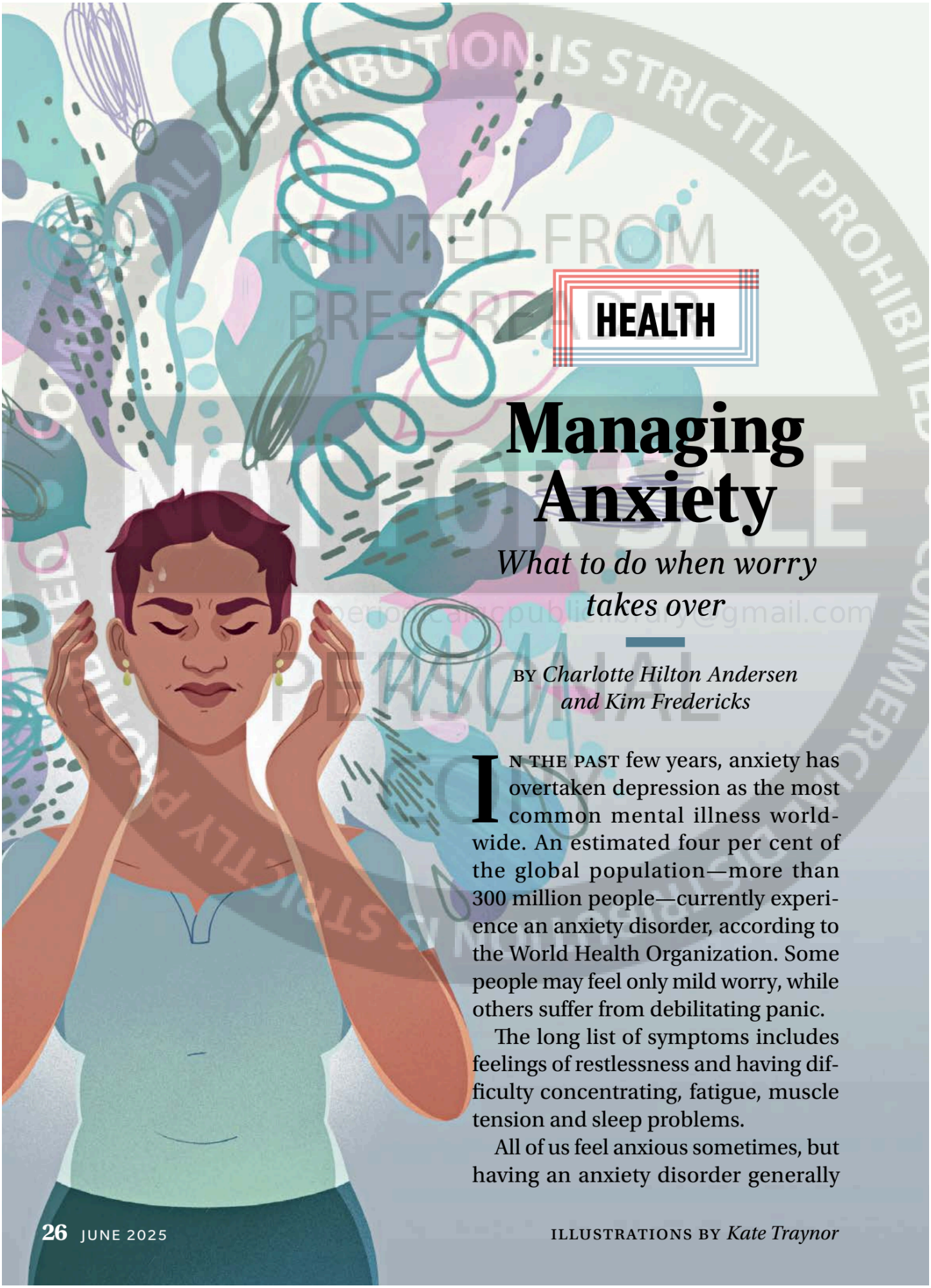
- Anxiety



HEALTH

Managing Anxiety

What to do when worry takes over

BY *Charlotte Hilton Andersen and Kim Fredericks*

IN THE PAST few years, anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common mental illness worldwide. An estimated four per cent of the global population—more than 300 million people—currently experience an anxiety disorder, according to the World Health Organization. Some people may feel only mild worry, while others suffer from debilitating panic.

The long list of symptoms includes feelings of restlessness and having difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension and sleep problems.

All of us feel anxious sometimes, but having an anxiety disorder generally

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Kate Traynor*

means that the worry feels excessive and is starting to have an impact on your life and happiness.

"This is a big issue because anxiety affects every aspect of your life," says Ken Yeager, PhD, a clinical psychologist who leads the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center's Stress, Trauma and Resilience Program and is an associate professor in the university's College of Medicine. "Anxiety increases stress, which then brings on physical symptoms—like chest tightness—and increased mental symptoms. These reinforce to your mind that something is indeed wrong, turning anxiety into a vicious cycle."

How to Manage Anxiety

According to the Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA), anxiety is a normal biological reaction—the body's way of telling us that something isn't right—that prepares us to act quickly so we stay out of harm's way. Yet when anxiety becomes overwhelming and begins to interfere with our daily lives, it becomes an anxiety disorder. If anxiety is interfering with your ability to enjoy life, there are steps you can take to minimize it.

