

LEARNING MADE EASY



Anxiety

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Explore effective ways
to manage anxiety

—
Understand and challenge
your anxious thinking

—
Make meaningful
life changes

Charles H. Elliott
Laura L. Smith

Authors of *Depression For Dummies, 2nd Edition* and *Borderline Personality Disorder For Dummies, 2nd Edition*



Anxiety

by Charles H. Elliott, PhD
Laura L. Smith, PhD

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Anxiety For Dummies®

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Introduction

We wrote our first book in the *For Dummies* series, *Overcoming Anxiety For Dummies*, shortly after the events of 9-11-2001. People felt rather anxious, especially about terrorism. We wrote the second edition in 2010 as the Great Recession was winding down. At that time, people were feeling particularly anxious about their finances and careers. Today, we present *Anxiety For Dummies* as the world struggles to cope with a global pandemic, an explosion of civil unrest and racism, climate change, and another potentially massive recession or depression.

So today's world, just like the previous two decades, gives us plenty to worry about. But as we don't want to become victims of a pandemic, financial setback, natural disaster, or violence, we can't let ourselves become victims of anxiety. Anxiety clouds our thinking and weakens our resolve to live life to the fullest. We realize that some anxiety is realistic and inescapable, yet, we can keep it from dominating our lives. Even under duress, we can preserve a degree of serenity; we can hold onto our humanity, vigor, and zest for life. We can love and laugh.

Because we believe in our collective resilience, we take a humorous, and at times irreverent, approach to conquering anxiety. Our message is based on sound, scientifically proven methods. But we don't bore you with the scientific details. Instead, we present a clear, rapid-fire set of strategies for beating back anxiety and winning the war against worry.

About This Book

We have three goals in writing this book. First, we want you to understand just what anxiety is and some of the different forms it can take. Second, we think that knowing what's good about anxiety and what's bad about it is useful for you. Finally, we cover what you're probably most interested in — discovering the latest techniques for overcoming your anxiety and helping someone you care about who has anxiety.

Unlike most books, you don't have to start on page 1 and read straight through. Use the extensive table of contents to pick and choose what you want to read.

Don't worry about reading parts in any particular order. For example, if you really don't want much information about the who, what, when, where, and why of anxiety and whether you have it, go ahead and skip Part 1. However, we encourage you to at least skim Part 1, because it contains fascinating facts and information as well as ideas for getting started.

Scattered throughout this book are case examples and stories that illustrate important principles and techniques. Although these examples are based on composites of real people, they do not represent any actual person. Any similarities to actual cases or people are purely coincidental.

Foolish Assumptions

Who might pick up this book? We assume, probably foolishly, that you or someone you love suffers from some type of problem with anxiety or worry. But, it's also possible that you simply find the topic of anxiety interesting. We imagine that you may be curious about a variety of helpful strategies to choose from that can fit your lifestyle and personality. Finally, you may be a mental health professional who's interested in finding a friendly resource for your clients who suffer from anxiety or worry.

Icons Used in This Book

For Dummies books use little pictures, called *icons*, in the margins to get your attention. Here's what they mean:



REMEMBER

The Remember icon appears when we want your attention. Please read the text associated with it for critical information.



TIP

The Tip icon alerts you to important insights, clarifications, or ways to do things better.



WARNING

Warning icons appear when you need to be careful, avoid potential risks, or seek professional help.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The Technical Stuff icon highlights information that some readers will find interesting but is not necessary for your overall understanding of anxiety.

Beyond the Book

For quick tips about anxiety, go to www.dummies.com, and type “Anxiety For Dummies Cheat Sheet” in the search box. You can get information about how to identify anxious thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. In addition, there are some suggestions for dealing with your anxious symptoms.

