

Anxiety Disorders: What treatments are available?

Anxiety is a way to describe feelings of worry, fear, and unease, typically, incorporating both the emotional and physical sensations we experience. Anxiety is related to the 'fight or flight' response and, while unpleasant, this is a normal reaction when our body perceives a threat. However, anxiety disorders can interfere with your ability to work, enjoy life or form close relationships. The key to coping with these conditions is to realize that they usually do not go away on their own. Getting the right kind of help can enable you to overcome an anxiety disorder or to find ways to deal confidently with it.

This is the second in a three-part series of articles on anxiety disorders.

What treatments are available?

Anxiety disorders are usually treated with therapy, medication, or both. The treatment may include these therapies:

Behavioral therapy helps you learn techniques for stopping or controlling unwanted behaviors. These techniques may include deep breathing for panic attacks and exposure therapy, or *desensitization*, for phobias.

Exposure therapy provides a safe space where people are gradually and systematically exposed to the objects or situations that frighten them. They also are helped to develop coping skills. For example, people who fear dogs might first view dogs in pictures and then go to see them in a relatively safe setting, such as a pet shop or kennel, before trying to face dogs on a leash.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps by challenging your negative and anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviors to help you understand how they affect each other, and how you avoid situations. For example, people who worry about giving speeches might learn to identify and question the self-defeating negative messages they send themselves before presentations and to replace them with more realistic positive ones. Instead of thinking to themselves, "I always mess up when I speak in front of a large crowd and people judge me" they might think, "I am prepared for my speech and know my audience well. My topic is interesting to this group of people."

Medications may be used along with other forms of therapy. For long-term treatment, doctors may prescribe selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs also known as anti-depressants), which act on the parts of the brain that regulate anxiety. Other medications, such as benzodiazepines (also known as tranquilizers), act on the central nervous system by slowing it down and have an immediate effect on lowering anxiety. These medications are prescribed only for short periods of time because there is a risk of addiction. It can be important to control panic attacks with medication so that they do not become more frequent or intense, making it harder to manage them. Beta blockers are a type of medication that treats high blood pressure and heart issues. However, doctors may prescribe them (most commonly propranolol) to help reduce the "fight or flight" stress hormone, which would control the physical symptoms of anxiety.

It is important to realize that these medications may take weeks to have full effect, and it might take time to find the best dose or medication for you. Additionally, taking medication is an individual choice and it's important to speak openly to your doctor about any concerns you have about them and be aware of the side effects.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment for anxiety disorders that typically requires a limited number of sessions, making the treatment very cost-effective. EMDR therapist may ask their clients to focus on the most painful memories they have that provoke their anxiety and hold these in their minds, paying particular attention to sensations, images and emotions that arise. This allows the therapist to help guide your attention away from the negative thoughts and towards more positive ones, softening the anxiety.

Some anxiety disorders may respond well to a single form of treatment while others may require a combination of medication and therapy. Depending on the nature of the condition, people may see progress in a relatively short time, such as six to eight weeks, or may need to continue the therapy for much longer.

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