

Anxiety Treatment Preparation

Anxious thoughts, emotions and physical sensations are a normal and necessary part of human experience. Anxiety serves to warn us of danger and provoke us to take action to avoid being hurt. However our minds are imperfect and can both under-and-overestimate the level of danger in any given situation. Anxiety disorders develop when, based on traumatic experience, the mind significantly overestimates danger.

Not only is anxiety a type of psychological suffering, but it can also negatively affect people's behaviour by causing them to become overly avoidant of situations or objects to the point where their quality of life is diminished. People can develop anxiety disorders about almost any situation or object. In some cases the development of the disorder can seem quite understandable and in others quite mysterious. Irrespective, they are very real for the sufferer and can be extremely upsetting and debilitating.

Most anxiety treatments are based on a very simple principle: retrain or recondition the mind to stop overestimating the dangerousness of situations or objects or in other words, to stop overreacting to them. This is usually done through a process sometimes called 'systematic desensitization' or 'graded exposure' whereby the person is encouraged to carefully and deliberately face the feared situation or object in a controlled manner and taught how to manage the anxiety that inevitably arises. The hope is that, by 'facing the fear' in this way, the mind will learn that the situation or object is not as dangerous as had been anticipated. With practice, the level of anxiety should reduce to a more realistic and manageable level and the person's quality of life can begin to return to normal. While the principle is very simple, the process may not be easy. In order for any psychological treatment to be successful, it must be tailored to suit the unique personality, situation and goals of the individual. Your responses to the following questions can be discussed in detail in counselling.

1. What situations or objects are you anxious about?
2. How would you describe the emotions involved?
3. What bodily feelings accompany it?
4. What thoughts accompany it?
5. How has the anxiety affected your behaviour?
6. How important is it to you to overcome your anxiety around this situation or object?
7. What is a reasonable ultimate goal for you?
8. How quickly would you like to achieve this?
9. If part of the solution is to deliberately expose yourself to the situation or object that causes you to be anxious, what is one very small, achievable and measurable first step?