

Patient Handout: Understanding, Managing, and Treating Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, or unease. It's a normal part of life to experience occasional anxiety. For example, you may feel anxious when faced with a problem at work, before taking a test, or making an important decision.

However, when you have anxiety as a disorder, it's more than just feeling stressed out before a big exam. It's an ongoing condition that doesn't go away after stressful events and can interfere with your day-to-day activities and relationships. This type of anxiety can make you stop doing things you enjoy. In extreme cases, it may prevent you from entering an elevator, crossing the street, or even leaving your home.

Anxiety feels different for everyone. You might feel butterflies in your stomach, a racing heart, or have a hard time concentrating. Sometimes, you might not be able to identify a specific reason why you're feeling anxious.

Common Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety

- Nervousness
- Restlessness, feeling wound-up, or on edge
- Easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble relaxing
- Irritability or easily annoyed
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbances (trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or unsatisfying sleep)

How is Anxiety Treated?

Anxiety is typically treated with a combination of psychotherapy (cognitive-behavioral therapy is often most effective), medications (like SSRIs or SNRIs), and lifestyle changes.

Managing Anxiety

- **Relaxation Techniques:** Deep breathing exercises, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help manage symptoms.
 - **Deep Breathing:** When you're feeling anxious, take slow, deep breaths. Inhale to a count of 4, hold the breath for 4 counts, and exhale for 4 counts. Repeat this for a few minutes.
 - **Mindfulness:** This is about staying focused on the present moment. Notice your surroundings, the sensations in your body, or pay attention to your breathing. Mindfulness can help interrupt anxious thoughts and prevent them from escalating.
 - **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** This technique involves tensing and then releasing each muscle group in your body, starting from your toes and working your way up to your head. With practice, you can learn to release tension and relax your muscles when you start to feel anxious.
 - **Challenge Negative Thoughts:** Identify the negative thought, assess its validity, and replace it with a balanced and more rational thought. If you're worried about a big presentation at work, your thought might be, "I'm going to fail." Challenge this by asking yourself, "Do I have any evidence that I will fail?" Replace the thought with, "I'm prepared and have done well on previous presentations."
- **Physical Activity:** Regular exercise can reduce feelings of anxiety and improve your mood.
- **Balanced Diet:** A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains can help you feel better physically and emotionally.
- **Limit Alcohol and Caffeine:** These substances can trigger or worsen anxiety symptoms.
- **Good Sleep Habits:** Aim for 7–9 hours of sleep per night. Consider a nighttime routine to help you wind down and prepare for sleep.

Prognosis for Anxiety

With treatment, many people with anxiety disorders can manage their symptoms and lead full, productive lives. However, some may continue to experience symptoms even with treatment. It's important to continue working with your healthcare provider to find the most effective treatment plan for you.

Resources for Help and Additional Information

- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA):** Provides extensive information and resources for those struggling with anxiety disorders. www.adaa.org
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):** Offers support groups, education, and other resources for individuals with mental health conditions and their families. www.nami.org
- **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):** Provides a wide range of information about mental health disorders, including a section on anxiety disorders. www.nimh.nih.gov
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):** Their national helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.
- **Suicide prevention hotline: 988**

This handout is designed to provide a broad overview of anxiety and does not cover all possible aspects of the disorder.