

Treating  
Anxiety Disorders

TREATING

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## ABOUT ANXIETY DISORDERS

Anxiety is a normal part of living. It's a biological reaction—the body's way of telling us something isn't right. It keeps us from harm's way and prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger. However, for some people, anxiety is persistent, irrational, and overwhelming. It may interfere with daily activities and even make them impossible. This may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

The term “anxiety disorders” describes this group of conditions:

- **generalized anxiety disorder (GAD):** persistent, excessive, and unrealistic worry about everyday things
- **obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD):** unwanted and intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and ritualistic behaviors and routines (compulsions) conducted to ease anxiety
- **panic disorder:** spontaneous, seemingly out-of-the-blue panic or “anxiety” attacks and the preoccupation with the fear of a recurring attack
- **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** an anxiety disorder triggered by an extremely traumatic event in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened or witnessed
- **social anxiety disorder (social phobia):** an intense fear of being scrutinized and negatively evaluated by others in social or performance situations
- **specific phobias:** seemingly excessive and unreasonable fears in the presence of or in anticipation of a specific object, place, or situation

More than 40 million adults in the United States over the age of 18 suffer from at least one anxiety disorder, and anxiety disorders are the most common mental health illness in children. Researchers are learning that anxiety disorders run in families, and that they have a biological basis, much like allergies or diabetes and other illnesses.

If you think you or a loved one might have an anxiety disorder, read this booklet about treatment. For more information about anxiety disorders, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

**ANXIETY  
DISORDERS  
ARE REAL,  
SERIOUS,  
AND  
TREATABLE**

## ANXIETY AND ANXIETY-RELATED DISORDERS

It's not uncommon for people with an anxiety disorder to suffer from numerous mental health disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, alcohol abuse, and sleep disorders, as well as from irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, and other physical disorders.

Some people may have a primary disorder, which requires that it be treated first. For example, if someone with social anxiety disorder is depressed about the inability to socialize with friends and family, the anxiety disorder may be triggering the depression, and it would be addressed first. Or if a person with depression is unable to begin treatment for an anxiety disorder, which requires high motivation and energy, it may be necessary to treat the depression first.

## CHOOSING TREATMENT FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS

Safe and effective treatments are available. “Which treatment is best?” is the most commonly asked question. Here’s the answer:

*Consult a doctor or therapist to get a proper diagnosis and to learn about treatment options, length of treatment, side effects, time commitment, and other health issues to help you decide on the best treatment approach for you.*

Treatments may include medication or therapy; both types have been found effective. A combination of medication and therapy may also be effective. The decision about treatment is based on your needs and preferences and should be discussed with a professional who is familiar with your diagnosis and overall health.

Most people with an anxiety disorder can be helped with professional care. Success of treatment varies; some may respond to treatment after a few months, while others may need longer. Treatment may be complicated for those with more than one anxiety disorder or suffering from co-existing conditions such as depression or diabetes. This is why treatment must be tailored to each person.

## TREATING CHILDREN AND TEENS

Children and teens have anxiety in their lives, and like adults, they can suffer from anxiety disorders. Starting school, moving, the loss of a parent or grandparent, and other stressful events can trigger the onset of an anxiety disorder, but an anxiety disorder does not necessarily stem from a major event. Taking your child to the doctor for anxiety is as important as visiting the doctor for an ear infection or broken arm.

