

Understanding and Treating Anxiety



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Understanding and Treating Anxiety

Most people suffer from anxiety at some stage of their lives. Anxiety is usually a relatively natural response to a situation which appears threatening or one to which we are not accustomed. So, for example, people are sometimes quite naturally anxious about passing tests, going for job interviews, or even speaking in public.

They may experience 'butterflies' in their stomachs, sweaty palms, restlessness, [Insomnia](#), or even slight



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dizziness. This usually goes away after the actual event has passed or once they have become used to it. The person who is terrified of their first public speech may become so accustomed to public speaking after awhile that she doesn't give it a second thought!

1. Diagnosis of [Anxiety Disorders](#)

When anxiety becomes so chronic or intense that it affects the person's day to day functioning and hampers performance, we will usually diagnose an [Anxiety Disorder](#). Some people have what is called a Generalized [Anxiety Disorder](#) (GAD). This means that their anxiety does not have a specific focus like, for example, a phobia, but is more 'free floating' and forms part of their everyday functioning and response to life.

Symptoms of GAD include motor [Tension](#) (edginess, jumpiness, trembling, restlessness, twitching, muscle aches, easily startled, furrowed brow, inability to relax), autonomic activity ([Sweating](#), heart palpitations, dry mouth, dizziness, tingling in hands and feet, upset stomach, shortness of breath, [Frequent Urination](#)), apprehensive expectation (anxiety, fear, worry, and persistent thoughts of potential misfortune), vigilance and scanning (constantly on the alert for danger, failure or disaster, resulting in difficulties in [Concentration](#), irritability, impotence and [Insomnia](#)). GAD is diagnosed if these symptoms have been present continuously for more than one month.

Other sufferers of anxiety are diagnosed with Panic Disorder, Phobic Disorders, or [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder](#).

A Panic Disorder will be diagnosed if there are at least three [Panic Attacks](#) within a three-week period in reaction to situations that are not life threatening and which are not associated with physical exertion. Symptoms include shortness of breath or choking sensations, heart palpitations, chest pain, dizziness or faintness, tingling in hands or feet, hot and cold flashes, [Sweating](#), trembling, fear of dying or [Heart Attack](#), and a feeling of unreality or danger.

Phobic Disorders include a persistent fear and compelling desire to avoid an object or situation to the extent that the person's life, functioning, and relationships are significantly impaired. Examples of phobic events include Social Phobia (fear of embarrassment in social situations) and Agoraphobia (fear of public places), fear of heights, flying, etc. Phobic objects may include anything from animals and insects to numbers or colors.

[Obsessive Compulsive Disorder](#) (OCD) may take the form of excessive and intrusive obsessive thoughts, images or impulses that are almost impossible to ignore or stop, even if the individual understands that they are senseless or unfounded. The disorder may also include repetitive and often purposeless behaviors that are often performed according to certain rules and which are sometimes believed to prevent or produce some future situation or event.

The person does not find the activity pleasurable but does experience a sense of relief from [Tension](#) when performing it. The obsessive thoughts, behaviors or impulses usually interfere significantly with functioning.

2. Causes of [Anxiety Disorders](#)

There are many different theories about the causes of [Anxiety Disorders](#). Some theories say that they are genetic and are purely chemical in nature. There is some evidence for this, as [Anxiety Disorders](#) very often tend to run in families, even when children have been adopted at birth and never meet their biological parents.

Other theorists say that extreme anxiety is learned from an overly anxious parent or that it originates from



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some trauma during early childhood or from overly punitive parenting. It is very likely that there is usually a combination of these potential causes and each case must be viewed as a unique one and well investigated before any pronouncements are made about the causes.

3. Differential Diagnosis

When we speak about differential diagnosis, we speak about ruling out the possibility that the anxiety symptoms may be caused by something other than an [Anxiety Disorder](#). Anybody who experiences clusters of symptoms similar to those discussed above should always have a thorough medical examination.

Symptoms similar to those above may be attributable to thyroid problems, heart problems (particularly mitral valve), reactions to certain prescription or recreational drugs, and even [Ear Infections](#) or [Allergies](#). If these are ruled out, the likelihood is that the person is suffering from an [Anxiety Disorder](#). It makes little sense to keep treating someone for anxiety when that is not the real problem and it is surprising how often that actually happens!

