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Australian & New Zealand Edition

Overcoming Anxiety

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Learn to:

- **Get fear, worry and panic under control**
- **Recognise your anxiety triggers**
- **Cope with the challenge of difficult situations**
- **Calm your thinking using relaxation techniques**

Christopher Mogan, PhD

Director of The Anxiety Clinic, Melbourne

Charles H. Elliott, PhD

Laura L. Smith, PhD

Authors of Depression For Dummies



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**by Christopher Mogan, PhD
Charles H. Elliott, PhD
Laura L. Smith, PhD**

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Introduction

This edition of *Overcoming Anxiety For Dummies* is directed at a new audience in Australia and New Zealand, following the wide acclaim for the earlier editions in the United States and the United Kingdom. These international editions have helped people, some for the first time, live without anxiety dominating their day-to-day existence. We want to bring forward further information and resources to those suffering from anxiety disorders locally, using the *For Dummies* format of providing practical ideas and skills in an accessible way.

Examples of anxiety and stress are all around us. Some airport security areas now have equipment that takes a *virtually naked* picture of you as you enter. CCTV cameras operate in shopping centres, on street corners and in ATMs to take a continuous record of possible violent events. We've suffered through what's currently called the global financial crisis and while, at the time of writing, some signs of recovery are emerging, uncertainty remains about where the world economy is headed. People worry about getting jobs, keeping jobs and their fragile dreams of retirement. The globalisation of economies and travel have made the spread of pandemics faster and potentially more deadly than ever. Environmental worries have escalated; the viciousness of Mother Nature has frequently flashed across our computer and TV screens. The spread of nuclear weapons continues, and worries abound about war, crime and terror. Children are frightened by stories about abuse and violence on the internet and TV, while their worried parents increasingly restrict their lives.

So today's world gives people plenty to worry about, as it always has. But just as we don't want to become victims of terror, we can't let ourselves become victims of anxiety. Anxiety clouds your thinking and weakens your resolve to live life to the fullest. We realise that some anxiety is realistic and inescapable; yet, you can keep it from dominating your life. Even under duress, you can preserve a degree of serenity; you can hold onto your humanity, vigour and zest for life. You can love and laugh.

Because we believe in our collective resilience, we take a humorous and, at times, irreverent approach to conquering anxiety. Although topics like anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and borderline personality disorder are serious, painful subjects, we believe that a chuckle or a smile, like a little sugar, helps the medicine go down and the message come through. We hope you agree.

Our message is based on sound, scientifically proven methods. But we don't bore you with the scientific details. Instead, we present clear and concise strategies for making realistic appraisals about the fears, threats and doubts that underpin anxiety. We help you to keep worry in perspective, countering with step-by-step techniques and exposures that build your capacity to engage in life in an adaptive way.

This book is meant to be a guide to overcoming a mental state or disorder called anxiety. It offers support and information. Everyone alive suffers from anxiety from time to time. However, if your anxiety greatly interferes with your day-to-day life, restricts your activities and robs you of pleasure, we urge you to seek professional mental health care.

About This Book

We have three goals in writing this book. First, we want you to understand just what anxiety is and the different forms it can take. Second, we think that knowing what's good about anxiety and what's bad about it is good for you. Finally, we cover what you're probably most interested in — discovering the latest techniques for overcoming your anxiety and helping someone else 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 I. However, we encourage you to at least skim Part I, because it contains fascinating facts and information as well as ideas for getting started.

We use a lot of case examples to illustrate our points throughout this book. Please realise that these examples represent composites of people with various types of anxiety disorders. None of the examples is about real people we've seen or known. Any resemblance to a particular person is entirely coincidental. We **bold** the names of people in our examples to indicate that a case example is starting.

Psychologists use lots of jargon and acronyms. We try our best to keep these to a minimum, but sometimes we can't avoid them. When we do use a new term, we *italicise* and define it.

We also use **bold** text to indicate keywords in a bulleted list or to highlight action parts of numbered steps. And when we direct you to a website for additional information, it's printed in monofont.

Finally, not only do you not have to read each and every chapter in order (or at all, for that matter), but you also don't have to read each and every icon or sidebar (the text in the grey boxes). We try to give you plenty of current information and facts about anxiety. Some may not interest you — so don't get too anxious about skipping around.

Foolish Assumptions

Who might pick up this book? We assume, perhaps foolishly, perhaps not, 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:



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



The Tip icon alerts you to important insights or clarifications.



The Try This icon represents a particular action you can take to help get rid of anxiety.



The Warning icon appears when you need to be careful or seek professional help.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or ebook you're reading right now, *Overcoming Anxiety For Dummies*, Australian & New Zealand Edition, also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the internet. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/overcominganxietyau for some quick, helpful tips and strategies. For free extra companion material for this book, visit www.dummies.com/extras/overcominganxietyau.

