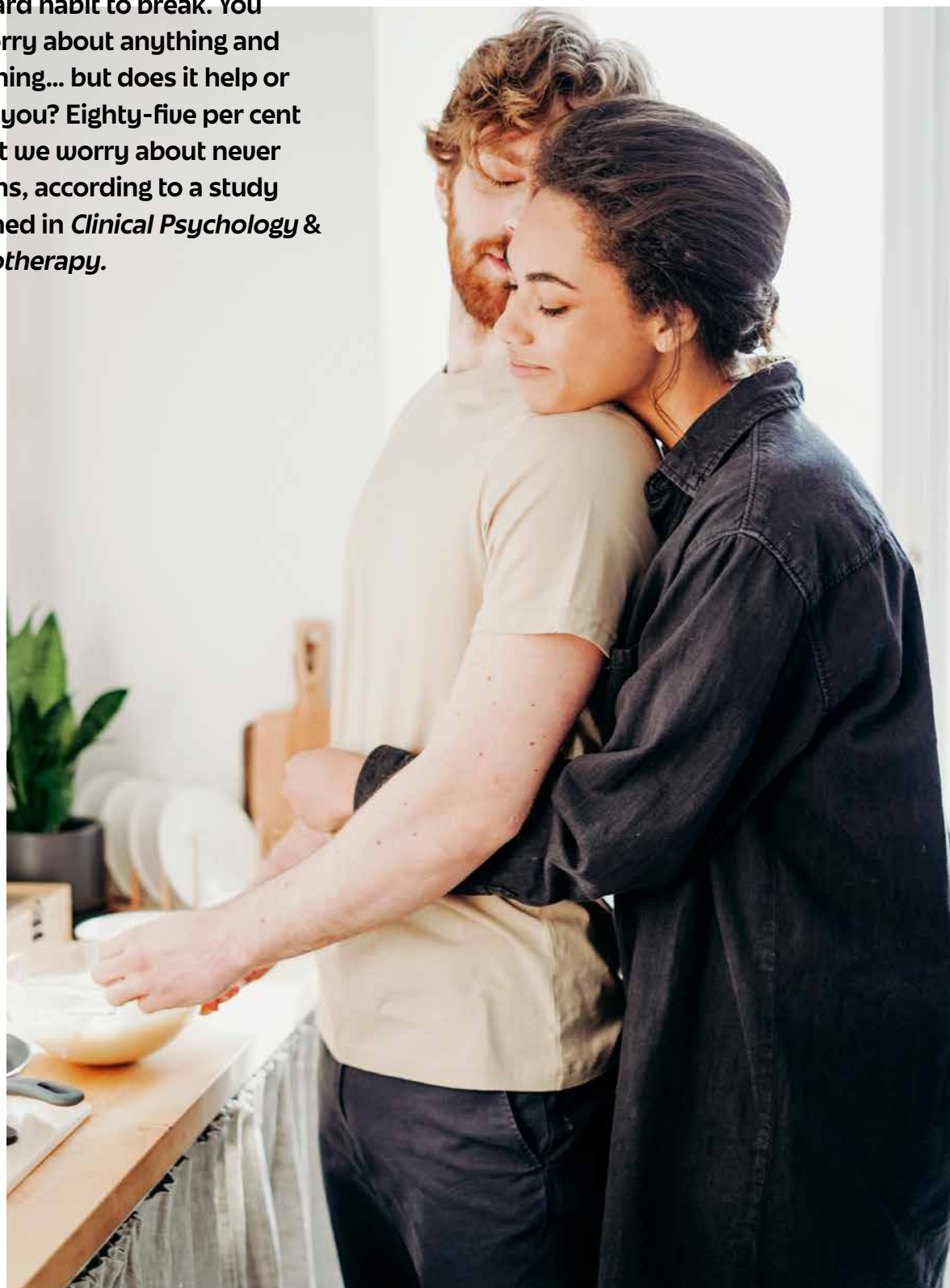
### Top 5 chill pills

Here are five Ayurvedic herbs that will help reduce anxiety.

