

# Life & Style

## RUCKSACKS GROW UP

ONCE the sole preserve of tourists and schoolchildren, the rucksack is back. Seen on actress Emma Stone and model Alexa Chung, the bag is both practical and chic.

You could splash the cash on Chanel's £2,100 version, but there are affordable options out there. Whistles has a wear-for-ever leather bag for £280 (pictured), while Zara's colour block carry-all comes in at a purse-friendly £29.99. You can even opt for a sporty Eastpak at £40. Not only will you look good, you can try out the new trend for exercising with a weighted rucksack, too.



## SPARE YOUR BLUSHES!

IF YOUR complexion is more akin to strawberries and cream than peaches and cream, you may be excited to hear there's a skin saviour — Argan Organics Anti-Redness and Rosacea Cream (£10.39, [arganorganics.co.uk](http://arganorganics.co.uk)). Made with herbs and plant oils, including the anti-ageing Moroccan argan oil, it



tackles redness, bumps and dry, flaky skin. As well as being the brand of choice of tennis player Andy Murray's mum, Judy, at £10 the cream worth every penny.

## SLEEK WITH NO HEAT

WE'VE had plopping (tying your hair in a T-shirt turban) for perfect curls, but no such guidance on how to get the opposite — straight, frizz-free hair without using heat. Enter 'hoodie hair'. Buy a cotton hoodie, wash your hair and let it air dry slightly, apply serum, centre

part it and pull up your hood. Remove the sweater when it feels dry for sleek, straight strands. You'll never need GHDs again.



# Why are so many young women taking heart pills to calm their nerves?

Picture: STUART HENDRY

'They take the edge off my anxiety': Emily Rae, 26

by Antonia Hoyle

**D**ESPITE being a successful web designer, Suzi Dixon dreaded the meeting looming ahead of her. Fearful her clients wouldn't think she was up to scratch, her chest tightened and her heart pounded.

So she did what she's done on a daily basis for the past decade when faced with situations that make her feel anxious: she swallowed a pill.

But this was no ordinary prescription anxiety pill or antidepressant. Instead, it was a beta blocker — designed for those at risk of suffering heart attacks.

As one of a generation of 20 and 30-somethings for whom extreme worry is a constant companion (a recent survey revealed that one-third of young women suffer panic attacks, while another found nearly

half have mental health issues), Suzi is not the only one turning to this type of medication.

Statistics from public body the Health and Social Care Information Centre reveal that prescriptions of propranolol — one of the most commonly prescribed beta blockers — rose by 7 per cent between 2012 and 2013.

While this may, in part, be due to its use in treating cardiovascular conditions (beta blockers decrease heart activity) they are undoubtedly being taken in abundance for anxiety, too.

Beta blockers work by blocking the effects of the stress hormones adrenalin and noradrenalin, which cause the physical symptoms of anxiety — the increased heart rate, blushing, clammy palms and

panic attacks. But at what cost? The side-effects of this medication can include nausea, stomach pains, cold hands and feet, insomnia, loss of libido, slow heartbeat, blurred vision and depression.

If taken by an asthmatic, they can exacerbate breathing problems, triggering a potentially fatal asthma attack, and, crucially, they do nothing to tackle the issues that cause anxiety in the first place.

'Beta blockers work on a superficial level by dampening the physiological symptoms of anxiety, but they don't deal with the underlying emotional issues,' says Dr Natasha Bijlani, a consultant psychiatrist specialising in women's mental health at London's Priory Hospital.

'Plus, side-effects such as dizziness and nausea are similar to the symptoms you're trying to get rid of anyway. Nobody should take them for years on end.'

But Suzi, 36, is undeterred. 'Some people have alcohol and cigarettes,'

she says. 'I have beta blockers. I don't want to be on them for ever, but they provide me with an emotional crutch and I worry when I'm without them.'