Where to Go from Here

Overcoming 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 5, 6 and 7. You say you just want to relax? Try the techniques in Chapter 11. Or if you're worried about your job and finances, in Chapter 14 we provide tips for finding your next job and making the budget stretch further. If you practise the techniques and strategies provided throughout, you're likely to feel calmer. For many people, this book should be a complete guide to dealing with worry, doubt 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 reduced to manageable levels; don't give up.

Part I

Understanding Anxiety

getting started
with

**overcoming
anxiety**



Visit www.dummies.com for great *For Dummies* content online.

In this part ...

- ✔ Explore the ins and outs of anxiety, including the anxiety epidemic that's going around and how anxiety affects the entire body.
- ✔ Find all the major categories of anxiety disorders, along with an overview of what you can do to reduce anxiety.
- ✔ Discover how you can easily get stuck tackling your anxiety, and how to keep that from happening.

Chapter 1

Showing How Anxiety Affects Our Lives

In This Chapter

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

Stroll down the street and about one in four of the people you walk by either has an anxiety disorder or at some point in their lives will experience one. Almost half of the people you encounter will struggle with anxiety to one degree or another, although they may not have a full-blown anxiety disorder. The rate of anxiety disorders has climbed for many decades, and no end is in sight.

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

In this chapter, you find out how to recognise the 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 your child or someone else you care about has anxiety. If you worry too much or care for someone who has serious problems with anxiety, this chapter (and 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 so-called mental 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 never been as complicated as it is now. The working week has grown longer rather than shorter and we're all likely to work longer as the official retirement age increases — in Australia, for example, it's scheduled to increase to 67 in the next ten years and to 70 in the decade following.

Broken and blended families create increased stresses to manage. Computer screens and television news bring the latest horrors into your living room in real time. Newspapers, blogs, tweets and magazines chronicle crime, war and corruption. Terrorism has crossed the globe and escalated to new heights. The media's portrayal of these modern plagues includes full-colour images with unprecedented, graphic detail. Let's face it, fear sells.

Unfortunately, as stressful and anxiety-arousing as the world is today, only a minority of those suffering from anxiety seek 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 or otherwise I'll 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 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 think about going to sleep and never waking up.
- ✓ Ever since my accident, I have nightmares and constant images racing through my mind about glass breaking, tires screeching and passengers screaming. I'm so jumpy and irritable that I can barely get through the day.

- ✔ I'm so afraid of flying that I can't travel, even though I'd like to.
- ✔ I worry about germs and contamination so much that I wash my hands about 30 times a day — my hands are raw and bleeding. I just can't stop.

As you can see, anxiety results in all sorts of thoughts, behaviours, 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.

Calculating 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, and stress, worry and anxiety disrupt relationships, work and family.

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 increases costs 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 family:** Parents with anxiety more often have anxious children. This is due in part to genetics, but it's also because all children learn from observation. Anxious children can be so stressed that they can't pay attention in school or function well in the playground.
- ✔ **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 worrying physical symptoms. In addition, anxious people often worry a great deal about their health.

The heartbreak of anxiety

Research in Australia and New Zealand shows strong association between risks for serious cardiovascular disease and low mood and social isolation. Studies have shown that stress, anxiety and depression can bring about changes in how the body behaves, impacting on regularity of heart beat, the formation of clots, and early

development of heart disease. The health effects of these mental conditions have been shown to be similar to smoking, including abnormal lipids and blood pressure. When stress factors cluster — that is, work stress and poor diet combined with lack of exercise — the risks for heart attack and stroke are much higher.

- ✓ **Relationship problems:** People with anxiety frequently feel irritable. Sometimes, they withdraw emotionally or do the opposite and dependently cling to their partners.
- ✓ **Avoidance:** Those with anxiety disorders avoid anxiety-provoking situations, so they miss work more often than other people, usually in an effort to temporarily quell their distress.

Adding up the cost to society

Anxiety costs many billions of dollars worldwide. A US government report says that anxiety costs more than depression, schizophrenia or any other emotional problem. The annual tab is estimated at more than US\$65 billion. The United Kingdom spent 32 billion pounds (approximately \$58 billion in Australian dollars) on mental health care in 2002, a huge portion of which was spent on anxiety-related problems. In 2010, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated the annual cost of mental illness in Australia at A\$20 billion. Even countries that spend little on mental health care incur substantial costs from anxiety disorders. These costs include

- ✓ Decreased productivity
- ✓ Health-care costs
- ✓ Medications

Decreased productivity is sometimes due to health problems made worse by anxiety. But the financial loss from downtime and health-care 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.

Recognising the Symptoms of Anxiety

You may not know if you suffer from anxiety or an anxiety disorder. That's because anxiety involves a wide range of symptoms. Each person experiences a slightly different constellation of these symptoms. And your specific constellation determines what kind of anxiety disorder you may have. We discuss the various types of anxiety disorders in detail in Chapter 2.

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 behaviours. Some people experience anxiety signs in all three ways, while others only perceive their anxiety in one or two areas.

