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How We Treat Anxiety Problems – A Guide to Therapies for Anxiety©

We understand how Anxiety Disorders develop through learning and conditioning. Escape and avoidance behavior are highly reinforcing – after all, they allow us to survive a situation that we think of as highly threatening and dangerous. When we evaluate anxiety problems, we look at the history of the problem, any past traumatic or pathogenic experiences in a person's life, when the problem may have not been occurring, when the problem has been less or more than it is now, and whatever reason the client has for coming for help at this particular time, what we call the Emotional Crisis. Most anxiety specialists use a combination of these methods.

Psychotherapy

Several methods of therapy were developed with the cure of anxiety in mind. Psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy, leads to understanding and working-through the inner memories and emotions related to anxiety. The most commonly used and evidence-based forms of psychotherapy for anxiety are Psychodynamic Therapy (also called Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy), which is a shortened, focused therapy derived from psychoanalysis, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Psychodynamic therapy unravels our interior associations that support the anxiety.

For example, Bill was so afraid of rejection that he avoided dating or, when he was dating, he began to imagine the woman was losing interest. At that point, he withdrew from the relationship and cut it off -- even though the woman involved had done nothing to suggest that she was planning to do so. It turned out, he was reenacting an unconscious pattern that he had seen his father do when his father became highly suspicious of his mother and began to accuse her of infidelity... and then eventually drove her to leave. You can see how this reenactment of trauma could lead him to be so anxious in relationships.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): CBT is a structured, often short-term, goal-oriented psychotherapy treatment that takes a hands-on, practical approach to problem-solving. Its goal is to change patterns of thinking or behavior that are behind and to change the way they feel and act. It is used to help treat a wide range of problems in a person's life, from sleeping difficulties or relationship problems to drug and alcohol abuse or anxiety and depression. CBT works by challenging and modifying unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, and by asking clients directly to shift behaviors. It also changes unhelpful errors in logic (e.g., catastrophizing, personalizing, selective attention to the negative, negative prediction). CBT is used for improving emotional regulation and developing personal coping strategies that target solving current problems.

Behavior Therapy

Behavior therapy focuses on changing unwanted and maladaptive behaviors through conditioning techniques. The primary methods used in behavior therapy for anxiety include exposure and desensitization, among other methods.

1) Exposure Therapy: This therapy involves the exposure of the patient to the feared object or situation, but in the therapy room the person is safe and there is no danger. That process causes MEMORY RECONSOLIDATION, namely overwriting the memory so it does not produce the anxiety. It's often used in treating phobias, panic disorders, and social anxiety disorder. The idea is to gradually increase the level of exposure to desensitize the individual to the anxiety-provoking stimulus, thereby reducing the anxiety response.

2) Systematic Desensitization: This is a type of exposure therapy that involves teaching the individual to replace the fear response to phobic situations with relaxation responses. The therapy is done in gradual steps, starting with situations that induce the least anxiety and progressively working up to more anxiety-inducing scenarios. As we work through the "hierarchy", the anxiety at each step ceases.

3) Behavioral Activation: Research shows us that changing our behavior directly may be more effective than trying to change our thoughts first. Sometimes we change our thoughts after we see ourselves do something new in behavioral activation. We set up a hierarchy of exposures. That means we start with something you can just do with minimum anxiety, and we work ourselves through the hierarchy step-by-step until you can accomplish something you didn't think you'd be able to do.

For example, one person with severe social anxiety could not even go outside to collect the mail at the end of the driveway or to cut the grass or to get a haircut. We started with some simple steps using relaxation, while stepping out on the porch. Later, he could walk down the walk to the mailbox. We continued to practice relaxation techniques, exposure, and desensitization methods to monitor and reduce anxiety until he was able to get a haircut, cut the grass, even go and meet the neighbors, and eventually have a job interview and successfully find and keep a job.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation and other forms of relaxation therapy are invaluable. Many therapists who specialize in anxiety problems will be sure to teach you some sort of relaxation procedure using mental imagery or progressive muscle relaxation. The idea is to help you to learn to turn on your parasympathetic nervous system as a counter to anxious arousal.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness techniques also work to turn on the parasympathetic nervous system.

To be mindful is to disconnect ourselves – the thinking, experiencing being – from all of the chatter and all of the stimuli and all of the thoughts that pass through our mind. We realize that all of those thoughts we call the **thought stream** are all going to be in motion, but we do not have to connect with and identify with them. In anxiety, we tend to over-focus on, and identify with, mostly with negative thoughts, threats, and fears. We do this to the exclusion of paying attention to everything else.

The second part of mindfulness is to be fully present, meaning to fully place ourselves within our moment-to-moment experience and not let thoughts of the past or the future intrude. These practices help to counter any tendencies towards anxiety. We have a comprehensive look at practicing mindfulness in another tab on this website.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

ACT is a method to help us learn to accept the world as it is and our experiences as they are. We learn to understand what we can change and what we cannot change. ACT borrows from a number of techniques, including mindfulness. ACT asks us to shift attention from the content of thoughts to the process of thinking itself. This is called Diffusion. For instance, instead of anxious, "I am noticing the thought of anxiety." We can appreciate the signal of anxiety, "Thanking my mind for warning me to prepare for the

situation and believe I can will make it work out well.” “I see this thought is just a prediction. This thought is just a judgment. This thought is just a memory.”

Yoga and Exercise

Somatic, that is, body activities and body awareness, are also effective for improving depression and anxiety. Yoga has shown promise with anxiety. Body methods slow us down, focus on the present moment (like mindfulness), cool arousal (like the parasympathetic system), keep us in the moment, and have the body doing activities that are virtually the opposite of sympathetic arousal.

Medications and Pharmacotherapy

Pharmacotherapy uses medication to manage anxiety symptoms. The choice of medication depends on the type of anxiety disorder, its severity, and the presence of any co-existing conditions, such as alcohol use, depression, AD/HD, or others. The most commonly used medications include these.

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs): SSRIs are the first-line treatment for most anxiety disorders. They work by increasing the levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that influences mood in the brain. Examples include fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), and escitalopram (Lexapro), among others.

Serotonin-Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs): These medications, such as venlafaxine (Effexor XR) and duloxetine (Cymbalta), are used for the treatment of anxiety disorders and work by increasing the levels of both serotonin and norepinephrine neurotransmitters.

Benzodiazepines: These are fast-acting sedatives that can help alleviate anxiety symptoms. However, due to their potential for dependence and withdrawal, they are generally prescribed for short-term use or specific situations where quick anxiety relief is needed. Examples include alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), and lorazepam (Ativan).

Beta-Blockers: Though primarily used for treating high blood pressure, beta-blockers can also be used to mitigate the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as rapid heartbeat and trembling. They are useful for public speaking anxiety.

In conclusion, the treatment of anxiety involves a comprehensive approach that may include psychotherapy, exposure, desensitization, behavior therapy, and pharmacotherapy. Treatment should be tailored to the individual. Collaboration between the patient and healthcare provider is key to determining the most effective treatment plan.

Call 414-540-2170.