The Relationship Between Stress and Asthma

by ERIC PATTERSON

Stress and Asthma

Asthma triggers are found in a multitude of everyday sources. Dust, dander, mold, pollen and smoke can initiate an attack. They seem to be everywhere and unavoidable. If you have exercise-induced asthma, even something as universally beneficial as exercise can set an attack in motion. Gaining control of your symptoms can present as a losing battle and one that only leads to frustration, anger, worry and sadness.

Though asthma is a physical health concern, be sure to give attention to your mental health. Feelings of frustration, anger, worry and sadness are perfectly normal and expected during periods of high symptoms. The problem begins when short-term, normal feelings transition into long-term, exaggerated feelings and mental illness. If left to fester, the unwanted feelings become anxiety and depression. The key that bridges the gap from normal to abnormal is stress.

Stress, like other triggers of asthma, is everywhere. It is unavoidable and inescapable. You cannot stop it. Your only hope is to contain it. Because of this, you cannot only focus your efforts on managing your asthma. You must manage stress. The best treatment stems from a holistic approach where your physical health and mental health are valued equally. If you attend to only one, the other will suffer, and you will be resigned to a life of unmanaged asthma and undesirable mental health.

Asthma Versus Anxiety

You already know that stress and asthma feed into each other. A major way this happens is through the similarity of symptoms. Your body and mind confuse anxiety and asthma to the point that they seem the same. Similar symptoms of anxiety and asthma include:

- Tightness in chest
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Hyperventilation
- Dizziness
- Sweating

Because so many physical symptoms overlap, the association becomes stronger. You are no longer able to tell the difference between anxiety and asthma while both worsen.

Next page: breaking the anxiety-asthma cycle.

Break the Cycle

The relationship between stress and asthma becomes distorted and changed over time. When acute attacks first occurred, they were likely met with surprise, confusion and fear. Maybe you considered the attack to be an anomaly or a fluke, not likely to happen again. With repetition, the fear grows larger and is no longer confined to the attack itself. Instead, it becomes generalized to an anticipatory fear. This means that when symptoms are not present, you find yourself worrying about the next attack, how bad it's going to be and what you can do to avoid it. Your stress has you convinced that this planning helps when, in actuality, it raises your overall anxiety, which makes it more likely to have an attack sooner.

These steps represent a typical asthma cycle when anxiety is involved.

- The event represents the first symptoms to appear including shortness of breath, tightness in chest, wheezing and coughing.
- The way that your mind interprets your symptoms will dictate the outcome. When you perceive the situation as a normal, expected asthma attack, you will feel only discomfort. Your mind and body can manage discomfort relatively well, and you will move through the symptoms more quickly. When you perceive the situation as danger, your mind will react with panicked thinking. Your body will react with tension, rigidity, as you are more likely to hold your breath.
- This is the actual attack. It could be asthma, anxiety or a combination of the two. Attacks can last anywhere from a few seconds up to 30 minutes. Some people claim that anxiety attacks can last for hours, but if your symptoms last more than half an hour, you may be misperceiving your symptoms. Be sure to talk it over with your doctor.
- Attack ends and relief. The good news is that all panic attacks and asthma attacks end. In the moment, they feel like they will go on for eternity, but even the worst panic attack ever ended. After the end, you experience a mix of relief, gratitude and thankfulness that it has concluded.
- The feelings of relief do not last long, though. Shortly after the attack, your mind begins to anticipate the next attack. Where will it be? When will it be? How bad will it be? It is this anticipation that sets the stage for the next anxiety attack. Your symptoms build until the next event presents and the cycle begins again.

Treat the Physical

To avoid feelings of being overwhelmed or desperation, work to complete the behaviors you know will improve your physical symptoms.

- **Gaining awareness of your triggers will aid in your attempts to reduce symptoms.** Be conscious of days, times and activities that seem to set off symptoms. By noticing trends, you become better able to add prevention. If mold and dust induce your asthma symptoms, take steps to protect your environment or avoid situations that are too risky.
- **Follow recommendations.** Your doctor is looking out for your health and best interest. Following her recommendations is a must to improve you asthma. Consistency is key. If you do not follow the treatment plan consistently, you do not have information regarding effectiveness. Be open and comfortable discussing your symptoms and fears associated with asthma. If you do not have a strong bond with your physician, seek a second opinion for better results.

Next page: treating physical and mental symptoms.

Treat the Physical

- **Asthma Action Plan.** The American Lung Association has a fantastic resource to monitor, track and respond to increasing symptoms. Completing the plan as a family helps give everyone a sense of control through a recommendation of care. Writing and seeing information on paper reduces worry. Rather than asking yourself endless "what ifs," you can simply refer to the action plan. Produce multiple copies of the plan and keep duplicates in places where symptoms are likely to strike.

Treat the Mental

If your physical health symptoms are treated to an acceptable level, you can move on towards mental health aspects of your well-being. Follow the steps below to ***MAKE*** anxiety a thing of the past. Here's how:

- **M**onitor. Whenever you monitor your symptoms, you need patience, understanding and a willingness to perceive your symptoms as objectively as possible. Like in asthma, note the triggers including situations, people and stressors that spike symptoms. Listen to what your body is telling you by acknowledging your physical symptoms. Do you get sweaty, restless or tightness in your chest? Listen to what your thoughts are telling you to accept the cognitive symptoms. Do you imagine that you dying or think that you are going crazy?
- **A**ction. If your monitoring system is sending you clues that anxiety is increasing, use your tested and reliable relaxation techniques. Only the best relaxation techniques will be helpful when it comes to damage control. Damage control could be using a medication, deep breathing or muscle relaxation. During the process, remind yourself that anxiety is always "discomfort, not danger." This attack will not kill you. If medication is your most frequently used action, consider an alternative. Medication works quickly and is effective but does little to reduce future attacks. Preventive action will allow you to experiment with techniques and interventions appropriate for each situation while symptoms are low.

- **K**eep at it. You will not be successful in your first attempts of reducing a panic attack, but the drive to keep going will allow for future success. Stopping anxiety means a huge shift in the way you think and respond to these situations. These actions will not change without effort. Worry only increases anxiety. Imagine spending the energy you put towards worrying in ways that actually decrease anxiety. By keeping at it, you give yourself opportunity that you would not have otherwise.
- **E**nd it. If you keep at it, you end it. Just like every asthma attack ends, every panic attack ends. In fact, if you follow the information above fully, work hard to find new interventions and practice them until perfection, you could end anxiety altogether.

Conclusion

With the stress associated with asthma, you know that anxiety is soon to follow. It is not a question of if; it is a question of when. Knowing this allows you the occasion to move with purpose. By limiting the physical symptoms, you can lower the stress, and lower stress leads to a better opportunity to reduce the anxiety and **MAKE** it end. The best-case scenario is being so preventive that anxiety does not have the chance to fully emerge. Don't let asthma and anxiety leave you breathless.