

Anxiety

Generalized anxiety and worry

Why your alarm system goes off too easily, and how to train it to settle.

WHAT ANXIETY IS

Anxiety is an old survival tool, not a defect. Your brain's smoke detector (the amygdala) asks "am I in danger?" It is fast but not smart. The watchtower above it (the prefrontal cortex) sends the "what ifs."

Four words get blurred together. Fear answers a real threat. Anxiety is the what-ifs keeping the alarm on low. Worry is the thinking part of anxiety. Panic is a false alarm.

WHY IT KEEPS GOING

Avoiding what scares you brings quick relief, and the relief teaches your brain that avoiding was necessary. Checking, seeking reassurance and "just in case" habits work the same way.

Anxiety often stands in for another feeling, like loneliness, rejection or anger. An emotion wheel (search for one online) helps you name what is underneath.

WHAT TREATMENT LOOKS LIKE

Exposure

Face what you avoid in small steps, then tell your brain afterward: that was safe.

Mindfulness

Practice noticing worry without fighting it. Start with 5 minutes when calm, never as an escape.

Therapy and medicine

CBT or ACT comes first if you can engage. An SSRI is the usual medicine, and it can take 8 to 12 weeks.

Lead with exposure and mindfulness. Medication can help, but it shouldn't be the first or only step.

EXPOSURE: AVOID AVOIDING

Put yourself in situations that cause anxiety, get through them, and tell your brain: that was safe.

- List what you avoid and rate each from 0 to 100
- Start at a step rated about 30 to 50
- Practice most days, at least 3 or 4 times a week
- Move up when the anxiety is about half what it was

IN THE MOMENT

Anxiety doesn't keep climbing forever. It peaks and falls, even when you do nothing about it.

The key lesson is to trust that you will be okay, and that you can handle this.

Simple things help the wave pass: go outside, slow your breathing, take a bath, or talk to someone.

Habits that help. Check one or two to start with.

- ☐ Exercise most days. Yoga is a good choice
- ☐ Keep caffeine to one cup of coffee at most
- ☐ Cut caffeine after noon
- ☐ Practice 5 minutes of mindfulness when calm
- ☐ Name the feeling underneath with an emotion wheel

- ☐ Go outside, take a bath, or talk to someone
- ☐ Keep the same wake time every day
- ☐ Check the news once a day; phone out of the bedroom
- ☐ Cut back on alcohol, which rebounds into anxiety
- ☐ Make time for faith or something bigger than you

RULE OUT LOOK-ALIKES

Anxiety can be a symptom of something else. Ask about:

- Bipolar disorder, depression, trauma or OCD
- Alcohol, caffeine or stimulants
- Thyroid, heart rhythm or asthma problems
- An unsafe or stressful situation at home or work

Treat the diagnosis, not just the symptom.

BOOKS AND APPS

Feeling Great by David Burns. CBT you work through like homework.

The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris. ACT, a lighter route. **Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life** by Steven Hayes teaches the same skills; its teen edition is easier going.

MindShift CBT, a free app. For mindfulness: Waking Up, Insight Timer or Headspace.

MEDICATION, BRIEFLY

An SSRI such as sertraline or escitalopram is the usual first medicine. Early side effects settle in a week or so. Benzodiazepines can calm a crisis, but they weaken the learning that exposure builds and carry dependence risk, so they are used sparingly.

Source. Adapted from Psychofarm's anxiety guides and podcast conversations on anxiety with Dr. Malzberg and Dr. Fu.

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