Where to Go from Here

Anxiety For Dummies offers you the best, most up-to-date advice based on scientific research on anxiety disorders. If you want help controlling your negative thoughts, turn to Chapters 6 and 7. If you’re concerned about living well during a pandemic, check out Chapter 13. If you’re worried about your job and finances, in Chapter 14 we provide tips for finding your next job and pinching pennies. Chapter 16 is a new chapter about anxiety related to racism.

For some people, this book could be a complete guide to fighting frenzy and fear. However, some stubborn forms of anxiety need more care and attention. If your anxiety and worry significantly get in the way of work or play, get help. Start with your family doctor to rule out physical causes. Then, consult with a mental health professional. Anxiety can be conquered, so don’t give up.

1

Detecting and Exposing Anxiety

IN THIS PART . . .

Understand the ins and outs of anxiety.

Find out what anxiety does to your body.

Discover when anxiety is good for you.

Take a closer look at the causes of anxiety.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Growing by leaps and bounds: Anxiety's proliferation
- » Paying the tab for anxiety
- » Understanding anxiety symptoms
- » Getting the help you need

Chapter **1**

Analyzing and Attacking Anxiety

Stroll down the street and about one in four of the people you walk by has significant problems with anxiety. And almost half of the people you encounter will struggle with anxiety to one degree or another. The rate of anxiety across the world has climbed for many decades, and no end is in sight.

The whole world watches on edge as disasters, terrorism, financial collapse, pandemics, social unrest, crime, and war threaten the security of home and family. Anxiety creates havoc in the home, destroys relationships, erodes health, causes employees to lose time from work, and prevents people from living full, productive lives.

In this chapter, you find out how to recognize the signs and symptoms of anxiety. We clarify the costs of anxiety — both personal and societal. We provide a brief overview of the treatments presented in greater detail in later chapters. You also

get a glimpse of how to help if someone you care about or your child has anxiety. If you worry too much, or care for someone who has serious problems with anxiety, this book is here to help!

Anxiety: Everybody's Doing It

Anxiety involves feelings of uneasiness, worry, apprehension, and/or fear, and it's the most common of all the emotional disorders. In other words, you definitely aren't alone if you have unwanted anxiety. And the numbers have grown over the years. At no time in history has anxiety tormented more people than it does today. Why?

Life has always been menacing. But today people around the world are glued to screens watching the latest horrors in real time. News feeds, blogs, tweets, newsprint, and social media chronicle crime, war, disease, discrimination, and corruption. The media's portrayal of these modern plagues includes full-color images with unprecedented, graphic clarity.

In addition, recurring financial crises rock the fragile stability of the poor as well as the middle class. The lack of basic necessities like food, shelter, education, healthcare, clean water, and sanitation endanger many lives throughout the world. No wonder anxiety is its own worldwide pandemic.

Unfortunately, as stressful and anxiety-arousing as the world is today, only a minority of those suffering from anxiety seek professional treatment. That's a problem, because anxiety causes not only emotional pain and distress but also physical strain and even death, given that anxiety extracts a serious toll on the body and sometimes even contributes to suicide. Furthermore, anxiety costs society as a whole, to the tune of billions of dollars.

When people talk about what anxiety feels like, you may hear any or all of the following descriptions:

- » When my panic attacks begin, I feel tightness in my chest. It's as though I'm drowning or suffocating, and I begin to sweat; the fear is overwhelming. I feel like I'm going to die, and I have to sit down because I may faint.
- » I've always been painfully shy. I want friends, but I'm too embarrassed to call anyone. I guess I feel like anyone I call will think I'm not worth talking to. I feel really lonely, but I can't even think about reaching out. It's just too risky.

- » I wake with worry every day, even on the weekends. Ever since I lost my job, I worry all the time. Sometimes, when it's really bad, I feel like I'm going crazy, and I can't even sleep.
- » I'm so afraid of everything that I can barely leave the house. I've stopped even looking for jobs. My family has to bring me groceries.

As you can see, anxiety results in all sorts of thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. When your anxiety begins to interfere with day-to-day life, you need to find ways to put your fears and worries at ease.

