

ASK THE EXPERT



Ernest Mastria

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Gain control over anxiety, depression

Ernest Mastria is a New Jersey clinical and forensic psychologist with private practices in Jersey City and Belmar. He received a master's in clinical psychology from Eastern Washington State University and a doctorate of psychology from Rutgers University in 1977.

His new book, *"The Habit of Living: A Way to Calm Your Symptoms and to Feel Happy"* (Mastria EMT Publishing; \$14.95), focuses on his theory that many emotional disorders, including anxiety, nervousness and depression, have a single common cause, which he calls "the habit."

According to Mastria, anxiety attacks, nervousness, depression and the like are all part of the habitual ways people respond to the guilts and fears prompted by differences of opinion. Mastria said society teaches children to feel guilty when there are differences of opinion, and some people never get over anxieties sparked by differences of opinion. Their protective reaction, what Mastria calls "the habit," increases over time, he said, and can prompt panic attacks, nervousness, compulsive behavior and depression.

People can gain control, Mastria said, by learning new habits that get their minds off their symptoms.

Mastria's book will be available in area book stores in about three months. Those who want information or to order books directly from Mastria can check his Web site: dmastria.com. To reach Mastria by telephone, call (732) 681-5200.

Q. You say the approach to anxiety spotlighted in this book is new, never really been tried before. Can you expand upon that?

A. It is different. The traditional approach has been to separate different symptoms into disorders and look for different causes. I took a reverse approach and looked for a common factor. I learned that just before a person experiences psychological problems of anxiety, depression and the like, their awareness of the here and now decreases.

Attention is converted to negative thoughts, the body responds with fear responses or anxiety. I found this to be a bad habit or reflex, like an eye blink or a knee jerk. The problem is common to all people.

Q. How common is this?

A. It's cross-cultural and it transcends time. If we had a person who lived 100 years ago, a person living in Asia and a person 100 years from now, we would find that just before their discomfort begins, their awareness of the here and now literally decreases. Awareness is then converted to negative thoughts. Some have words or mental pictures accompanying them. Most are actually attitudes that something (negative) is going to happen. The negativity is chronic. It's there 24 hours a day. It confuses the intelligence, it anticipates what other people think, it fabricates causes and justifies discomfort.

Q. You have created a way to deal with this reaction or habit. Can you explain it?

A. The intervention has nothing to do with searching for experiences or background causes. From the very first session, we work on

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building new reflexes that increase the focus on pleasure. It takes three to 10 weeks to overcome negative anticipation. When you anticipate negatively, you feel fear. It's a natural response to a bad habit, a product of what I call oversocialization during childhood.

As children, we feel guilt and fear for differences of opinion with adults. Then we start holding back expressing ourselves and we comply repetitively. The body learns this as a skill and as the person grows, whenever they experience a difference of opinion, they feel anxiety. The hallmark of people who experience this is that they tend to take differences of opinion too personally and hold back for fear of offending. If another person differs with them, they take it personally.

I focus on four main points

when working with clients: The first is consciously orienting yourself to time and place. Know where you are. Orient yourself, tune in to your surroundings. The second is consciously use your five senses, especially seeing, hearing and touching. Check the landscape, personal, internal and external. The third one is don't drift or daydream. What happens is that with low-activity situations, your awareness decreases. In front of a television, for instance, you tend to go into

oblivion. The fourth point is to only have on your mind what is hitting your senses. In other words, if you can't see, hear, smell, touch or taste it, it doesn't exist.

The second part of the procedure is taking back small pieces of time. Maintain focus, don't be diverted by negative thoughts. Ignore them. If you are human, it will work. It may take time, but when you are very focused, you won't have symptoms of anxiety.

Lois M. Rogers, Staff Writer