4. Treatment

Different therapists treat anxiety in different ways and this depends largely on their particular training, experience, and outlook. Also some clients respond better to one form of treatment than others and it is important for the therapist to do a thorough assessment and get to know his client before deciding on treatment.

Some therapists treat their clients with prescription drugs like anxiolytics, beta blockers, or even antidepressants. This means that they are treating the symptoms of the anxiety. Anxiety symptoms or [OCD](#) can often be successfully controlled by the careful use of prescription drugs.

Unfortunately many of them can be addictive or produce side effects and the person often builds up a tolerance to them, needing to take more and more to achieve a similar effect. Another criticism is that no attention is paid to the causes of the anxiety or to helping the person learn ways of controlling or managing the anxiety without drugs.

Many therapists use techniques like progressive relaxation or [Meditation](#) to help the client learn how to access his own calming response (everybody has one!) and to lower anxiety levels to more comfortable states. This is often combined with psychotherapy to help improve self-esteem and understand the causes of the anxiety, cognitive therapy to 'reprogram' the negative thoughts underlying the anxiety, or desensitization aimed at eliminating phobias.

There are also many natural products which help and may be used alone or in combination with therapy. It is usually best to speak to your pharmacist, health store owner, or health care professional to find out what is best for you and how to take it, but some common [Herbs](#) are Passiflora, Pasque Flower, [St Johns Wort](#), [Melissa](#), [Chamomile](#) and [Kava Kava](#). For more information go to [Native Remedies](#)

It is important to note that most [Anxiety Disorders](#) respond well to treatment and I would encourage anyone who suffers from anxiety to go for help. It can make all the difference to your life!

5. Self Help

There are many things that will help with anxiety.

If you are experiencing stress at work, in your relationships or anywhere else, look and see what changes need to be made. Get help if you feel you are unable to do this yourself.



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Regular exercise is one of the most beneficial things one can do and has been shown to have a significant effect on lowering anxiety symptoms and improving well being. At least 45 minutes 3 - 5 times a week will make all the difference!

Make sure that you eat regularly to avoid fluctuations in blood sugar level and have at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night! Sleep deprivation can cause symptoms of anxiety.

Avoid stimulants like coffee, tea (except herbal [Teas](#)), sugary foods, chocolate or carbonated drinks, particularly the cola variety. People who suffer from anxiety, who are at greater risk for dependence, should never take alcohol and most recreational drugs. These substances can also worsen the anxiety symptoms.

Include oats, bananas, [Avocado](#) pears, whole-wheat pasta, bread and brown rice in your diet.

Set aside at least 15 minutes twice a day to sit in a quiet spot, close your eyes and practice deep breathing. Listen to soothing music or a relaxation tape or CD.

If there is something specific that is causing anxiety (like shyness or fear of animals) see if you can't gradually become accustomed to it, little by little. This will also improve your confidence and self esteem.

Talk to people about how you feel! Try and socialize, start a hobby, take up a sport or develop new interests! Perhaps think about offering your services as a volunteer to help others. Anything which takes your mind off yourself and keeps you interested will help!

Read as much as you can about anxiety and how to help yourself.

6. Conclusion

As we have discussed, anxiety can take many different forms and can be treated in many different ways. There are also many things which one can do oneself to control or significantly reduce the symptoms of anxiety. Most of these take some work and persistence, but then so does an [Anxiety Disorder](#)! Believe in yourself and spend time getting to know what works for you and then persevere with it. You will be surprised how much you can help yourself.

Good luck and be well!

Michele Carelse is a Registered Clinical Psychologist and Licensed Counselor with more than 15 years experience running her own private practice.

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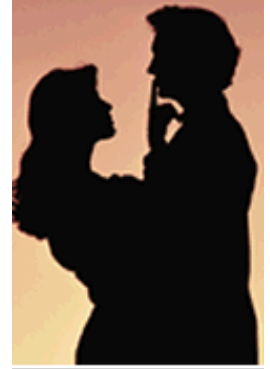
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