

Anxiety (Generalised Anxiety Disorder)



Anxiety is a mental illness that affects most depression sufferers and 28% of the population in their lifetime. This is one of the most common mental illnesses that affect our population today. It is highly affected by race, gender and age. The most common age of sufferer is 30-44, with women being more susceptible than men. White people are much more likely than any other ethnicity to suffer from anxiety.

The causes of anxiety are not fully known – however, they are usually put down to maladaptive thought processes (negative patterns of thought). When a person becomes anxious, they become more and more worried about what other people think of them, and over read into actions. For example, in a situation where a person saw a friend in the street, but that friend did not acknowledge them. There is a healthy thought pattern, and an unhealthy one, these are as follows:

Situation	<i>Friend didn't acknowledge me in in the street</i>
Healthy reaction	They must be busy, or there is something wrong. However, it's nothing to do with me, because I've done nothing wrong.
Anxious person's reaction	They must be annoyed at me if they didn't speak to me, what have I done wrong? I am a horrible person and am going to avoid social contact with that person because they're annoyed at me and don't like me.

This thought pattern results in more and more anxiety as time goes on, as they end up pushing more and more people away and avoiding all social contact, which makes social situations harder to deal with, thus causing more anxiety.

Diagnosis of anxiety (Generalised Anxiety Disorder) is reliant on matching symptoms to the DSM-V criteria. This states that, for a person to be considered to be suffering from Generalised Anxiety Disorder, they must:

1. Have excessive worrying and anxiety, occurring more days than not for 6 months, about a number of events.
2. Find it difficult or impossible to control the worry.
3. Must suffer from 3 of the following:
 - Restlessness, feeling on edge
 - Being easily fatigued
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Irritability
 - Muscle tension
 - Sleep disturbance
4. The anxiety, worry or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in; social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
5. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (eg, a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.
6. The disturbance is not better explained by another medical disorder.

Once this diagnosis has been made, the patient will be referred to a specialist, who will assess the severity of the anxiety and make a decision on what the treatment should be. This can either be pharmaceutical, therapeutic or both. Most commonly, it is a combination of both.

There are several pharmaceutical ways of treating anxiety with different anti-anxiety medications, as well as anti-depressants. These treatment methods are shown in the table below:

Type of Medication	How they work	Effectiveness	Side Effects	Risk
Benzodiazepines (Xanax (alprazolam), Clonazepam, Lorazepam, Valium (Diazepam))	These are the most common form of anti-anxiety medication, and work by reducing abnormal electrical activity in the brain. This begins to work very quickly, however a tolerance is built up over time, therefore dosage must be upped.	<i>See below.</i>	Drowsiness Dizziness Nausea Blurred vision Headache Confusion Tiredness/fatigue Nightmares	Due to the fact that the body develops a tolerance to the medication, the dosage is increased regularly. This can result in the patient taking huge doses of the drug, which can result in dependence to it. People, who take this drug for long periods of time, must be carefully weaned off of the medication, in order to reduce the risk of withdrawal symptoms. Coming off of this medication, without strict guidance from a doctor, can result in extreme symptoms. Irritability, sleeplessness, anxiety, headaches, fatigue and nausea are some of the likely side effects of being weaned off of Benzodiazepines. Coming off of these 'cold turkey' can have even more extreme symptoms, including seizures and, in some cases, death.
Buspirone	Again, it is used to treat anxiety disorders by reducing abnormal electrical activity in the brain. However, this works much slower than benzodiazepines. It usually takes 2 weeks to start taking effect.	<i>See below.</i>	Dizziness Headaches Nausea Nervousness Light headedness Excitement Trouble sleeping	<i>Kidney/liver problems</i> - This medication should not be used if the patient has suffered, or is suffering from, any kidney or liver problems, as it may make these worse. <i>Medical history</i> - Doctors should be informed about any past mental illnesses that the patient may have faced, including bi-polar disorder (manic depression) as well as Parkinson's disease. <i>Alcohol</i> - Alcohol should not be consumed when taking this medication, as it may interact with the drug in a negative way. <i>Pregnancy</i> - This medication should only be used during pregnancy when there are no other options and the medication is clearly needed. Doctors should be informed if the individual is pregnant, as it may cause harm to the baby.
Antidepressants (SSRI, SNRI, Tricyclic antidepressants)	These work in the same way they do for depression, by altering mood, in order to ease symptoms. See section on <i>Depression</i> for more information	<i>See below.</i>	Blurred Vision, Constipation, Dry Mouth, Drowsiness, Drop in blood pressure when moving from sitting to standing, Urine Retention, Increased Appetite, Weight Loss, Excessive Sweating, Tremors, Sexual Problems (reduced sexual desire, erectile dysfunction, difficulty reaching orgasm), sleepiness.	<i>Disorientation</i> – Particularly in older people, disorientation and confusion is common when the dosage is too high. <i>Heart rate</i> – In some cases, Tricyclic Antidepressants can cause either increased heartbeat, or irregular heartbeat. <i>Seizures</i> – In people who already suffer from seizures, they commonly cause these to become more frequent. <i>Drug interaction</i> – Some other drugs can cause dangerous reactions so doctors MUST be informed of any other medications or supplements. <i>Serotonin Syndrome</i> - In some cases (rarely), if two or more medications are taken to raise the levels of serotonin, serotonin syndrome may be induced, this results in anxiety, sweating, confusion, tremors, restlessness, lack of coordination and rapid heartbeat. <i>Pregnancy</i> - Some antidepressants can cause problems to the child during pregnancy or breast feeding. <i>Suicide Risk</i> - SSRI's carry the risk of producing more frequent or intense suicidal thoughts in the first few weeks – however, this risk is low.