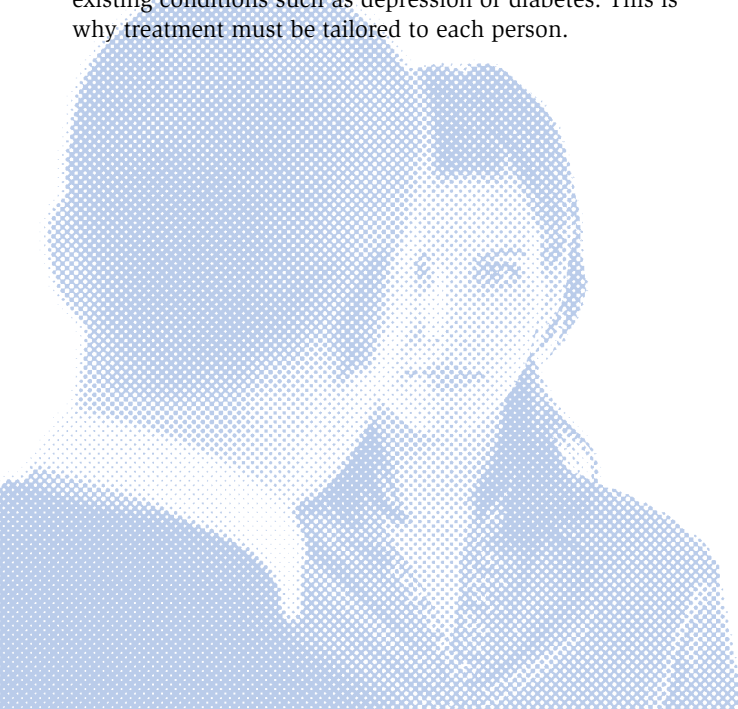
## TREATMENT PROVIDERS

Many kinds of health care professionals are trained to diagnose and treat anxiety disorders: physicians (including psychiatrists, internists, OB-GYNs, family practice), psychologists, social workers, behavioral health specialists, marriage and family therapists, nurses, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants. Clergy and school counselors may also be able to help. A layperson specialist, usually someone who has recovered from an anxiety disorder, may also provide assistance. The cost for services and reimbursement varies depending on the type of professional, individual health insurance, and state policies.

Find a therapist near you at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org). Those listed are members of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America who specialize in anxiety disorders. Requirements for the practice of psychotherapy vary among states. Ask about a therapist’s training and credentials before beginning treatment.

Other places to contact to find a treatment provider:

- Health insurer
- Psychiatry department at a local medical school
- University psychology department
- Local hospital mental health clinics or staff psychiatrists
- State or local mental health agency or veterans administration (VA)
- Counseling services on a local college campus



## CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING TREATMENT

Consider the following questions and issues when deciding on a mental health professional and type of treatment.

- **Training and credentials.** Consider the training of the professional and inquire about experience or expertise with the disorder. If the professional is licensed in your state or a preferred provider for your health insurer, make sure he or she has the appropriate training and experience.
- **Experience.** Select professionals who have experience treating anxiety disorders. Ask about their basic approach to treatment.
- **Family involvement.** Find out the role family members play in treatment. Make sure you understand how loved ones are involved and are comfortable with it.
- **Type and format of treatment.** Make sure you understand the course of treatment, including length, procedures, frequency and duration of the sessions, and expected length of time any medication will be necessary.
- **Cost and insurance.** Know your health insurance coverage for mental health, and ask if your insurance is accepted. It's your responsibility to know your financial resources and any insurance requirements and limitations. Find out if the fee schedule is on a sliding scale based on income.
- **Comfort and confidence.** It is important to feel comfortable with a mental health professional. Having confidence in the person is essential for establishing a positive working relationship.
- **Communication.** Ask how the mental health professional will communicate with your family doctor.

## TREATMENT OPTIONS

Most people who seek treatment experience significant improvement and an improved quality of life. It is important to work closely with a health care professional to determine the best option for you. In general, treatment can involve medications, talk therapy, exposure therapy, support groups, and self-help. Therapists will use one or a combination of these therapies.

*Please note:* New treatments—medications and therapies—for anxiety and anxiety-related disorders are being tested all the time. Check [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) for updated information.

### THERAPY

**Cognitive-behavioral therapy**, or CBT, is a well-established, highly effective, and lasting treatment. It focuses on understanding and changing thinking and behavior patterns. Benefits are usually seen in 12 to 16 weeks, depending on the individual.

CBT typically involves reading about the problem, keeping records between appointments, and completing homework assignments in which the treatment procedures are practiced. Patients learn skills during therapy sessions, but they must practice repeatedly to see improvement. In this type of therapy the patient is actively involved in his or her own recovery, has a sense of control, and learns skills that are useful throughout life.

**Exposure therapy**, a form of CBT, is a process for reducing fear and anxiety responses. In therapy, a person is gradually exposed to a feared situation or object, learning to become less sensitive over time.

Although the first line of treatment for an anxiety disorder is often CBT, some people find that excessively high levels of anxiety make them unable to get the most out of such treatment. In this case, a combination of treatments, using CBT and medication may be recommended.

**Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**, or ACT, uses strategies of acceptance and mindfulness (living in the moment and experiencing things without judgment), along with commitment and behavior change, as a way to cope with unwanted thoughts, feelings, and sensations. ACT imparts skills to accept these experiences, place them in a different

context, develop greater clarity about personal values, and commit to needed behavior change.

