

## ANXIETY DISORDERS: TREATMENT PLAN

### General Information

Anxiety Disorders are the most common psychiatric disorders. Up to 29% of the population may experience an Anxiety Disorder during their lifetime. In a year, up to 13% of individuals experience Social Anxiety Disorder; up to 6.6% experience Generalized Anxiety Disorder; and up to 2.7% experience Panic Disorder. Like many psychiatric disorders, there are strong biological (brain changes, abnormalities in neurotransmitter modulation) and genetic (abnormalities in genes that code for serotonin transmission and promotor genes, as well as differences in receptor function) contributions to the development of these disorders.

### Symptoms

Common symptoms may vary by type of disorder.

*Panic Disorder:* Palpitations, shakiness, choking sensation, shortness of breath, racing thoughts, fear of dying or going crazy, numbness in hands or feet, dizziness, feelings of unreality. This disorder is often associated with avoidance of places, situations, or people which the individual associates as a trigger.

*Generalized Anxiety Disorder:* Tension, feeling “on edge”, difficulty with concentration or having your mind “go blank”, muscle tension, poor sleep, becoming easily fatigued.

*Social Anxiety Disorder:* Fear of being in situations where an individual may feel scrutinized or embarrassed, fears further embarrassment with the thought that others may recognize their embarrassment, anticipatory anxiety and distress over being around unfamiliar people or social situations, avoidance of social settings.

*More severe symptoms may include:* Suicidal thinking, severe avoidance behavior causing impairment in daily function. These disorders can increase the risk for depressive illness and substance use disorders.

Some forms of anxiety disorders are most commonly seen in children.

*Separation Anxiety Disorder:* Often seen with school refusal. This may be a predictor of adult anxiety disorders (primarily Panic Disorder).

*Simple Phobias:* Unwarranted fear of an object, animal, or event.

*Selective Mutism:* When a person who is capable of speech, is unable to speak in certain social situations or to certain people.

## Commonly Co-Occurring Conditions

Anxiety Disorders commonly include the presence of physical symptoms; in fact, an individual is very likely to see their PCP before a psychiatrist when they develop anxiety. When you suffer with an Anxiety Disorder it can be associated with the development of Depression, other Anxiety Disorders, Substance Use Disorders, and can have a negative impact on health care outcomes. Many medical illnesses (e.g., thyroid disorders, mitral valve prolapse, asthma, COPD, cardiac conditions, diabetes, endocrine tumors) can present with symptoms of anxiety and your provider may feel the need to do testing or evaluations to rule out a medical cause. Medications can also cause anxiety symptoms (decongestants, asthma inhalers, steroids, weight-loss medications, stimulants, etc.).



Anxiety may be due to a complex interplay of biological and genetic vulnerability with environmental or situational problems, such as exposure to trauma or high levels of stress. Science has identified that the part of our brain that signals fear and anxiety – the amygdala – responds to anxiety cues at lower thresholds in individuals with Anxiety Disorders. In addition to this, other biochemical and neurotransmitter abnormalities have been identified in scientific studies. Social Anxiety Disorder is moderately heritable (inherited), while Panic Disorder has even higher rates of heritability. Many of these disorders present in childhood, adolescence, or young adult years. Without treatment, these disorders can result in significant impairment.

## Testing & Assessment

Your provider may choose to conduct various assessments or testing for further insight, in order to develop the best comprehensive treatment plan for you, as an individual. The more objective data they can gather, as it relates to your symptoms, the more effectively they can develop this individualized care and treatment plan.

### Standard Assessments

*Physical Exam:* A physical exam by your PCP may be needed if you have not had one in the last year, or if you have new physical symptoms that need evaluation. If you do not have a PCP, SMART centers have PCPs available to provide this level of care.

*Blood Work:* Blood tests are frequently required to rule out medical diseases, food allergies or to establish your health status so that your provider can monitor for any medical side effects from treatment.

*ECG:* An electrocardiogram (ECG) may be needed if cardiac symptoms are present and require a medical evaluation.