Thinking anxiously

People 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.
- ✓ **Magnification:** People who magnify the importance of negative events usually feel more anxious than other people do.
- ✓ **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.

See Chapters 5, 6 and 7 for information about anxious thinking.

Behaving anxiously

We have three words to describe anxious behaviour — avoidance, avoidance and avoidance. Anxious people inevitably attempt to stay away from the things that make them anxious. Whether it's snakes, dogs, 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 dismantling avoidance in Chapter 8.

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 these scary-looking creatures? Usually, they make a very hasty 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 (or the device you're reading this on). The responses to anxiety vary considerably from person to person and include

- ✓ Accelerated heartbeat
- ✓ A spike in blood pressure
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Gastrointestinal upset
- ✓ General aches and pains
- ✓ Muscle tension or spasms
- ✓ Sweating



The symptoms in the preceding list 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 disorder, 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 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

1. Ophidiophobia
2. Zoophobia
3. Gerascophobia
4. Acrophobia
5. Lachanophobia
6. Hypnophobia
7. Atelophobia
8. Phobophobia
9. Sesquipedalophobia
10. Neophobia
11. Psychophobia
12. Tapinophobia
13. Eisotrophobia

Means a Fear of This

- A. Growing old
- B. Sleep
- C. The mind
- D. Imperfection
- E. Snakes
- F. Fear
- G. New things
- H. Animals
- I. Small things
- J. Mirrors
- K. Heights
- L. Long words
- M. Vegetables

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

Seeking Help for Your Anxiety

As we say earlier in this chapter, most people simply choose to live with anxiety rather than seek help. Some people worry that treatment won't work. Or they believe that the only effective treatment available is medication, and they hate 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.



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.



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:

- ✓ 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

(Refer to the earlier section 'Recognising the Symptoms of Anxiety' for more details on these symptoms.)

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



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, Lisa has both physical symptoms and cognitive symptoms of anxiety. Her therapist chooses a cognitive approach to help her reduce these symptoms.

Lisa, a first-year at university, gets physically ill before every exam. She throws up, has diarrhoea and her heart races. She fantasises that she will fail each and every test she takes and that eventually, the university will dismiss her. Yet, her lowest grade to date has been a credit.

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 II of this book describes various cognitive or thinking therapy techniques.

Behaving therapies

Another highly effective type of therapy is known as *behaviour therapy*. As the name suggests, this approach deals with actions you can take and behaviours 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 10.

On the other hand, one type of action that targets anxiety and can also feel a little scary is *exposure* — breaking your fears down into small steps and facing them one at a time. We cover exposure in Chapter 8.



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 9 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 heartbeat, upset stomach, muscle tension, sweating and dizziness. We have a variety of suggestions, including breathing and relaxation techniques, for helping quell this turmoil. You may choose to make changes in your lifestyle (see Chapter 10), give the relaxation strategies we cover in Chapters 11 and 12 a try, or employ mindfulness, an approach that teaches you to connect with present moment experiences (see Chapter 13).



Ten dubious duds

This book is designed to give you ideas on how to beat anxiety. Beware the following things, which make anxiety worse:

- ✔ **Avoidance:** Avoiding what scares you makes anxiety worse. For example, if you're afraid of driving on a freeway and only use side streets, your fear of driving on crowded, fast roads will get worse.
- ✔ **Whining and complaining:** People love to do this, but it only makes things worse.
- ✔ **Seeking reassurance:** When people give you reassurance, it feels good. But the effects are short-lived, and reassurance can actually make anxiety worse.
- ✔ **Seeking quick fixes:** The internet is full of quick fixes, but we don't know of any that have really been proven to work.
- ✔ **Therapies without an evidence base:** You may be recommended options for change and healing that have no scientific basis. An example is psychoanalysis, which has little scientific support in the treatment of anxiety and anxiety disorders. Take a broad-based approach that includes seeking proper assessment and diagnosis from a mental health professional followed by evidence-based treatments.
- ✔ **Drinking or illegal drugs:** Substances may relieve anxiety for a short while, but using drugs is driven by impulsivity and actually increases anxiety.
- ✔ **Trying too hard:** If you push yourself too hard and feel anxious about your progress, you're just going to make things worse. Slow down a little.
- ✔ **Sipping herbal drinks:** Nothing is wrong with using these as a short-term crutch, but don't count on them to cure your problem.
- ✔ **Hoping for miracles:** Hope is good — some believe miracles do happen — but it's not a good idea to live in a fantasy world where everything works out for the best.
- ✔ **Taking medication as a sole solution:** Some medications help *some* people with *some* anxiety problems, *some* of the time. But the strategies and therapies described in this book have proven to be more reliable and effective in the long run.

Choosing where to start

We organise this book so you can start anywhere you want, but you may wonder whether one set of strategies would work better for you than another. Although we can't predict with certainty what will work best for you, the following quiz provides a guide for helping you choose the approach that may feel most compatible for your initial efforts. On the other hand, if you just want to read the book from front to back, that's fine, too.