- **Ashwagandha** *Withania somnifera*  
An adaptogen supporting stress resilience and assisting sleep.
- **Bacopa** *Bacopa monnieri*  
This brain booster enhances calm clarity.
- **Holy basil** *Ocimum sanctum*  
Can stabilise stress and blood-sugar by balancing cortisol and insulin.
- **Jatamansi** *Nardostachys jatamansi*  
This mildly sedative herb activates the calming GABAergic receptor complex.
- **Shankhpushpi** *Convolvulus pluricaulis*  
A powerful plant traditionally used for anxiety, high blood pressure and IBS.

### The weight of worry

Though worry's a waste of energy it's a hard habit to break. You can worry about anything and everything... but does it help or hinder you? Eighty-five per cent of what we worry about never happens, according to a study published in *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*.



Images: Left: Cottonbro, Top right: Valeria Ushakova, Lower: Katherine Hanlon

### Relaxing routine

A sane schedule can appease anxiety by restoring homeostasis. Prioritise peaceful practices and avoid stressful triggers until resilience builds. Only implement a few changes at a time to avoid overwhelm. Bypass hurry and worry with good time management. Aim to sleep, exercise, eat and meditate at set times daily. Commit to a regular retreat. Here are some habits you can build into your day to reduce anxiety levels.

- Awaken early and recall three things you appreciate.
- Splash face with cold water.
- Ingest a nourishing drink/snack to stabilise blood-sugar.
- Meditate or do a guided relaxation followed by gentle exercise in nature if possible.
- Enjoy self-massage with warm oil am or pm, washing off after an hour.
- Apply soothing essential oils such as sandalwood on the third eye, lavender on pulse points and rose on the heart chakra.
- Bathe then enjoy a nourishing breakfast.
- Plan for the day.
- See all happening smoothly.
- Regularly pause and breathe deeply into body, sensing stress then exhaling it out.
- Avoid overstimulating substances, activities or company.
- Move hourly through the day.
- Eat meals mindfully.
- Ensure adequate hydration with warm fluids.
- Dissipate stress with afternoon yoga nidra.
- Wind down a few hours before bed with dim lighting and relaxing activity.
- Avoid eating or alcohol within two hours of sleep (ideally by 10.30pm).
- Seek whatever comforts you such as art, bath, games, hugs, music, nature, animals, company, reading or watching something.
- Set up your snooze space so it's comfortable and sedating.

### Yoga nidra

Restore your nervous system with a relaxing session of supine yoga. Cortisol-clearing yoga nidra shifts brain waves to dreamy delta where thoughts reduce and regeneration peaks. A recent study concluded, "Yoga nidra practice was more helpful than relaxation to music in reducing depression, anxiety and insomnia among frontline COVID-19 healthcare workers." (Efficacy of Yoga Nidra on Depression, Anxiety, and Insomnia in Frontline COVID-19 Healthcare Workers, *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 2023.) 🌱



Sydney-based Caroline Robertson is an expert in Ayurveda and naturopathy with decades of experience practising and teaching. Caroline has also authored seven books including *A Woman's Ayurvedic Herbal*. For clinic or online consultations, courses or Ayurvedic retreats, see [carolinerobertson.com.au](http://carolinerobertson.com.au).

# Mellowing menu

The food you consume daily has a significant impact on your mood. These recipes, all based on foods to ease anxiety, come from Marcea Klein, Ayurveda and TCM nutritionist.



## Breakfast:

### Sweet Potato Pudding

1 purple or orange sweet potato, chopped  
1 tbsp of ghee  
¼ tsp ground cardamom  
1 pinch ground nutmeg  
¼ tsp ground coriander  
½ cup coconut milk as needed  
4 ground and skinned almonds or cashews, soaked overnight in salted water  
3 diced dates  
Pinch of salt

Steam the sweet potatoes until tender. Remove skins and add to a saucepan with the other ingredients and stir. Cook for 5-10 minutes. Mash, adding extra warm coconut milk to desired consistency.

## Snack:

### Warm Spiced Apples

1 tbsp ghee  
1 cinnamon stick  
1 clove  
½ tsp coriander  
½ tsp cardamom  
Pinch of nutmeg  
Lime (optional)  
Mint (optional)  
2 -3 apples (preferably red & ripe), peeled & thinly sliced  
¼ cup water as needed  
1 tbsp rose water (optional)  
Desiccated coconut (topping)

In a heavy saucepan, add the ghee, spices and optional lime and mint and sauté for about a minute.

