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## *Integrative Approaches to Anxiety: Easing the Fear*

### **What is anxiety?**

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Like other emotions, fear is a normal part of being human. It is a reaction to danger or something you believe to be threatening. It increases our awareness of the environment. It reminds us to protect ourselves. However, it can also move out of balance. Anxiety should be treated if it is

1. Intense (more than people usually feel)
2. Chronic (felt many times during the day or most days of the week)
3. Limiting (makes it hard to do daily tasks or relate to others).

Anxiety is the most common psychiatric problem in the United States. One in every 20 people will experience it at some time in their lives. Treating anxiety can be challenging because fear may affect your ability to trust others and to try new treatments. Living with a constant sense of being in danger is exhausting.

### **Other symptoms of anxiety**

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People with anxiety go to the doctor three times more than the average person. Sixty percent of those with anxiety will have other problems linked to anxiety, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), depression, or substance use.

Other symptoms that are linked to anxiety include:

Tiring easily	Restlessness
Poor concentration	Sweats
Irritability	Headaches
Muscle tension	Trembling
Sleep problems	Fast heart beat

### **Causes of anxiety**

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There is no one molecule, part of the brain, or gene problem that is “the cause” of anxiety. It is probably best to think of anxiety as a set of symptoms that can have many different causes. Generalized anxiety, panic attacks, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and phobias are all unique. In truth, there may be different causes and symptoms for each person who has anxiety.

To manage your anxiety, consider choosing an approach in each of the following four areas. Explore what combination of treatments works for you.

1. **Mind-Body Issues.** The connection between your mind and body is important. When you feel anxious, you may notice one or more symptoms in your body. How you deal with stress, how aware you are of your surroundings and your patterns of thinking can all play a role.
2. **Body Chemistry.** Studies of twins indicate that part of anxiety is genetic. Some families have more anxious members than others. (Treatments that help one person in the family may help others in the family too.) Different forms of anxiety are linked to different chemical imbalances in the body. Levels of norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin, and many other chemicals, can affect anxiety. Some people have chemical receptors in the brain that don't respond as well as others'. Parts of the brain may be more or less active than normal in people with anxiety. These parts include the amygdala, the prefrontal cortex (which is strongly affected by meditation) and the hippocampus (where memories are processed).



## Integrative Approaches to Anxiety

3. **Past Experiences.** People who have had intense trauma in their lives, or even those who have faced many minor traumas, are at risk for anxiety. How your parents dealt with stress and how you were treated as a child may affect your anxiety as an adult. Being bullied as a kid can lead to anxiety.
4. **Current Environment and Lifestyle.** Of course, anxiety is due to more than problems experienced in the past. Many people have very stressful lives. How you respond to stress – and how much you live with every day – will contribute to your anxiety level.

The following suggestions are based as much as possible on the latest findings from medical research. They are safe and have helped many people work with anxiety.

### Mind-body issues

Mind-body approaches are vital for treating anxiety. We highly recommend these be part of every treatment plan. A 2008 review found that many different approaches were helpful for anxiety. Some of these include:

- **Psychotherapy/Counseling.** Treatments such as psychotherapy have been well-studied. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and behavioral training are known to help anxiety. They can also help medications for anxiety work better. It is extremely helpful for people with anxiety to find a therapist, someone who is not emotionally connected to them.
- **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).** MBSR, which is based on various forms of meditation, has been proven to reduce anxiety and depression symptoms. Even a full year after taking a mindfulness course, participants reported that their symptoms were decreased. For more information, consider reading *Full*

*Catastrophe Living or Wherever You Go, There You Are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Mindfulness courses are available at many medical centers, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Any type of meditation, from vipassana to various forms of yoga to a walking meditation or body scan, can be helpful.

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR).** In progressive muscle relaxation you will learn how to relax the muscles in your body in order.
- **Biofeedback.** During biofeedback, a therapist will teach you how to stay more relaxed using “feedback” from your body. S/he will show how you can change your rate of breathing, pulse, blood pressure and other measurements in the body by what you are thinking and by relaxing certain muscles. For more information, check out <http://www.answers.com/topic/biofeedback>.
- **The Fear Book.** An interesting book that takes a Zen approach to anxiety is *The Fear Book*, by Cheri Huber.
- **Breathing Exercise.** Pick a breathing exercise you can use whenever you need to. A popular one is the 4-7-8 breath. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Practice this a few times to get the feel of it. Then exhale completely to empty your lungs. Inhale to a count of four. Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale slowly to a count of eight. Repeat this cycle four times. Never do more than eight cycles.



