

## Treatments for Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders and affect almost a third of all adults at some point in their lives. If you have experienced an anxiety disorder, you are not alone. Anxiety disorders include generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety, panic disorder, specific phobias, and more. Most anxiety disorders are characterised by intense or excessive worry and feelings of dread. These symptoms often affect a person's ability to function in everyday situations. If you or someone you know struggles with anxiety, you do not need to suffer alone. There are many evidenced-based treatment options available to help you reduce your anxiety symptoms and lead a happy life.

### Understand Your Anxiety

The first step to managing anxiety is understanding what it is and what may be causing or contributing to your anxiety symptoms. This helps you understand and normalise your anxiety. Most symptoms of anxiety are your body's way of signalling "danger," even though danger may not be present. Recognising what is happening inside your body can help lessen the physical and cognitive sensations and help you better manage your anxiety response.

### Relaxation Techniques

When we experience anxiety, our brain floods our body with chemicals (such as adrenaline and cortisol), giving us energy to deal with a threat even when no major threat is there. To help reset and calm your body's nervous system, engaging in formal relaxation practice can be helpful. Implementing these relaxation methods can help disrupt the cycle:

- **Focused deep breathing:** Breathe in deeply through your nose for 4 counts, hold for 1 count, and then breathe out through your mouth for another 4 counts. Continue counting your breaths in this way until you experience a reduction in acute anxiety. This will slow the heart rate and calm your body down.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Progressive muscle relaxation involves consciously tensing up a muscle group and then relaxing it. This helps remove any muscle tension that was built up due to anxiety and provides feedback to your brain that you can be safe and calm. Start at one end of the body (i.e. head to toes or toes to head) and work your way through the various muscle groups. Focus on the main parts of your body including your shoulders, stomach, arms, and legs. Tense each muscle group for a count of 5, then relax your muscles, one after the other.

### Physical Exercise & Diet

Physical exercise and diet play a huge part in how we feel not just physically, but also mentally.

- **Physical exercise** has been consistently shown in research to reduce the effects of acute anxiety (it helps release some of the stress-response hormones and physical tension). Regular exercise also

helps build resilience to stress and anxiety. An intense cardio exercise that gets your heart pumping not only burn off excess adrenaline but also releases endorphins, which is our body's natural pain reliever and a feel-good hormone.

- **Diet** A healthy and nutritious diet also can help reduce anxiety. Vitamin and nutrition-rich foods help feed our body and brain, giving us the energy we need to combat stress, solve problems and engage in healthy behaviours and coping mechanisms.

## Focus on Problem Solving

Some anxieties come from struggles in our lives that we haven't resolved. These could range from unresolved problems with relationships and living situations, to career choices and financial issues. Putting off addressing these situations only serves to increase anxiety. If you find yourself dwelling on these situations, take a moment to ask yourself a few questions. How might I be able to solve this issue? Have I done anything to find a solution? It can be helpful to break down each part of the problem into smaller chunks to reduce your anxiety and help you make small, realistic steps towards solving your problems.

## Use Therapy

Working one-to-one with a qualified mental health counsellor provides an opportunity to learn evidenced-based interventions to handle anxiety. A therapist can help you develop a greater understanding of yourself, your anxiety triggers, and identify coping mechanisms that work best for you. Some methods may include:

- **Talking therapy** is a way for you and your therapist to identify the events in your past and possibly your daily life that have triggered your anxiety.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy** is a method of learning to re-programme negative or harmful thinking patterns. This includes recognising unrealistic, negative thoughts, and learning how to challenge and replace them with more realistic, positive, and healthy thoughts. It also involves increasing behaviours that lower your anxiety and reducing behaviours that may increase it.
- **Exposure Therapy** is the practice of intentionally facing your fears to address and overcome them. This approach is designed to diminish our feelings of danger in situations that are not threatening. Exposure therapy is common for treating post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and panic disorder.

## Finding Support Groups

Besides one-to-one therapy, support groups are another treatment option for people with anxiety. These are safe spaces where you can further your education and engage with others who are going through similar experiences. Knowing you're not alone and building a social network creates a greater support system while also putting your irrational fears of anxiety into perspective.

## Prescription Medication

In addition to behavioural interventions for anxiety, some people may benefit from working with professionals who can prescribe medications specifically for anxiety. This may include antidepressants or other anxiety medications.

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