It seems increasing pressure to succeed in their personal and professional lives, compounded by the constant scrutiny of social media, is contributing to soaring anxiety levels in young women.

Suzi started suffering from tremors and insomnia at 17 while studying for her A-levels. Her GP prescribed Prozac, an antidepressant that recalibrates the balance of chemicals in the brain but which has also been linked to an increased risk of suicide.

'Prozac changed my personality,' she says. 'I grew arrogant and detached, and my insomnia actually got worse.'

'After two years, I told my GP I wanted to deal with my nerves

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without it.' So she came off the drug and tried to control her anxiety with a healthy diet and exercise — both proven to regulate moods. But she says: 'I had a constant fear of letting people down. At work, I worried about being exposed as inadequate; that people would see me blush and think I couldn't cope.'

'I was considered difficult when, in fact, I was just terrified. In crowded places, my heart would beat faster and I was often single, because I was too nervous to date.'

At 27, she had her first panic attack. 'I was at an exhibition and started hyperventilating and being sick,' recalls Suzi, who is still single and lives in Bournemouth.

'My palms were sweaty, I couldn't walk, blood rushed to my heart and I thought I was having a heart attack.'

**C**AUSED by a surplus of adrenaline in the body when the brain feels it is under threat, panic attacks aren't dangerous but feel frightening.

The following day, Suzi's GP told her it sounded like she was suffering from Generalised Anxiety Disorder, a condition that affects one in 25 adults and is thought to be caused by an imbalance of the brain chemicals serotonin and noradrenaline, which help control emotions and behaviour.

Those affected are unable to stop worrying, struggle to sleep or concentrate and often have a disproportionate fear of failure.

Suzi was put forward for an online course of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) — designed to rearrange thought patterns and address negative behaviours — and prescribed up to four tablets of propranolol a day.

Within a week, she says, her anxiety all but disappeared. 'My heart raced less when I was nervous, which meant I panicked less and felt more confident. But, unlike when I was on antidepressants, I still felt like myself — just a more capable version.'

While Suzi says she uses beta blockers as a last resort, experts believe the solution to anxiety doesn't lie in doctors endlessly doling out repeat prescriptions.

'Maybe it is easier for GPs in busy clinics to do whatever they know keeps anxiety at bay for their patients, but it isn't ideal,' says Dr Bijlani.

Lauren Woodward, 30, from Lowestoft in Suffolk, has been taking beta blockers since she was a teenager in an attempt to deal with her anxiety and weekly panic attacks.

'I'd rather be able to trust my body, but they give me reassurance I need,' she says.

'I rely on them and carry them everywhere.'

Lauren, mother to Charles, six, and Harry, four, is so nervous of social situations she takes beta blockers before meeting friends for coffee and even prior to making calls.

'I panic because I don't like the sound of my voice,' she explains.

'I'm a natural worrier and, if I can't take a beta blocker, I avoid doing even something as simple as driving, as I worry I will crash.'

Lauren's GP originally prescribed her beta blockers after her father walked out of the family home when she was 15. 'I came home from school one afternoon to find him gone,' she recalls.

'I couldn't breathe, my heart started to pound, my legs gave way and I had a panic attack.'

She managed to avoid taking beta blockers while she was pregnant (use during pregnancy can cause problems with the placenta and lower the baby's heartbeat), but says motherhood exacerbated her anxiety.

'School meetings fill me with dread and beta blockers help me look less nervous,' says Lauren, who adds that the only side-effects she suffers are vivid

dreams. 'They stop my chest tightening and my legs giving way with stress.'

Yet, while beta blockers mask the symptoms of her anxiety, they don't stop her worrying in the first place.

'I don't like taking the children to the park in case they have an accident, or to the zoo in case the animals escape and kill us,' she says.

'On museum trips, I have premonitions that everything will collapse and the boys will die. I know I'm being irrational, but I can't help it.'

