EP EMBRACE PSYCHIATRY
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Understanding Anxiety

Symptoms, the GAD-7 self-check, coping strategies, and treatment options

What Anxiety Is

Anxiety is the body's alarm system. In small doses it is useful — it sharpens focus before a big presentation or keeps you alert in traffic. An **anxiety disorder** means the alarm rings too loudly, too often, or in situations that are not actually dangerous, and it starts interfering with work, relationships, sleep, or daily life.

Common anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder (constant, hard-to-control worry), panic disorder (sudden episodes of intense fear), and social anxiety disorder (intense fear of judgment or embarrassment). They often travel with depression and sleep problems.

Common Symptoms

Mind

- Excessive worry that is hard to control or shut off
- Racing thoughts, "what-if" spirals, expecting the worst
- Trouble concentrating because the mind will not quiet down
- Irritability and feeling on edge

Body

- Fast heartbeat, pounding chest, shortness of breath
- Sweating, trembling, dizziness, nausea or stomach upset
- Muscle tension — jaw clenching, tight shoulders, headaches
- Trouble falling asleep because the mind races
- Feeling of dread, or a sense that something bad is about to happen

Behavior

- Avoiding situations, places, or people that trigger anxiety
- Needing constant reassurance
- Procrastinating because starting feels overwhelming
- Over-preparing or checking things repeatedly

Avoidance brings short-term relief but teaches the brain the feared thing really was dangerous — which makes anxiety stronger over time. Effective treatment reverses this cycle.

The GAD-7 Self-Check

The GAD-7 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7) is a standard 7-question screening tool. Each question asks how often you have been bothered by a symptom over the **last two weeks**:

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0 = Not at all **1** = Several days **2** = More than half the days **3** = Nearly every day

#	Question topic	What it asks about
1	Nervousness	Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
2	Uncontrollable worry	Not being able to stop or control worrying
3	Excessive worry	Worrying too much about different things
4	Relaxation	Trouble relaxing
5	Restlessness	Being so restless it is hard to sit still
6	Irritability	Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
7	Fear	Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

Scoring: add the seven answers for a total from 0 to 21. Roughly: 0–4 minimal, 5–9 mild, 10–14 moderate, 15–21 severe. The GAD-7 is a screening and tracking tool, not a diagnosis by itself. We will repeat it over time to measure progress.

Coping Strategies That Work

Calm the body first

- **Box breathing:** breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, hold for 4. Repeat for 2–3 minutes. Longer exhales (in 4, out 6) calm the nervous system faster.
- **5-4-3-2-1 grounding:** name 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. This pulls attention out of worry and into the present.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** tense each muscle group for 5 seconds, then release — feet up to face. Notice the contrast.
- **Cold water:** splashing cold water on your face or holding something cold can interrupt a spike of panic.

Work with the thoughts (CBT basics)

- **Name it:** "I am having the thought that ___" — this small distance weakens the thought's grip.
- **Check the evidence:** What is the actual likelihood? What would I tell a friend thinking this? What is a more balanced view?
- **Scheduled worry time:** give worry a 15-minute appointment each day. When worries pop up outside it, write them down and postpone them to the appointment.
- **Face it gradually:** with support, approach avoided situations in small steps rather than all at once.

Daily habits that lower baseline anxiety

- Regular exercise, consistent sleep, and less caffeine (caffeine mimics anxiety physically).
- Limit alcohol — it calms briefly, then rebounds anxiety and ruins sleep.
- Cut back on constant news and doom-scrolling.

943 West Overland Road, Suite 3587, Meridian, ID 83642 | 208-279-5241 | office@embracepsychiatry.com | embracepsychiatry.com
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Treatment Options

Therapy: cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the best-studied treatment for anxiety disorders, including exposure-based work for phobias and panic. **Medication:** daily antidepressants (SSRIs/SNRIs) are first-line for ongoing anxiety; other options exist for as-needed or short-term use. (See our separate handout, "Anti-Anxiety Medications.") Many people do best with therapy plus medication.

When to Seek Urgent Help

- **Panic attack vs. emergency:** panic attacks cause chest pain, racing heart, and shortness of breath — the same symptoms as a heart problem. If these are new, severe, or you are unsure, **get emergency care first**; it is always better to rule out a medical cause.
- Thoughts of harming yourself — call or text **988** right away.
- Anxiety so severe you cannot eat, sleep, work, or care for yourself.
- Using alcohol, sedatives, or other substances to cope most days.

What Recovery Looks Like

The goal is not to never feel anxious — it is to keep anxiety from running your life. With treatment, attacks become less frequent and less intense, worry becomes manageable, and avoided situations become doable again. Progress is usually gradual, with setbacks along the way. That is normal and does not mean treatment is failing.

Please read: This handout is for education only and is not medical advice. Do not start, stop, or change any medication without talking to your prescriber. If you are in crisis, call or text **988** (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) or text **HOME** to **741741**.

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