



Feeling anxious? You're not alone.

By Dr. Delia Roberts

Anxiety and related disorders are one of the most common types of mental health challenges. More than 30% of people will suffer from anxiety severe enough to have a large, negative impact on their work and relationships at some point in their lives. However, anxiety disorders are often under-diagnosed and even when recognized, 40% of people receive no treatment. People with anxiety disorders have also have higher rates of other mental and physical ailments that may not be treated appropriately. This means that many people who could be living happier, healthier lives are not getting the help that they need. If you, or someone you know suffers from constant fear and anxiety, this article is for you.

Everyone has things that they are anxious and worry about. A small amount of nervousness can help us pay attention to things that are important. But when these worries expand to overwhelming feelings of fear, dread, avoidance and constant uneasiness, it's time to get some help. Left untreated, anxiety disorders have negative impacts on health and get in the way of day-to-day life. They can severely impair one's ability to work, relate to others and function well in all aspects of life.

The causes of anxiety disorders are not known, but rates are higher in people with certain chronic health issues like cardiovascular disease, thyroid problems, obesity and a family history of anxiety. It is also common for people with anxiety disorders to suffer from other mental health issues, like PTSD and depression. Suicide rates are twice as high in those with anxiety disorders so it's very important to seek medical help if you are struggling with anxiety.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

There are a number of different types of anxiety disorders. Some of the main

classifications and their key screening questions are:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In GAD people worry excessively about a wide range of things like family, work, health and money.

- During the past month have you felt anxious and worried most of the time?
- Are you frequently tense and having trouble sleeping?

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is when the worries are centered around social situations. This can be more generalized (like being anxious about going to a party) or more specific (like panic when faced with speaking in front of a group of people).

- Does fear of embarrassment cause you to avoid doing things or speaking with people?
- Is being embarrassed or looking stupid among your worst fears?

Panic Disorder is characterized by sudden overwhelming feelings of fear and panic. There are usually physical symptoms like racing and/or pounding heartbeats, sweating, and difficulty breathing.

- Do you have repeated sudden episodes of intense fear or discomfort?
- Have you worried about a subsequent attack over the month following a panic attack, or significantly changed your behavior to avoid the panic trigger?

Phobias are disorders where a fear becomes constant and grows way out of proportion to the event or thing. Avoidance of the trigger can take over other life behaviors.

- Do you have fears that are so strong that you change your behavior to avoid the triggers?
- Is the level of fear excessive for the level of risk of harm?

Treatments for Anxiety Disorders

The first step in getting help is to undergo an evaluation by a medical health provider that should include a physical examination and blood work. It's important to rule out any underlying medical conditions or reactions to medications that might be causing the anxiety. Education about anxiety disorders can also be helpful and informative for making the choice of treatment together with a health care provider. Treatment choices include pharmacological (drugs) and psychological (counseling) options as well as important lifestyle behaviors such as exercise and getting enough sleep. Which to use depends on the type of anxiety disorder, the individual situation, access to and acceptance of psychotherapy, and level of response to treatment.

Two of the most popular psychological approaches that have been shown to be effective for treating anxiety disorders are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). These types of physiological treatments teach specific methods to separate out feelings and emotions from behaviors. Learning how to interrupt the fear cycle without engaging in the anxiety driven behaviors can be very powerful in overcoming anxiety disorders. Gradual repeated exposure to the thing or situation that causes the fear and anxiety is also a useful technique to lower the fear to a more realistic and appropriate level. EMDR treatments have been shown to be effective as well, especially in cases where an underlying trauma contributes to the anxiety disorder. Most people experience significant improvement in symptoms following 12-20 weeks of weekly sessions. However, if access to a therapist is limited due to geographical access or financial situation, group therapy, virtual guided, on-line programs and even self-help books have all been shown to be helpful.