Stir in the apples. Add some water and cook over low heat, with the lid on, for about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Turn off the heat. Remove the cinnamon stick and cloves.

Stir in the rose water. Serve with the cooking liquid and enjoy warm, topped with desiccated coconut, for a snack or for breakfast.

## Lunch:

### Grilled Asparagus Salad with Goat's Feta

24 spears thick asparagus, ends trimmed

1-2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil or ghee  
¼ tsp salt  
¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper  
Zest of 1 lemon  
1 tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice  
½ cup goat's feta cheese, crumbled

Preheat the grill to high or use a steamer.

Place the asparagus spears on an oiled baking sheet. Toss with 1 tablespoons of the oil, salt and pepper.

Place the asparagus spears on the grill or steamer. Cover and cook the asparagus for 3 to 4 minutes, until nicely browned on one side and still crisp, or until cooked when steaming.

Remove the asparagus from the grill or steamer and place on a baking dish. Cut on the bias into bite-sized pieces.

Place the cut asparagus in a mixing bowl. Add remaining ghee or oil, lemon zest and lemon juice. Toss well. Add the feta and some salt to taste.

Serve with warm bread or a dosa to soak up the lemon-scented olive oil and feta.

### Dinner:

#### Kale and Carrot Soup

2-3 cups chopped carrots    2.5cm chopped ginger  
450g chopped kale leaves, ¼ whole lime or lemon  
bok choy or other greens    ½ tsp salt or miso to taste  
½ tsp fennel seeds            1 tbsp sesame oil

Place the carrot and kale in a pot and add water until the vegetables are just covered. Bring to the boil. Lower the heat and add the remaining ingredients.

Cover and simmer until the vegetables are tender.

Taste and adjust seasoning. If using miso, add 1 tsp or a bit more or less to each bowl and pour the hot broth over the miso to dissolve. Then pour the rest of the soup over. You can also blend the soup before serving.

#### Nourishing Dhal

½ cup split mung dhal (soaked overnight) then drained	1 tsp cumin seeds 2 tbsp ginger, finely chopped
4 cups water	1-2 tsp ground turmeric
2 tbsp shredded coconut	2 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp turmeric	½ tsp saffron
1 tsp sea salt	1-2 cups chopped vegetables such as carrot, sweet potato, zucchini, green beans, spinach, beet and broccoli
2 tbsp oil or ghee	
1 tsp hing	
1 tsp mustard seeds	
10 curry leaves	

Place the mung dhal in a medium saucepan with water, coconut, turmeric and salt. Bring to the boil, reduce heat and simmer until beans are soft but not broken down.

Heat the oil or ghee to medium heat in a second saucepan. Add the hing and fry for 1 minute, then add the mustard seeds and fry over low heat for 2-3 minutes until they begin to pop. Add the curry leaves then add the cumin seeds. Add the ginger, coriander and saffron, continue frying over low heat, stirring constantly.

Add the vegetables and a little water to prevent sticking and cover to simmer a few minutes until the vegetables are tender. Pour the spicy vegetable mixture into the dhal, mix well and continue to simmer for 5 minutes.

Serve the dhal with basmati rice or the soup.

### Dessert:

#### Carrot Halva

4 carrots, peeled & grated

4 cups milk of choice  
¼ cup jaggery  
A few raisins  
1 pinch of saffron  
¼ tsp cinnamon  
2 tbsp ghee

Cook the carrots by braising in a little water.

Add milk to the pan and boil the mixture until the milk is absorbed by the carrots.

Add jaggery, raisins and the saffron. Cook for about 15 minutes.

Sauté the cinnamon in ghee in a pan for about 30 seconds. Serve hot.

#### Bedtime Drink

2 cups almond milk  
2 soaked pitted dates  
1 tsp ghee  
3 saffron strands  
¼ tsp nutmeg  
¼ tsp cardamom powder  
¼ tsp cinnamon powder  
¼ tsp ginger powder  
1 tbsp maple syrup or raw honey (optional)

Combine all ingredients in a blender and puree until creamy. Pour into a glass and enjoy warm or at room temperature.