Lauren says her GP knows she doesn't like being reliant on beta blockers, but issues repeat prescriptions every three months nonetheless.

And since separating from her husband of ten years, Jonathan, 39, a voiceover artist, at the start of this year, her doctor has encouraged Lauren — daunted by life as a single mum — to take them twice a day if she feels the need.

'Just knowing that they are there is a comfort,' she says.

But given how ineffective some experts say beta blockers are, could they simply be having a placebo effect? In other words, do they only lower Lauren's anxiety levels because she believes they will?

'Their use might be increasing because anxiety is such a huge problem, treatments are limited and we're wary of overusing much more effective anti-depressants,' says GP Ian Campbell.

'But propranolol isn't very effective. It isn't physically addictive, but people can become emotionally dependent on it.'

Emily Rae, 26, started taking beta blockers this summer after becoming overwhelmed trying to juggle admin and childcare jobs alongside breaking into her

I'm a worrier.  
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beta blocker,  
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chosen career as an actress. 'Every day, I felt as if something bad was going to happen.'

'I'd wake at 6am with sweaty palms and my heart hammering,' says Emily, who lives in London with her boyfriend of five years.

'I worried about letting people down and felt sick, dizzy and detached, with a knot of tension constantly simmering close to the surface. I pushed myself to the limit and could never relax.'

**T**HIS spring, after a series of panic attacks, Emily went to her GP who diagnosed her with Generalised Anxiety Disorder and sent her for CBT.

'I met a girl in my group therapy class who seemed reliant on beta blockers for her anxiety and decided I didn't want that to happen to me,' she says.

But the panic attacks continued, and so she returned to her GP this August, who prescribed her four tablets of propranolol a day to take whenever she felt she needed them.

There is evidence asthmatics shouldn't take propranolol, as it could prompt breathing difficulties. Emily is an asthmatic, but says: 'My asthma is mild so my GP said it would be safe.'

Initially, however, they didn't have the effect she'd hoped.

'I felt absolutely exhausted for four days,' she says. 'My teeth chattered and I couldn't stop yawning. I was worried, but read that these were side-effects and, as my body adapted, they subsided and I felt more relaxed.'

Emily tries not to take them more than three times a week.

'They help if I'm meeting new people or doing anything unfamiliar,' she says.

'But I don't want to be on medication in the long term and hopefully will be able to calm myself down without them in the future.'

'I know beta blockers aren't a cure, but they take the edge off my anxiety.'

Picture: SCIENCE SOURCE / SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

## Yes, roll-

IT'S the secret weapon stylish woman's arsenal — see you from dusk to dawn in a manner of establishments. Enter the roll-neck jumper, the season's unlikely style



## DATE NIGHT

Sleeveless longline knit, £16.50, asos.com  
Jeans, £30, newlook.com  
Boots, £595, russellandbromley.co.uk

WHEN you want to upgrade from a blouse, a sleeveless roll-neck is a great alternative for revealing slender arms while keeping you warm.

This longline option is flattering, as it covers any hint of a muffin top.

It will also make you look instantly taller, while the jeans tucked into boots gives a streamlined effect.

## EVENING OUT

Black jumper dress, £55, asos.com  
Heels, £245, russellandbromley.co.uk

WHO says you can't wear a little black dress and a roll-neck at the same time?

This stretch fabric dress from ASOS will hug your curves in a flattering way and cover up your cleavage, leaving you free to get your legs out while still looking demure.

## LUNCH WITH FRIENDS

Roll-neck collar, £8, asos.com  
Dress, £79, winserlondon.com  
Heels, £85, lkbenmett.com

THIS detachable collar can be any of your summer dresses, think of it as an alternative to a collar.

Team it with a dress or top with a neck and it will pair perfectly. Simply pop it underneath for an update. Warm and cosy, it's a way to continue wearing your dresses until December.

Cost of anxiety

GPs prescribe beta blockers more than 27 million times a year, at a cost of £93 million