Therapy types for Anxiety

Therapy is generally seen as the best way to treat anxiety disorders long term. When combined with antianxiety medications, they are extremely effective for most people, including severely anxious individuals. The most common therapy types are as follows:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

This is the most common treatment method for Generalised Anxiety Disorder. CBT challenges clients to tackle their anxiety by changing the thought patterns, which CBT therapists believe are to blame for anxiety and feelings of anxiousness. This therapy type attempts to change negative thought patterns, for normal, healthy ones. This is an extremely effective technique in treating anxiety and is the most common treatment for it. It is also the most effective, well-funded and researched therapy type for anxiety. CBT offers results 14% better than other therapy types for treating Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

Mindfulness based stress reduction is a therapy type which uses relaxation techniques such as meditation, combined with behavioural adaptation techniques, similar to CBT, to treat anxiety. This treatment uses meditation to bring out the negative emotions which are seen to cause anxiety, since being suppressed. MBSR therapists believe that the cause of anxiety is suppressed thoughts and feelings, affecting the individual from the subconscious. They use meditation to bring these thoughts to surface and the behavioural kind of therapy tackles the issue.

Exposure Therapy

This is one of the most simple therapy types; however, it is effective for treating anxiety disorders. In order to overcome the anxiety they feel for certain situations, exposure therapy pushed clients to face the thing that they are anxious of. For example, if the person is anxious of meeting new people in particular, the therapist will ease them into meeting new people slowly. They may start by having new people walk in, then they will push the client to simply say hello, and then develop this to taking the client to a party or gathering, and getting them to engage in conversation with strangers. The aim of this is to show the client that there is no reason to worry about what they are anxious about, in order for them to overcome their fear. However, this therapy has a high dropout rate, and low client satisfaction to begin with, as the idea is to make them uncomfortable and step out of their comfort zone.

Effectiveness of Anti-Anxiety Medication

Anti-anxiety medication is not a cure. The use of medication for GAD (Generalised Anxiety Disorder) is a short term solution to reduce symptoms during the time that therapy is taking place. The short term effects of anti-anxiety medications are good, however, do come with their side effects and risks.

Benzodiazepines usually work for around 6 months, before the therapeutic effects wear off, and with addiction/dependence coming at around 2 weeks, patients have to be carefully weaned off after this time. However, they do effectively increase the efficacy of therapy, making it easier and quicker to recover, with the help of medication, when compared to therapy alone. Also, for this period of time, feelings of anxiety are reduced, resulting in increased social interactions and general improved mood. This, once again, aids the recovery of a person suffering with GAD.

Research suggests that the best long term medical solution for GAD is SSRIs. Antidepressants work in treating GAD by generally improving mood. Maladaptive thought processes are particularly prevalent when mood is low, and, therefore, by increasing the individual's mood, these negative, unhealthy thoughts are decreased. On top of this, rumination is decreased with the use of SSRIs.

Benzodiazepines are an immediate solution to a long term problem. These are used for people who 'need help now', as their anxiety is significantly affecting their life in a negative way, eg, if they are unable to work/go to school, or perform normal day to day tasks like going to the shop. Antianxiety medication should not be used as a treatment alone.



