



ANXIETY: CHOOSING TO LIVE WITH LESS WORRY

“I never realized my chest pains, headaches, and dizziness were connected to my constant worrying until I talked with my doctor.”

— Alan, 77-year-old grandfather

Being worried and feeling anxious once in a while is a part of life. Brief periods of worry are a normal reaction to stressful life events such as paying unexpected bills, moving to a new home, or worrying about health. But when worry becomes overwhelming, affecting your everyday life and ability to function, you may be experiencing an “anxiety disorder.” Anxiety disorders can be disabling and, when left untreated, may lead to poor physical health or a lower quality of life. Fortunately, help is available.

How Might I Experience Anxiety?

Anxiety disorders come in different types, each with its own physical and emotional symptoms. The good news is that once an anxiety disorder is diagnosed, professional help can begin immediately.

The most common form of anxiety is **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**, in which people constantly worry about everyday problems for at least six months. These thoughts may start out with a “What if . . .” such as “What if I go to the exercise class and I’m unable to do the exercises?” or “What if I go to the party and nobody talks to me?” Usually, these thoughts are followed by feelings of fear and apprehension which often result in avoiding the activity altogether, even if the activity is routine. The person may also experience restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, and/or sleep problems. Other types of anxiety disorders are:

- **Panic disorder** is a sudden, intense feeling of panic. Unexpectedly experiencing a pounding heart, sweating, dizziness, shortness of breath, or choking feelings may indicate a panic attack.
- **Phobias** come in two types: social phobia (fearing being judged or ridiculed by others) or specific phobia (excessive fear of places, things, or events, such as spiders, flying, or heights). These fears can lead to avoiding the specific situations that trigger the intense anxiety, such as taking a train instead of flying in a plane. Physical symptoms may include sweating, racing heart, or trembling.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** can occur after a severe trauma like an assault, a life-threatening incident, an unexpected death of a loved one, war, or a natural disaster. Symptoms include difficulty concentrating, nightmares, emotional numbness, and/or flashbacks.
- With **obsessive-compulsive disorder**, a person may experience repeated, recurring, unwanted thoughts that reflect unrealistic fears. These thoughts may lead you to perform compulsive behaviors or rituals like constantly washing your hands or turning light switches on and off as a way to try to relieve the anxiety.

Why Do Some People Suffer from Severe Anxiety?

Researchers continue to study and learn why people suffer from severe anxiety. Experts suggest that a person may be “at risk” for developing an anxiety disorder due to a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors, specifically:

- **Biological Factors.** Severe anxiety may accompany other mental health problems like depression or an illness such as cancer or heart disease. If anxiety disorders run in your family, you may be at increased risk of developing one. In addition, chemical imbalances in the brain may contribute to the development of anxiety disorders.
- **Psychological Factors.** Your thoughts can influence your feelings about yourself. For example, “what if” thinking, jumping to conclusions that a worst-case scenario will occur, or being overly concerned about what others think can lead to anxiety.
- **Social Factors.** If you have been exposed to stressful situations like violence, abuse, or poverty for long periods of time or have experienced a stressful event like divorce or the death of a loved one, you may be more susceptible to anxiety.

Is Anxiety a Normal Part of Aging?

Anxiety is *not* a normal part of aging, although it is estimated that 1 in 10 older adults suffers from an anxiety disorder. Anxiety problems may appear when people are young or even during the middle years and then resurface, or even escalate, as one gets older. The stresses that accompany the aging process like losses of loved ones, chronic or new physical problems, new living situations or financial concerns can all contribute to symptoms of anxiety.

Why Might Anxiety Disorders Be Hard to Recognize?

Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness experienced by older adults and yet is often undetected and untreated. As an older adult, you may feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about your symptoms. It is common to perceive anxiety as a sign of personal weakness. This is why so many people with anxiety suffer in silence.

It is also common to feel more comfortable reporting physical complaints to your medical doctor rather than discussing psychological issues such as anxiety. However, without a complete understanding of how you are doing, a physician may not be able to provide the best possible care. Chest pains, headaches, and fatigue are just a few of the symptoms that may be connected with anxiety. If you don't inform your doctor about your mental health, the anxiety will most likely not be assessed and, therefore, not treated.

Alternatively, identifying an anxiety disorder can be challenging for your doctor because some prescription or over-the-counter medications, particularly those containing stimulants or caffeine, may have side effects similar to anxiety symptoms. Some medical illnesses (such as hyperthyroidism – an overactive thyroid) can even cause anxiety-like symptoms.

How Do I Find Out If I Have an Anxiety Disorder?

If worry has become a big part of your life, it is important to seek help. As discussed earlier, your primary care provider first needs to conduct a comprehensive medical exam to rule out any other underlying illness or side effects from medications that may be contributing to your anxiety symptoms. If there is no medical problem or medication causing the anxiety, you may very well have Generalized Anxiety Disorder or another anxiety disorder. You can discuss your situation with your doctor or a mental health professional like a social worker or a psychologist. Some people feel more comfortable talking initially with their doctor, particularly if they have never been to a mental health professional.

How Are Anxiety Disorders Treated?

The good news is that most people treated for anxiety are substantially helped. With treatment, older adults with anxiety disorders can feel more in control of their lives, less nervous and stressed, more relaxed and happier overall. Treatment plans may be adjusted as time goes on.