# Integrative Approaches to Anxiety

## Body chemistry

- **Drugs.** Medications for anxiety can be helpful. They are especially worth considering for a short time if you need help settling down enough to be able to explore other treatments. However, it is important to avoid the common trap of “covering up the symptoms” by using medications without ever really going deeper to explore the reasons the anxiety exists. Drugs have a role in anxiety treatment, but should not be the only thing used.
  - Propranolol at a dose of 10-40 mg as needed three times daily, can decrease acute anxiety. It is often used for stage fright.
  - Benzodiazepines such as clonazepam or lorazepam may be used for rapid improvement of symptoms as well. This class of drugs is best used only for a short time, as you can become addicted to them.
  - SSRI's. Many patients also take SSRI drugs, such as fluoxetine (Prozac) or escitalopram (Lexapro). These drugs can help anxiety, but they have a greater risk of side effects. Again we suggest you explore other options.
  - Buspirone. Some practitioners prefer to prescribe buspirone because it does not cause severe drowsiness and you won't become addicted to it.
- **Nutrition.** A healthy diet has been found to be of value in many health problems, including anxiety. Consider some of the following:
  - Glycemic Index. Some people find that they have more anxiety within a few hours of eating, as their blood sugars drop in response to insulin. It may be helpful to try eating multiple small meals, which include both proteins and complex carbohydrates (whole grains). Often, the simple carbohydrates from foods such as white breads, donuts, and pastries can lead to greater imbalances in sugar levels.

There is a theory that sucrose (sugar) can lead to increased lactic acid in the muscles, which can cause anxiety. A low-sugar diet is worth a try for a week or two.
  - Anti-Inflammation Diet. An anti-inflammation diet might be helpful, although more research is needed.
  - Elimination Diet. In one study of 60 people with anxiety and headaches, elimination diets helped everyone. It might be worth avoiding certain foods for a few weeks in the following situations: 1) if you feel that these foods increase your anxiety, 2) if you crave certain foods or 3) if you rely on this food as 'comfort foods' when feeling anxious. If symptoms go away but then come back when a food is added back to the diet, that food may be part of the problem.
  - Caffeine. People with anxiety are more sensitive to caffeine. It helps to completely remove caffeine from what you eat. Try this for a few weeks and see if you notice a difference. You may develop a headache for a few days, but this should clear up soon.



## *Integrative Approaches to Anxiety*

### **Body chemistry continued**

- **Dietary Supplements.** Several supplements seem helpful for anxiety. These include:
  - Folic Acid. Folic acid seems to help antidepressants and some supplements work better. A dose of 400-800 micrograms daily may be helpful.
  - B Complex Vitamins. Thiamine (Vitamin B1) at 250 mg daily may help with anxiety. B6 helps your body make serotonin. B6 and B12 both affect levels of S-adenosylmethionine, SAME, which is known to improve mood problems. They can also be tried. B complex supplements are worth trying for at least six weeks. If you take B6 supplements, it is important to make sure the total you take each day is less than 100 mg to avoid harm to your body.
  - Omega 3's. From a few studies investigating the use of fish oil and other omega 3 sources for depression, it appears that omega-3 fatty acids may have positive effects on the body's nervous system. Given that they tend to be quite safe, omega-3 supplements are reasonable to consider. A good starting dose is 2000 to 3000 mg of fish oil daily.
  - Valerian. This supplement works especially well for insomnia. One study using 50 mg three times a day found that it also decreased anxiety symptoms as well as a low dose of an anxiety drug did. A standard dose is actually 150-300 mg in the morning and 300-600 mg in the evening for anxiety. Note that it takes a few weeks to reach full effect. If you use it for more than a few days, it should be stopped gradually. Side effects are minimal.
  - Kava Kava. This controversial supplement, native to the South Pacific, has been found in several studies to help with anxiety. It changes levels of GABA, norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine in the brain. There are 68 people who have had liver failure associated with kava use. It is thought that for many of these people, the kava was contaminated. It usually takes 1-8 weeks for kava to reach full effect. It is suggested that liver function tests be checked 8 weeks after you start kava. Some sources say it should be used for no more than 3 months. Do not take kava if you have liver problems or if you take any medications that may harm the liver. Also don't use it if you have Parkinson's disease. Use it only under the supervision of a provider familiar with its use. Kava may increase your risk of suicide if you have depression. Dose for a tincture of kava lactones is 50-70 mg three times a day.
  - Many supplements used for depression, such as SAME, St. Johns wort, and 5-HTP, are also used for anxiety. Research on anxiety alone is limited, but given that depression and anxiety are often closely linked, it is worth considering these supplements.