Coping Strategies

Each different GAD sufferer has their own personal coping strategies which work for them - each different from the one before. However, there are some which are more common than others and have evidence to support their benefit to reducing anxiety and worry, these are as follows:

Exercise

Similarly to depression, exercise is considered one of the best ways to reduce symptoms of anxiety. Exercise encourages the brain to produce and release more serotonin, which is the neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of happiness and euphoria. This also boasts long term benefits to mental health, with results that challenge many long lasting therapies, such as psychotherapy and cognitive therapy. Simply by exercising, the individual can significantly improve their mood and state of mind. In severely anxious clients, however, exercising may pose a risk, as exercising outside (such as running or going to the gym) may be a trigger for feelings of anxiety. A common feeling amongst GAD sufferers is that, if they go out running, people will look at them and laugh or, if they make a mistake, people will see and laugh/judge them. For many people this poses more negatives than it does benefits. The person must do what is comfortable to them, which is often in their own home.

Relaxation techniques

There are many relaxation techniques which can help reduce anxiety in the short term. These can be very basic, such as deep breathing, to more complex, such as tai-chi. *Please see below for how to perform these relaxation exercises.* Relaxation exercises can help dramatically in reducing symptoms of anxiety, by focusing the mind elsewhere, rather than ruminating on one thing which is causing negative emotions. Deep relaxation is an easy technique which can be done almost anywhere, in order to reduce symptoms quickly and effectively, with no drawbacks, such as side effects or risks.

Social Support

Social support is a large factor in reducing symptoms of anxiety long term. The idea of a person(s) being there for the individual and have a friendly voice or someone to simply hear them out, is of unparalleled benefit. A common effect of anxiety is the feeling of being alone and that nobody likes/cares for them, due to overwhelming anxiety. Reaching out to other people, whether that be friends, family or a support group/network, can be a huge benefit to people suffering with GAD. Anxious people tend to push others away in fear that they have upset or annoyed them and, if there is a person or group who can refuse to be pushed away and show unconditional positive regard, then this can be of massive help to a GAD sufferer. However, group meetings or meeting new people may cause more harm than good. Being put into a situation that causes great anxiety, such as meeting a group of new people, can be like being thrown in at the deep end, causing panic and long term increased anxiety.

Avoid smoking, drinking and too much caffeine

Smoking, drinking excessive alcohol and drinking caffeine all negatively affect GAD sufferers. Drinking over 14 units of alcohol per week is usually considered bad for people with GAD. The depressive effects of alcohol make anxiety worse than it would normally be. Alcohol increases negative thinking and, therefore, increases levels of anxiety. Anxiety tends to increase binge drinking. In an attempt to stop the anxious thoughts, sufferers tend to drink more and more, resulting in worse symptoms, and increasing levels of drinking, which can lead to significantly worse health problems, mental and physical.

Research into smoking and stress has shown that, instead of helping people to relax, smoking actually increases anxiety and tension. Nicotine creates an immediate sense of relaxation, so people smoke in the belief that it reduces stress and anxiety. This feeling of relaxation is temporary and soon gives way to withdrawal symptoms and increased cravings. Smoking reduces nicotine withdrawal symptoms, which are similar to the symptoms of anxiety, but it does not reduce anxiety or deal with the underlying causes.

Caffeine is also not a good thing for people with anxiety. Caffeine is so good at keeping you awake, because it makes the brain more active than it would normally be, this means that stress levels are more likely to rise, neurotransmitter

production is reduced (serotonin and noradrenaline) and reducing blood flow to the brain. These all result in increased levels of anxiety and lower mood. In small quantities, in mentally healthy people, these side effects are limited and hardly affect us, yet, in people who are already anxious, the feeling is significantly increased.

Relaxation Techniques

Deep Breathing - With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple yet powerful relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements, such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

How to practice deep breathing: The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale. Breathing techniques can be practiced almost anywhere and can be combined with other relaxation exercises, such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind.

You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

Practicing progressive muscle relaxation- Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face.

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Progressive muscle relaxation sequence:

- Right foot, then left foot
- Right calf, then left calf
- Right thigh, then left thigh
- Hips and buttocks
- Stomach
- Chest

- Back
- Right arm and hand, then left arm and hand
- Neck and shoulders
- Face

Mindfulness Meditation - Mindfulness is the quality of being fully engaged in the present moment, without analysing or otherwise “over-thinking” the experience. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness meditation switches the focus to what’s happening right now. Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce stress, anxiety, depression and other negative emotions. Some of these meditations bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words or the flickering light of a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations. Mindfulness can also be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, or eating.

A basic mindfulness exercise:

- Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
- Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.
- Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and your ideas.
- Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.