*EEG & Neuro Referral:* These may be needed to evaluate some types of symptoms (e.g., fainting, dizziness, tremors, problems with balance, etc.). SMART centers have a neurologist available to provide this level of care.

### Innovative Testing

*CNS Vital Signs Neurocognitive Testing:* A computerized neurocognitive testing platform that assesses how well your brain is managing tasks, such as working memory, verbal memory, concentration, processing speed, and executive functioning. These results give your provider objective measurements of function, which can be helpful in measuring your level of impairment and help monitor your progress of improvement during treatment.

*qEEG:* Quantitative electroencephalogram (qEEG) measures the electrical activity in the brain using surface electrodes. Data is collected and analyzed by a computer program and compared to databases that have established norms. The computer produces a colorized map demonstrating areas of the brain with low or excessive activity compared to norms, providing objective information about which area(s) in the brain may be affected by or generating the dysfunction.

## Developing Your Treatment Plan

Anxiety Disorders can be difficult to treat as they present certain challenges that can be difficult to overcome. Oftentimes, patients struggle with these illnesses for years or have developed coping adaptations, which further impair function (avoidance of any activities, places, or persons that provoke anxiety). Due to the complexity of Anxiety Disorders, the treatment plan usually must be multifaceted. Most patients will require a combination of interventions (medication, therapy, dietary changes, practice, and/or treatment of co-occurring medical contributors) to achieve either response (at least a 50% reduction in symptoms) or remission (the resolution or near resolution of all symptoms). Even when symptom control is achieved, patients may need to practice behavioral changes to return to pre-illness levels of functioning. However, there are some common strategies that will likely be suggested. Some patients may improve with one or two of these steps while others may require many or all to get to remission. Your SMART provider will work with you to offer the best options for improvement, and will monitor your progress to remission.

## Treatment Options

Below is a general overview of treatment options. You may have already tried some of these interventions, or this may be your first experience. You and your provider will work together to determine the best treatment options for your specific case at this time. Keep in mind, individuals may require multiple interventions or a combination of treatments to achieve their best personal results. It will be important for you to work with your provider to develop a comprehensive personalized treatment plan.

### Therapy



- Several forms of therapy have been found to be effective in reducing anxiety symptoms and in addressing the behavioral consequences (phobic avoidance) that follow untreated anxiety.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) addresses the distortions in thinking that accompany anxiety and provides tools to correct thinking and change behavior. SMART centers have CBT classes available that teach skills for the management of anxiety.
- Behavioral Therapies such as Progressive Desensitization can help patients overcome phobic avoidance by gradual exposure to feared situations, coupled with techniques to decrease anxiety during exposure.
- Mindfulness Training can improve anxiety tolerance and symptoms.

## Exercise

- Exercise can be a very effective stress-management technique.
- Patients with uncontrolled panic attacks, or those who have become very sensitive to internal cues (such as rapid heart rate or rapid breathing), may initially feel that their anxiety symptoms are triggered by exercise. However, exercise, in general, can help to reduce anxiety. These patients may need to work up to exercise goals in steps, while working with their provider, to reduce their “cue sensitivity”.
- Exercise is an important part of both mental and physical wellness and should be an important part of your health maintenance routine.



## Diet



- Changing diet alone will likely not resolve your Anxiety Disorder, but certain dietary changes are important for those suffering from Anxiety Disorders.
  - Elimination of chemical triggers for anxiety is crucial to getting symptoms such as panic attacks under control. The most common trigger is caffeine. You may need to stop your intake of coffee, tea, and sodas. Do not stop suddenly as this can lead to caffeine withdrawal headaches. Reduce consumption over time.
  - Avoid using OTC medications or herbal preparations (e.g., oral decongestant medications, herbal teas and cleanses, weight-loss products) without consulting your provider. These may contain products that can trigger anxiety.
- Follow a diet that has been shown to be beneficial to brain health, such as the Mediterranean diet or the MIND diet, which is similar but includes the consumption of antioxidant/anti-inflammatory foods such as berries, leafy greens, and nuts.
- Avoid alcohol. This temporarily decreases anxiety but often results in rebound anxiety.