The most common treatments for anxiety disorders are cognitive behavioral therapy and medications (used alone or in combination). Anti-anxiety medications called *anxiolytics* can reduce severe anxiety symptoms. However, anxiolytic medications have several side-effects which you should first discuss with your doctor. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps you understand and change anxiety-inducing thoughts so you can react differently to situations associated with your anxiety. This therapy also teaches relaxation and breathing techniques to help better manage difficult situations and your anxiety.

What Else Can I Do to Overcome Anxiety?

In your overall treatment plan, it is important to include the following:

- **Regular Exercise.** Physical exercise activates a chemical reaction in the brain that may help you feel better and less nervous. Activities might include taking a daily walk, swimming, water exercises, yoga, or doing exercises in a chair if you have an impairment that limits your mobility.

- **Relaxation.** Try different relaxation techniques and find what works for you, such as deep breathing or progressive relaxation.

Psychotherapists specializing in treating anxiety teach these techniques:

Deep breathing can reduce stress and allows more oxygen into your body. These are simple to learn, easy to do, and some techniques can be done anywhere or anytime.

Progressive relaxation is a way of learning to relax your muscles that can also help reduce tension when feeling anxious. This is easy to learn and only requires a tape recorder or CD-player, a progressive relaxation tape, a quiet space, and a chair or bed.

- **Use Distraction.** Distracting yourself is not a cure for anxiety but it may provide you with temporary relief. For example, listening to relaxing music like classical piano or sounds of nature can be soothing and calming. Other types of distraction may include watching TV, going to a movie or a play, reading a good book, or talking with family and/or friends.

- **Encourage Yourself.** Thoughts influence feelings and behaviors. If you focus on worst-case scenarios, you are likely to feel anxious and avoid doing things that may have life enhancing possibilities. Instead, imagine yourself managing your worst-case scenario. Then try to talk yourself into taking some risks. For example, let's suppose

that in order to do volunteer work at a children's hospital you are required to attend and pass a mandatory class. You say to yourself, "I will attend the class and do my best. Hopefully I'll pass. *And so what if* I don't pass? I can live with that. Certainly I have faced a lot worse things in life than that!" This self-talk will encourage you to attend the class. If you say to yourself, "*What if* I don't pass? I'd be so ashamed! I wouldn't be able to tolerate that," you will likely feel anxious and too defeated to attend.

Practice making your encouraging thoughts stronger and more convincing than the discouraging thoughts. One way to practice is by using a tape recorder—keep practicing encouraging self-talk statements into the recorder and playing it back until you sound convincing. Then follow-up by going forward with the activity you had been worried about doing.

Where To Get Help

National Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA). The ADAA is a national, non-profit membership organization dedicated to informing the public and healthcare professionals about anxiety disorders, getting professional help, treatment options, and finding self-help support groups. Select "Anxiety and the Elderly" in the *About Anxiety Disorders* section of the Web site. Website: www.adaa.org

Geriatric Mental Health Foundation. Use this Web site to learn more about the role of the Geriatric Psychiatrist, who should see one, and how to find one. Phone: 1-301-654-7850.

Web site: www.gmhfonline.org

National Institute of Mental Health(NIMH). This federal agency provides information about anxiety disorders and methods for locating services and getting help. Its easy-to-read booklet "Facts about Anxiety Disorders" can be viewed on its website or can be ordered free. Phone: 1-800-421-4211. For publications: 1-866-615-6464.

Web site: www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/anxietymenu.cfm

National Mental Health Association(NMHA). This non-profit organization addresses all aspects of mental health and mental illness, including information about anxiety disorders.

Phone: 1-800-969-6642. Web site: www.nmha.org

New York City Resources

Albert Ellis Institute. This Institute's therapeutic approach is based on cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). A progressive relaxation tape or CD *Learning to Relax* can be ordered from the Albert Ellis Institute in NYC.

Phone: 1-212-535-0822 or 1-800-323-4738.

Web site: www.rebt.org

CornellCARES. Developed and maintained by Weill Medical College of Cornell University's Division of Geriatrics and Gerontology, provides an easily accessible Web-based directory of NYC Medicare mental health providers. Some specialize in treating anxiety.

Web site: www.CornellCARES.com

Lifenet. The Mental Health Association of New York City and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene operate the Lifenet hotline (24 hours per day/7 days per week) directing callers to appropriate mental health and substance abuse services. All calls are strictly confidential.

Phone: 1-800-543-3638(English). 1-877-298-3373(Spanish). 1-877-990-8585 (Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean).

Web site: www.mhaofnyc.org/2lifenet.html

Medicare and Medicaid Mental Health Coverage

Medicare. This federal agency offers helpful Medicare information packets. Phone: 1-800-633-4227 for publications.

Web site: www.medicare.gov/Publications/Pubs/pdf/mental.pdf

New York State Department for the Aging. This Department offers an easy-to-understand article entitled "*Medicare Outpatient Mental Health Benefits Explained*".

Web site: www.aging.state.ny.us/news/medicare_outpatient.htm

New York State Department of Health. This Web site provides an overview of Medicaid, the application process, and what health services, including mental health services, are covered.

Web site: www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/medicaid/mainmedicaid.htm

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions consult your physician or other health care provider.

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