There are many different medications that can be used to effectively treat anxiety disorders. Some work better than others for specific types of anxiety disorders

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and in certain people, so sometimes it takes a couple of trials to find the best one. The most frequently used are the selective serotonin receptor inhibitors (SSRIs) or similar drugs that were initially developed as antidepressants, but which are also effective at lowering anxiety levels. These drugs can take up to 8-12 weeks to become effective because they take time to reach high enough levels in the body. Some side effects can be expected, including headaches, irritability, gastrointestinal complaints, drowsiness, or insomnia, sexual dysfunction, weight gain and a transient increase in anxiety. However, when dosages are started at a low level and gradually increased to reach therapeutic levels, when they do occur most of the side effects are short lived. Some SSRI's can also cause increased risk of gastrointestinal bleeding when taken with the common pain medication, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs). In some cases, the SSRI's can also cause lowered bone density and risk of fractures, especially in the elderly. In adolescents there may also be an increased risk of suicide. Thus it is important to work with a health care provider to monitor both the effectiveness of the treatment and the side effects, especially during the first few months of starting a medication. It's also very important not to stop abruptly as sudden withdrawal can cause strong negative effects. The course of medication is usually one to two years, followed by a gradual weaning from the drug.

There are other classes of medications in addition to the serotonin reuptake inhibitors that can be used to treat anxiety disorders. For example, unlike SSRI's which take time to become effective, the anti-anxiety drugs called benzodiazepines are effective immediately. However, benzodiazepines are sedating and some people develop a tolerance so that they require higher and higher doses to be effective. They also have the potential to become addictive. Thus, these other classes of drugs are usually only prescribed for immediate, short duration relief from overwhelming anxiety, or when serotonin reuptake inhibitors are not working.

The search for new drugs that can be used to more effectively treat anxiety disorders and which act without side

effects continues. As our understanding of how neurochemicals act to produce emotions like fear grows, scientists are investigating different ways to affect the levels of these neurochemicals, and hence the level of anxiety a person feels. Another approach is to examine the effects of other known drugs on emotions, and then investigate their use in lowering anxiety. Some promising areas of research include studying molecules like GABA and various neuropeptides, glutamate and endocannabinoids (CBD and THC), psychedelics and plant derived phytochemicals. But to date, no new treatments have emerged as clearly being beneficial. Part of the reason is that there isn't a lot of research being done in the area, and part is because when considering the use of new drugs, it is important to have appropriate studies that include control groups where neither the participants nor the investigators know which treatment they are receiving (double blinded), and where the studies are long enough to ensure that the drugs can be safely used for the duration of the treatment. The individualized nature of anxiety treatment also makes it harder to find consistently beneficial results in a study that includes mixed groups of people.

Pharmacological and psychological treatments can also be combined. Neither treatment alone, or in combination has shown to be more effective in all cases. The best choice depends on the individual situation, access to resources and other health and lifestyle factors – and may change over time as underlying psychological and health components arise.

Lifestyle Factors

There are some lifestyle factors that can also help reduce anxiety levels. These include the basic things like getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet (including limiting caffeine and alcohol consumption) and getting regular exercise, preferably out of doors with exposure to green spaces and fresh air. Social connections are also very important and the use of some type of meditation can also help. See past editions of FSN for more information on these and other healthy lifestyle topics.

We live in a rapidly changing world, so it's not surprising that most people have plenty to worry about. But when these fears become overwhelming and expand beyond the ups and downs of day-to-day life, it's time to reach out for help. There are treatments that can help us regain perspective, so that we can manage our lives effectively, including working productively and engaging with friends and family in a positive way. For more information see your health care provider, social services or HR manager or check out the resources below.

Additional Resources

Anxiety Canada <https://www.anxietycanada.com/>

Health Link BC <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/anxiety>

NIH Infographic <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/publications/so-stressed-out-infographic>

Apps:

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/> (free)

<https://www.headspace.com/> (requires subscription)

<https://www.calm.com/> (requires subscription)

Programs (require referral from your health care provider)

<https://bouncebackbc.ca/> (free self-paced program with virtual or phone support)

<https://cbtskills.ca/> (virtual CBT skills groups with different themes)

<https://www.bcalm.ca/> (BC Association of Living Mindfully courses to be paid for by MSP) 🌱