## Medications

- Antidepressant SSRI/SNRI medications are the first line medications for anxiety. These drugs have the effectiveness to block panic attacks and help with anticipatory anxiety. It may take longer for these medications to work in Anxiety Disorders. Improvement may continue through eight to 12 weeks after starting the medication. Some individuals who are highly sensitized to physical sensations may need to start at lower doses and gradually build up the dose. You may need to try more than one medication before you achieve the desired response.
- Buspirone is an anti-anxiety medication that may be helpful for some patients. It has the advantage of not causing physical dependence. While it is useful in some Anxiety Disorders, it may not be effective as an agent to block panic attacks.
- Occasionally, your provider may suggest a benzodiazepine type anti-anxiety medication, usually for temporary use. These medications are habit forming and you can suffer withdrawal if you abruptly stop the medication. This medication cannot be used with alcohol. You should not drive when taking this medication, as it may impair your ability to safely operate your vehicle.
- Atypical antipsychotic medications are occasionally used for Anxiety Disorders. This includes medications such as quetiapine (Seroquel) or aripiprazole (Abilify). These drugs can have neurological consequences after long-term use and may cause weight gain and metabolic disturbances.
- Medications often relieve symptoms, but the behavioral consequences of severe anxiety, which interfere with daily functioning, may not resolve with medication alone. The patient may need graded exposure therapy and/or other behavioral therapies.



## Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS)

- When the strategies noted above have not resulted in the complete resolution of distressing symptoms, TMS therapy may offer a supplemental option.
- TMS is a neuromodulation therapy that strengthens the connections between different networks in the brain. TMS is not FDA approved for the treatment of anxiety but has been used as an effective intervention. If you wish to explore this option, please speak with your provider.
- TMS is a safe, easily-tolerated outpatient treatment. You may drive yourself to and from therapy sessions.





## Achieving Better Outcomes

### Substances to Avoid

- Do not smoke to relieve nervousness. Nicotine and the withdrawal worsen anxiety.
- Stimulants including caffeine, weight loss products, and herbal products.
- Avoid alcohol. Rebound anxiety can be severe. You are at higher risk to develop a problem with alcohol and other drugs when you have an Anxiety Disorder.
- Be aware that some medications may be difficult for you to tolerate (e.g., oral decongestants, weight-loss medications, asthma medications, steroids, and/or ADHD medications).

### Other Things to Avoid

- Sleep deprivation may make you more vulnerable to triggering cues.
- Prolonged stressful situations. While no one can avoid all stressful situations, it is important to eliminate stresses whenever possible.
- Avoid abruptly stopping medications when you feel better, as this can result in a recurrence of symptoms.

### More Ways to Help Yourself

- Learn about your illness.
- Identify triggers and, when possible, eliminate substances/foods that trigger symptoms.
- Remember that you do not have to be comfortable to be functional. Try not to avoid responsibilities and social outings. Practice helps over time, while avoidance only leads to more avoidance.
- Partner with your provider to find a treatment plan that leads to achieving a good result.
- Communicate with your provider about your symptoms, stresses, impairments, and medication compliance.
- There are many books on the subject of Anxiety. “The Feeling Good Handbook” by David D. Burns, MD and “The Anxiety Disease” by David V. Sheehan, MD are two.
- Support groups are available. Visit the NIMH website or the NAMI website.
- Consider adopting the practice of deep breathing exercises. You may use a cell phone trigger or set reminders to prompt you to take one minute of deep breathing multiple times a day. Be aware of muscle tension in your body as you complete the breathing exercise and release the tension. Practicing active relaxation prepares you to be better equipped when you are confronted with an anxiety generating situation.
- There are also good guided relaxation exercises commercially available, which guide you through progressive muscle relaxation and often use imagery to assist you in achieving a more relaxed state. Again, these work best when practiced with regularity.

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