Tabulating the Costs of Anxiety

Anxiety costs. It costs the sufferer in emotional, physical, and financial terms. But it doesn't stop there. Anxiety also incurs a financial burden for everyone. Stress, worry, and anxiety disrupt relationships, work, and family.

THE HEARTBREAK OF ANXIETY

Cardiovascular disease stands as the number one cause of death throughout the world. And research has demonstrated that chronic anxiety is a major contributor to poor cardiac health. So, early diagnosis and treatment for anxiety may help prevent some heart disease.

When patients are diagnosed with heart disease, anxiety often increases, even among people without a history of anxiety. Numerous studies have shown that untreated anxiety among cardiac patients is linked to poorer outcomes. These poor outcomes include recurrent cardiac events and even higher rates of death.

Therefore, it's been recommended that all cardiac patients should be assessed for the presence of problems with anxiety. Since anxiety can be successfully treated, it makes sense to include evaluation and treatment for anxiety when it occurs in cardiac patients. Such interventions are likely to alleviate anxiety as well as contribute to improved cardiovascular health, but further research is needed to firmly establish this relationship.

What does anxiety cost you?

Obviously, if you have a problem with anxiety, you experience the cost of distressed, anxious feelings. Anxiety feels lousy. You don't need to read a book to know that. But did you know that untreated anxiety runs up a tab in other ways as well? These costs include

- » **A physical toll:** Higher blood pressure, tension headaches, and gastrointestinal symptoms can affect your body. In fact, recent research found that certain types of chronic anxiety disorders change the makeup of your brain's structures.
- » **A toll on your kids:** Parents with anxiety more often have anxious children. This is due in part to genetics, but it's also because kids learn from observation. Anxious kids may be so stressed that they can't pay attention in school.
- » **Fat:** Anxiety and stress increase the stress hormone known as cortisol. Cortisol causes fat storage in the abdominal area, thus increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke. Stress also leads to increased eating.
- » **More trips to the doctor:** That's because those with anxiety frequently experience worrisome physical symptoms. In addition, anxious people often worry a great deal about their health.
- » **Relationship problems:** People with anxiety frequently feel irritable. Sometimes, they withdraw emotionally or do the opposite and dependently cling to their partners.
- » **Downtime:** Those with anxiety disorders miss work more often than other people, usually as an effort to temporarily quell their distress.

The cost to society

Anxiety costs hundreds of billions of dollars worldwide each year. Most of the cost is due to loss of productivity. Decreased productivity is sometimes due to health problems made worse by anxiety. But the financial loss from downtime and healthcare costs doesn't include the dollars lost to substance abuse, which many of those with anxiety disorders turn to in order to deal with their anxiety. Thus, directly and indirectly, anxiety extracts a colossal toll on both the person who experiences it and society at large.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Anxiety

You may not know if you suffer from problematic anxiety. That's because anxiety involves a wide range of symptoms. Each person experiences a slightly different constellation of these symptoms. For now, you should know that some signs of anxiety appear in the form of thoughts or beliefs. Other indications of anxiety manifest themselves in bodily sensations. Still other symptoms show up in various kinds of anxious behaviors. Some people experience anxiety signs in all three ways, while others only perceive their anxiety in one or two areas.

Thinking anxiously

Folks with anxiety generally think in ways that differ from the ways that other people think. You're probably thinking anxiously if you experience:

- » **Approval addiction:** If you're an approval addict, you worry a great deal about what other people think about you.
- » **Living in the future and predicting the worst:** When you do this, you think about everything that lies ahead and assume the worst possible outcome.
- » **Dependency:** Some people believe they must have help from others and are unable to achieve on their own.
- » **Perfectionism:** If you're a perfectionist, you assume that any mistake means total failure.
- » **Poor concentration:** Anxious people routinely report that they struggle with focusing their thoughts. Short-term memory sometimes suffers as well.
- » **Racing thoughts:** Thoughts zip through your mind in a stream of almost uncontrollable worry and concern.