**Dialectical Behavioral Therapy**, or DBT, integrates cognitive-behavioral techniques with concepts from Eastern meditation and combines acceptance and change. DBT involves individual and group therapy to learn mindfulness, as well as skills for interpersonal effectiveness, tolerating distress, and regulating emotions.

**Interpersonal Therapy**, or IPT, is a short-term supportive psychotherapy that addresses interpersonal issues in depression in adults, adolescents, and older adults. IPT usually involves 12 to 16 one-hour weekly sessions. The initial sessions are devoted to gathering information about the nature of a person's depression and interpersonal experience.

## MEDICATION

Medication treatment of anxiety is generally safe and effective. Four major classes of medications are used to treat anxiety disorders: SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor), SNRI (serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor), tricyclic antidepressant, and benzodiazepine. For more information, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

Any course of treatment should be individually tailored and altered as needed, and it often takes time and patience to find the drug that works best for you. Some medications are fast-acting and may be for short-term use, and others require several weeks to become effective. Ask your doctor to explain why a particular type of treatment is recommended, what other options are available, what you need to do to fully participate in your recovery, and any side effects you may experience. *[See insert card for indications.]*

General, common side effects may include headache, nausea, sleeplessness or drowsiness, weight gain, “flat” feeling, or reduced interest in sex. If you experience side effects or are uncomfortable with your medications, talk with your doctor. Do not stop taking prescription medication on your own. Side effects may worsen when you start and stop medications. **Discontinuation of medications should be done with the knowledge and assistance of your doctor.**

## MEDICATION WARNING FOR CHILDREN

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a warning in October 2004 that antidepressant medications, including SSRIs, may increase suicidal thoughts and behavior in a small number of children and adolescents. The FDA does not prohibit the use of these medications, but it does alert patients and families to the risks, which must be balanced against clinical need.

In May 2007, the FDA proposed that makers of all antidepressant medications update their products' labeling to include warnings about increased risks of suicidal thinking and behavior in young adults ages 18 to 24 during initial treatment (generally the first one to two months). Find out more at the FDA website:

[www.fda.gov/cder/drug/antidepressants](http://www.fda.gov/cder/drug/antidepressants)

Discuss all concerns about antidepressants and other medications with your doctor.

## DISCUSSING MEDICATIONS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Use these guidelines to talk to your health care professional about medications:

- To avoid potentially dangerous drug interactions, let your doctor or therapist know all medications you are taking, including prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs, herbal or dietary supplements, and vitamins. *Make sure your family doctor knows you are taking medications for an anxiety disorder.*
- Ask these questions about a new prescription: How will the medication help me? What side effects might occur? Should I avoid any foods or beverages? Are drug interactions with other prescriptions a possibility?
- Learn when to take a new medication and how, such as on an empty stomach or with food, in the morning or evening, and how frequently.
- Find out how long it should take for the medication to start working and what you should expect when this happens.
- Ask for the prescribing physician's after-hours phone number in case you develop side effects.

- A good source of information about medications and over-the-counter products is your pharmacist, who should have information about all your prescriptions to advise you about possible drug interactions, side effects, and instructions for use.
- Ask how often you should see the doctor for a medication check-up.

## DEEP BRAIN STIMULATION

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved deep brain stimulation, or DBS, in 2009. This is a treatment option for people with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) who have not responded to the existing conventional therapies.

A neurosurgeon surgically implants electrodes into a specific region of the brain and connects them to pulse generators, which are implanted just below the collarbone. The battery-powered pulse generator, also called an implantable neurostimulator, contains a microchip that regulates the stimulation.

## COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

There is an ever-growing body of scientific evidence about complementary and alternative medicine, or CAM, which is an approach to health care that exists outside conventional medicine practiced in the United States. CAM is increasing in interest as consumers and health care professionals search for additional ways to treat health disorders. These include mind-body medicine such as meditation; manipulative practices such as massage; energy therapies like qi gong; and naturopathic, homeopathic, and traditional Chinese medicine.

Complementary medicine is used along with conventional medicine. An example is aromatherapy—inhaling the scent of essential oils to promote health and well-being—to help lessen discomfort following surgery.

Alternative medicine is used in place of conventional medicine. An example is following a special diet to treat cancer instead of undergoing surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy recommended by a medical doctor.

Integrative medicine, which combines conventional and CAM treatments, has experienced evidence of effectiveness and safety.