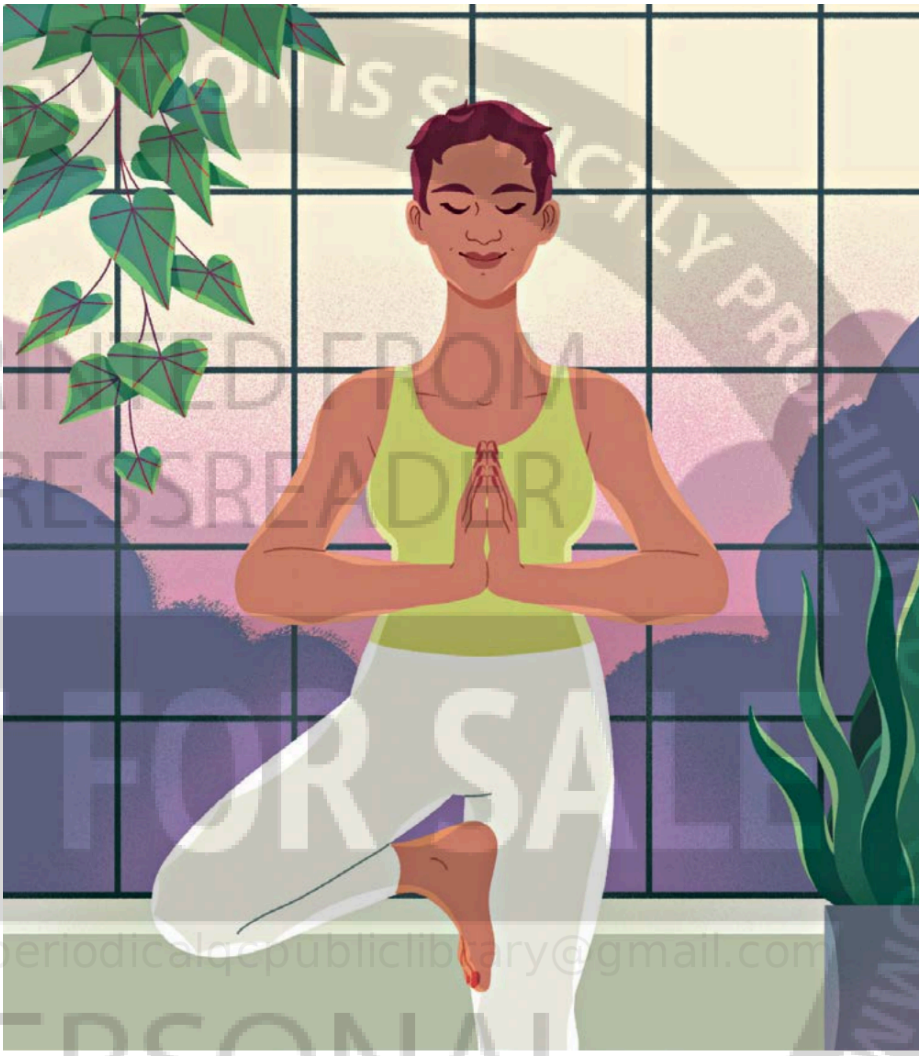
"This isn't something you just have to live with. You can learn to manage it and feel better," says Yeager. Here are some things to try:

Maintain A Healthy Diet. The average person can help minimize anxiety and stress by eating a balanced diet, says Joel Sherrill, PhD, deputy director of the Division of Services and Intervention Research at the National Institute of Mental Health. Enjoying healthy and well-balanced meals, staying hydrated, and limiting alcohol and caffeine are the first steps in helping relieve anxiety through diet. Make sure you don't skip meals, as that can lead to a drop in blood sugar, which can cause you to feel jittery and worsen anxiety.

Exercise Regularly. We know that exercise is good for our physical health, but research has also found that not getting enough physical activity is associated with anxiety. And exercise such as running activates brain chemicals that can reduce anxiety.

"If you're experiencing anxiety and stress, the average person can minimize that by exercising and practicing mindfulness-based movement such as yoga and tai chi, says Karen Cassiday, PhD, past president of the ADAA. Both aerobic and anaerobic exercise have been linked to better management of anxiety.

Get Adequate Sleep. Sleeping enough and making sure you have a sleep routine are important factors in controlling anxiety, says Sherrill. When your sleep is compromised, it can affect your mood and impair your ability to cope with the stress you encounter, he explains. In addition, sleep deprivation creates an imbalance in hormone levels and increases adrenaline levels, both of which can increase anxiety.



Repeat A Mantra. A lot of anxiety comes from getting trapped in thought loops about your worries. Yeager says you can use some mental tricks to help break those patterns. It can be as simple as repeating a mantra every time you find yourself ruminating. Give yourself a pep talk with phrases like "You can do it" or "I am enough."

Surround Yourself With People You Love. Having a strong social circle of support is one of the best things you can do to reduce anxiety and depression. And the flip side of that is trying to limit your time with people who trigger your anxiety, either by worrying a lot themselves or saying things that trigger your own worries.

Seeking Help

Yeager's most important tip is a recommendation that anyone suffering from troubling anxiety should talk to a trained professional.

Even if you're not looking for a formal diagnosis, a therapist can help you put your anxiety into perspective, and has resources to help you deal with the unwanted emotions. There are also medications that can help you manage your symptoms when necessary. "Too many people get caught up with thoughts like *Everyone worries* and *I should be able to deal with this myself*," says Yeager. The downside of minimizing your anxiety, he says, is that it only increases the stress cycle.

Finally, there are physical conditions as well as the side effects of certain medications that can mimic the symptoms of an anxiety attack.

"Anyone who is experiencing symptoms that are intense or overwhelming, especially if they are new, should seek medical advice to make sure they rule out a physical cause," advises Sherrill. R

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