We discuss anxious thinking in great detail in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Behaving anxiously

We have three words to describe anxious behavior — avoidance, avoidance, and avoidance. Anxious people inevitably attempt to stay away from the things that make them anxious. Whether it's snakes, heights, crowds, freeways, parties, paying bills, reminders of bad times, or public speaking, anxious people search for ways out.

In the short run, avoidance lowers anxiety. It makes you feel a little better. However, in the long run, avoidance actually maintains and heightens anxiety. We give you ways of confronting avoidance in Chapter 9.

One of the most common and obvious examples of anxiety-induced avoidance is how people react to their phobias. Have you ever seen the response of a spider phobic when confronting one of the critters? Usually, such folks scream, jump, and hastily retreat.

Finding anxiety in your body

Almost all people with severe anxiety experience a range of physical effects. These sensations don't simply occur in your head; they're as real as this book you're holding. The responses to anxiety vary considerably from person to person and include the following:

- » Accelerated heartbeat
- » Shallow, rapid breathing
- » A spike in blood pressure
- » Dizziness
- » Fatigue
- » Gastrointestinal upset
- » General aches and pains
- » Muscle tension or spasms
- » Sweating



WARNING

These are simply the temporary effects that anxiety exerts on your body. Chronic anxiety left untreated poses serious risks to your health as well. We discuss the general health effects in greater detail in Chapter 2.

NAME THAT PHOBIA!

Phobias are one of the most common types of anxiety, and we discuss them in detail in Chapter 2. A *phobia* is an excessive, disproportionate fear of a relatively harmless situation or thing. Sometimes, the object of the phobia poses some risk, but the person's reaction clearly exceeds the danger. Do you know the technical names for phobias? Draw arrows from the common name of each phobia to the corresponding technical name. See how many you get right. The answers are printed upside down at the bottom.

Be careful if you have *triskaidekaphobia* (fear of the number 13), because we're giving you 13 phobias to match!

| Technical Name | Means a Fear of This |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Ophidiophobia | A. Growing old |
| 2. Zoophobia | B. Sleep |
| 3. Gerascophobia | C. The mind |
| 4. Acrophobia | D. Imperfection |
| 5. Lachanophobia | E. Snakes |
| 6. Hypnophobia | F. Fear |
| 7. Atealophobia | G. New things |
| 8. Phobophobia | H. Animals |
| 9. Sesquipedalophobia | I. Small things |
| 10. Neophobia | J. Mirrors |
| 11. Psychophobia | K. Heights |
| 12. Microphobia | L. Long words |
| 13. Eisoptrophobia | M. Vegetables |

Answers:

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13.
E, H, A, K, M, B, D, F, L, G, C, I, J

Seeking Help for Your Anxiety

As we say earlier in this chapter, most people simply choose to live with anxiety rather than seek professional help. Some people worry that treatment won't work. Or they believe that the only effective treatment out there is medication, and they fear the possibility of side effects. Others fret about the costs of getting help. And still others have concerns that tackling their anxiety would cause their fears to increase so much that they wouldn't be able to stand it.



TIP

Well, stop adding worry to worry. You can significantly reduce your anxiety through a variety of interesting strategies. Many of these don't have to cost a single cent. And if one doesn't work, you can try another. Most people find that at least a couple of the approaches that we review work for them. The following sections provide an overview of treatment options and give you some guidance on what to do if your self-help efforts fall short.



WARNING

Untreated anxiety may cause long-term health problems. It doesn't make sense to avoid doing something about your anxiety.

Matching symptoms and therapies

Anxiety symptoms appear in three different spheres, as follows (see the earlier section “Recognizing the Symptoms of Anxiety” for more details on these symptoms):

- » **Thinking symptoms:** The thoughts that run through your mind
- » **Behaving symptoms:** The things you do in response to anxiety
- » **Feeling symptoms:** How your body reacts to anxiety

Treatment corresponds to each of these three areas, as we discuss in the following three sections.