Some CAM therapies are currently used to treat anxiety and anxiety disorders. Kava, a plant found in the South Pacific, has been shown to be safe and effective in treating anxiety and improving mood. There is growing evidence about the effectiveness of acupuncture and yoga in treating anxiety and anxiety-related disorders.

Before adding a CAM treatment, talk to your doctor or therapist. Like other treatments, CAM may not be right for you. Visit <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatisacam/> to learn about the great variety of CAM treatments.

## EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING (EMDR)

Under certain conditions eye movements appear to reduce the intensity of disturbing thoughts. A treatment known as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR, may have a direct effect on the way that the brain processes information. EMDR appears to be similar to what occurs naturally during dreaming or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Basically, it helps a person see disturbing material in a less distressing way. More evidence is needed to test the effectiveness of this treatment, but some evidence suggests it may be helpful for treating PTSD.

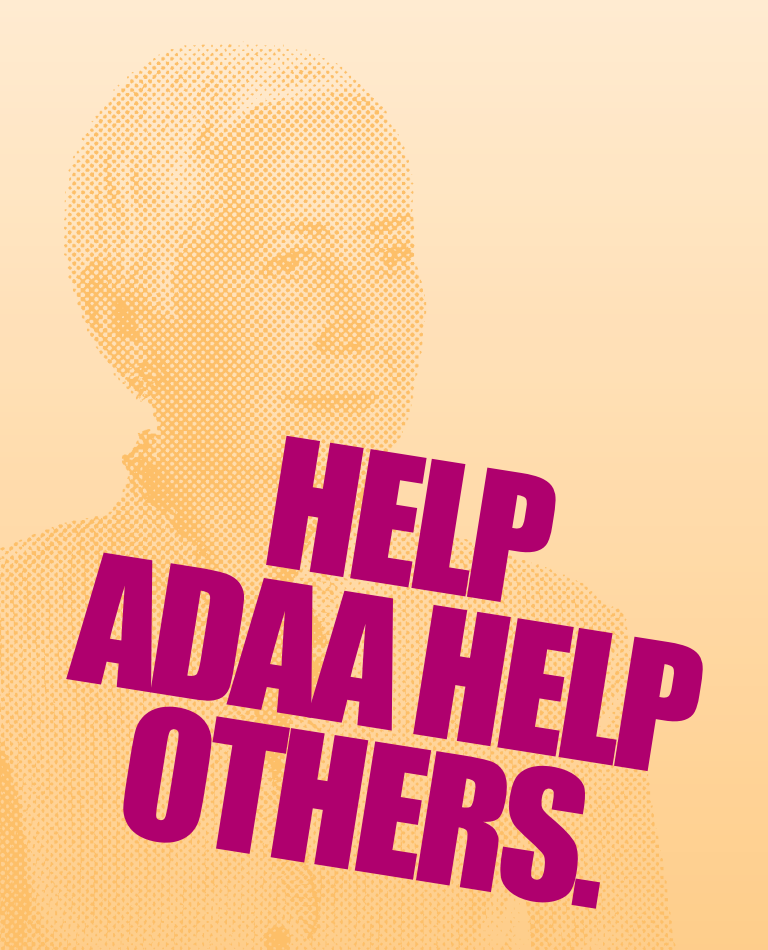
Find out more about EMDR, including its history and effectiveness at [www.emdr.com](http://www.emdr.com).

## ADAA CAN HELP YOU

Suffering from an anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. In addition, you may feel alone, embarrassed, or frightened.

ADAA can give you the resources to help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing, and assist you in finding mental health professionals in your city who can help.

Visit the ADAA website at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) and click on **Find a Therapist** to identify therapists who treat anxiety disorders in your area, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms, and best treatments for all of the disorders, and review questions to ask a therapist or doctor. ADAA provides resources to help you make the best decisions so that you can get on with your life.



# HELP ADAA HELP OTHERS.

You can make a difference by helping ADAA expand its efforts to reach those with anxiety disorders. Your contribution supports ADAA's efforts to increase awareness that anxiety disorders are real, serious, and treatable. ADAA relies on your donations to provide free educational information about anxiety disorders, help people find treatment, support research, and advocate for improved treatments and access to care.

Donate online at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org), on the phone (240-485-1001), or by mail to ADAA, 8730 Georgia Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20910. All donations are tax-deductible.

The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety and anxiety-related disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them.



For more information:

**Anxiety Disorders Association  
of America**  
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