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# Integrative Approaches to Anxiety

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## Past Experiences

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- How you experience stress is influenced by how you saw your parents and others deal with stress when you were growing up. It was also shaped by traumatic events from the past (including various forms of abuse) and how much control you have had over your life. Many of the items listed in the mind-body section can be useful for exploring these issues. Many modalities help people ‘work through’ difficult past experiences. This can lead to lower anxiety levels. Examples include body work, energy medicine, psychoanalysis, journaling, and many others.
  - Family Counseling may be helpful in some situations.
  - Journaling can help one release pent up emotions that may contribute to anxiety.

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## Current Environment and Lifestyle

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- **Exercise.** There is good research showing that exercise can help with anxiety. While cardiovascular (aerobic) exercise may have the greatest affect, weight lifting and flexibility training also help. One study showed that exercising most days of the week for at least 12 minutes a day for 10 weeks helped anxiety. The benefits were still present one year later, even if people were exercising less. People who exercised in 40-minute sessions had even more benefit. Beneficial effects of exercise for

anxiety were still present in college students 7 years after one study.

- **Substance Use.** Many people with anxiety (as many as 30%) use alcohol or other potentially addictive substances to control symptoms. If this describes you, we hope that as you try some of the other treatments listed above, you can stop using tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.
  - Stop Tobacco. Nicotine can make anxiety worse.
  - Stop Alcohol. Alcohol may decrease a sense of anxiety, but its long term use decreases serotonin levels in the brain, which can make anxiety worse.
  - Stop Illegal Drugs. 17% of people with anxiety use illegal drugs. You can become addicted to these drugs, and they may cause side effects, including making anxiety and other mood symptoms *worse*.
- **Sleep.** Sleep can be affected by anxiety, and anxiety can lead to poor sleep.
- **Media Fasts.** Many people fail to notice that the news leads to a lot of anxiety for them. A media fast can help. Spend a certain amount of time (a week is a good start) without watching, reading, or listening to the news. Many people find this extremely helpful.
- **Time in Nature.** Increasing time in natural settings can be relaxing for many people.



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## *Integrative Approaches to Anxiety*

### **What About Other Therapies?**

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In addition to the suggestions described above, it is reasonable to explore other approaches as well. It would be worth thinking about the following:

- **Acupuncture.** Several small studies have shown that acupuncture can help with anxiety symptoms. One study indicated that more than 5 sessions are needed to have the most effect. An overall review of the research suggests that acupuncture is promising for anxiety. More research is needed to fully justify the use of acupuncture. Many people find that acupuncture can be extremely relaxing.
- **Energy Medicine.** Some studies indicate that therapeutic touch helps to lower anxiety. Other therapies, such as reiki and healing touch, may also be helpful. They tend to be quite safe. See the Mental Help Website for more information at [http://mentalhelp.net/poc/view\\_doc.php?type=doc&id=8928&cn=15](http://mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=8928&cn=15).
- **Tai chi** was found in one study to lower anxiety in women.
- **Yoga** was found in a review of eight studies to show some promise, and it was found to be as beneficial as relaxation therapy. It is important to start yoga gently, and classes can be quite helpful.
- **Bodywork** such as therapeutic massage and myofascial release can also provide relaxation. One study of 39 women being treated for breast cancer found that bodywork reduced both anxiety and nausea.

For additional information, see the website for the Anxiety Disorder Association of America, [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

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