Thinking therapies

One of the most effective treatments for a wide range of emotional problems, known as *cognitive therapy*, deals with the way you think about, perceive, and interpret everything that's important to you, including

- » Your views about yourself
- » The events that happen to you in life
- » Your future



REMEMBER

When people feel unusually anxious and worried, they almost inevitably distort the way they think about these things. That distortion actually causes much of their anxiety. In the following example, Luann has both physical symptoms and cognitive symptoms of anxiety. Her therapist chooses a cognitive approach to help her.

Luann, a junior in college, gets physically ill before every exam. She throws up, has diarrhea, and her heart races. She fantasizes that she will fail each and every test she takes and that eventually, the college will dismiss her. Yet, her lowest grade to date has been a B-.

The cognitive approach her therapist uses helps her capture the negative predictions and catastrophic outcomes that run through her mind. It then guides her to search for evidence about her true performance and a more realistic appraisal of the chances of her actually failing.

As simple as this approach sounds, hundreds of studies have found that it works well to reduce anxiety. Part 2 of this book describes various cognitive or thinking therapy techniques.

Behaving therapies

Another highly effective type of therapy is known as *behavior therapy*. As the name suggests, this approach deals with actions you can take and behaviors you can incorporate to alleviate your anxiety. Some actions are fairly straightforward, like getting more exercise and sleep and managing your responsibilities. You can get good ideas on those actions in Chapter 11.

On the other hand, a more critical type of action targets anxiety directly. It's called *exposure* and feels a little scary. Exposure involves breaking your fears down into small steps and facing them one at a time. We cover exposure in Chapter 9.



TIP

Some people, with the advice of their doctor, choose to take medications for their anxiety. If you're considering that option, be sure to see Chapter 10 to help you make an informed decision.

Feeling therapies: Soothing the inner storm

Anxiety sets off a storm of distressing physical symptoms, such as a racing heart-beat, upset stomach, muscle tension, sweating, dizziness, and so on. Making a few tweaks to your lifestyle such as increased exercise, better diet, and adequate sleep help a little. But our primary recommendation is to figure out how to approach distressing physical symptoms with an accepting attitude. Chapter 8 offers guidance on what's called mindful acceptance.

Finding the right help

We suppose it's not too presumptuous to assume that because you're reading this book, you or someone you know suffers from anxiety. And you'd probably like to tackle anxiety. This book is a great place to get started on managing your anxiety.



TIP

The good news is that a number of studies support the idea that people can deal with important, difficult problems without seeking the services of a professional. People clearly benefit from self-help. They get better and stay better.

Then again, sometimes self-help efforts fall short, especially when anxiety is moderate to severe in intensity. Chapter 23 provides ten critical signs that indicate a likely need for professional help. See Chapter 4 for information about finding the right professional for you.

If you do need professional consultation, many qualified therapists will work with you on the ideas contained in this book. That's because most mental health professionals will appreciate the comprehensive nature of the material and the fact that most of the strategies are based on well-proven methods. If research has yet to support the value of a particular approach, we take care to let you know that. We happen to think you're much better off sticking with strategies known to work and avoiding those that don't.

In Chapters 18, 19, and 20, we discuss how to help a child or an adult loved one who has anxiety. If you're working with a friend or family member, you both may want to read Part 5, and probably more, of this book. Sometimes, friends and family can help those who are also working with a professional and making their own efforts.

Whichever sources, techniques, or strategies you select, overcoming anxiety will be one of the most rewarding challenges that you ever undertake. The endeavor may scare you at first, and the going may start slow and have its ups and downs. But if you stick with it, we believe that you'll find a way out of the quicksand of anxiety and onto the solid ground of acceptance.