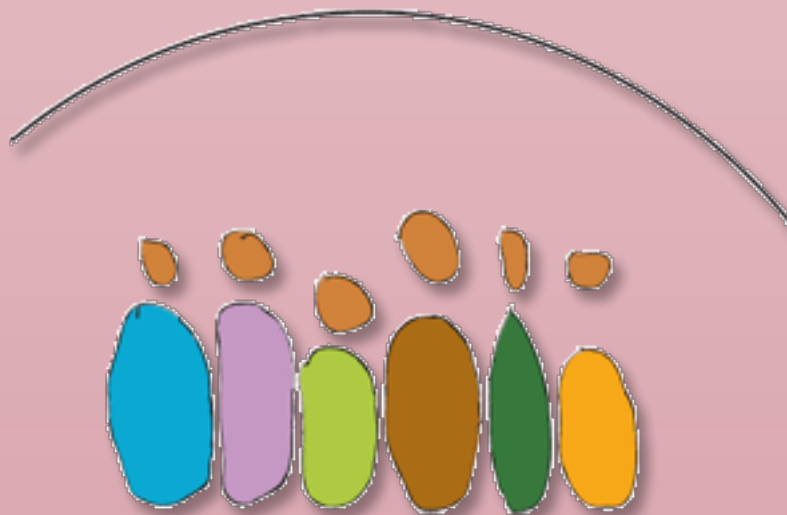


Appendix 4. Information for the patient

Learning to recognize and handle anxiety

Generalized anxiety and panic



This information was prepared by the Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) Work Group for the Treatment of Patients with Anxiety Disorders in Primary Care. Health Technology Assessment Unit (UETS) of the Agencia Lain Entralgo. Board of Healthcare of the Region of Madrid.

Contents

- What is anxiety?
- What are the factors that influence anxiety?
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- What types of anxiety disorders are there?
- What are the treatment options?
- What is the evolution of anxiety and panic?
- What should I keep in mind when I visit my healthcare centre?
- How can I handle my anxiety so that it evolves favorably?
- How can my family and friends help me?
- Where can I learn more about anxiety?

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal part of life and is a common response to people's day-to-day situations. A reaction is generated in response to a signal or threat of danger to confront and respond to it. So a certain degree of anxiety is even desirable for the normal handling of day-to-day demands (preparing for an exam, go to a job interview, having to speak in public, etc.).

Anxiety is an emotion that is accompanied by bodily reactions such as muscular tension, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, headache, chest or back pain, palpitations, "knots in your stomach", diarrhea, and many others.

When anxiety becomes intolerably intense, or when it limits a person's capacity to adapt, anxiety can affect daily life, and can become a problem.

If you are one of the many people who have anxiety problems, don't lose heart – with proper attention, it can be overcome. If you cannot make the anxiety disappear completely from your life, you can learn to control it.

"I feel bad, I don't know what's wrong with me, I feel dizzy, have a headache, butterflies in my stomach, palpitations... I also have so many things to do that I don't know where to start. I freeze up, can't think clearly...I'm paralyzed."

What are the factors that influence anxiety?

The causes of anxiety disorders are not completely understood, but it appears that they can be caused by a combination of several factors.

Genetic factors are involved (hereditary and family), neurobiological factors (brain areas and organic substances), psychological, social, and cultural factors. In the process of the appearance of anxiety, both individual predisposition factors (personality) as well as environmental factors are important.

How is it diagnosed?

Your family physician will use different tools to be able to establish the diagnosis of your illness.

- **Clinical History:** the doctor will ask you about different aspects of your family history and other illnesses that you may have.
- **Physical examination:** help your doctor to know whether your symptoms are caused by something other than an anxiety disorder.
- **Questionnaires:** your healthcare centre may use a specific questionnaire to help in the diagnosis or to see the changes that are experienced over time.

To rule out any other illness, your doctor may feel that certain tests are needed.

What types of anxiety disorders are there?

There are different types of anxiety disorders, but generalized anxiety and panic are the two most common ones in Primary Care.

These two disorders are characterized by the following symptoms:

Generalized anxiety disorder

People who suffer from this disorder present excessive anxiety and worry in regard to day-to-day activities or events, which, when it persists over time and is constant, may be very bothersome due to the presence of some or all of the following physical symptoms:

- Restlessness or impatience
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating or drawing a blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep alterations
- Trembling, sweating, hot flashes

“I don’t recognize myself. I’m not myself. I’m exhausted even though I don’t do anything. I can’t sleep and I’m nervous and very irritable. Everything scares me. I distrust others and think that they think badly of me. I distance myself from my family, from my friends...I’m isolating myself more and more.”

Panic disorder

Panic disorder is characterized by the appearance of panic attacks* that cause:

- Persistent apprehension due to the possibility of having more attacks.
- Concern for the implications of the attack or its consequences (e.g. losing control, suffering a heart attack, “going crazy”).
- Changes in behavior related to the crisis, such as what are known as “agoraphobia and avoidance behavior”. Specific situations and places are feared and avoided, such as: traveling on a train, subway, or bus, going to shopping centres, places with lots of people, or where you cannot get out easily.

***Panic attack**

This is the main symptom of panic disorder. It is characterized by the sudden appearance of uncontrollable fear or intense discomfort that begins suddenly and reaches its maximum intensity within the first 10 minutes, and may last up to 1 or 2 hours, with physical symptoms such as:

- Tightness, feeling of suffocation
- Palpitations, heart pounding
- Sweating, shivering, or asphyxiation
- Nausea, feeling of choking
- Dizziness or fainting



“I can’t take it any more, I’m suffocating...my heart is going to jump out of my chest, I’m losing my mind, I’m going to go crazy. Don’t touch me, don’t talk to me... I’m going to explode.”

What are the treatment options?

There are several objectives of the treatment of your anxiety problem:

- Relieve the symptoms and prevent relapses.
- If you have panic attacks, to reduce their frequency, duration, and intensity, and reduce avoidance behavior.

The usual treatments are psychotherapy and medication, which may or may not be used together, depending on the type of anxiety disorder that you have.

Psychotherapy

Individual or group psychological interventions, with different degrees of complexity, aimed at treating and modifying the emotional, thought, and behavioral factors that maintain the anxiety and/or its consequences.

Medication

Anti-depressants and anxiolytics are the most commonly-used medications for the treatment of anxiety.

Your family physician is the proper person to tell you which drug is most convenient, how long it is needed, and the possible side effects that it could cause.

Other treatments

- **Self-help treatments:** Reading and applying specific self-help programs for anxiety problems (text with a programmed sequence of exercises to learn to handle and control anxiety).
- **Medicinal herbs:** Some herbs such as valerian, passion flower, ginkgo biloba, and kava extract* appear to reduce anxiety symptoms, but more research on their safety and effectiveness is needed.

Inform your doctor in regard to any substance, medicine, herbal product, or alternative medicine that you are taking.

Evaluate the possibilities available in your healthcare centre with the professional staff and discuss the treatment to be followed with them. Your opinion is very important when deciding.
In some cases, your doctor may feel that you need to be referred to a specialist.

* The Spanish medicine and healthcare products regulatory agency included in 2004, the medicinal plant Kava in the list of plants whose sale to public was forbidden or restricted due to hepatic toxicity.

How do anxiety and panic evolve?

Anxiety problems go through periods in which symptoms are reduced or disappear for a variable period of time.

As with other chronic illnesses (diabetes, hypertension, etc.), with proper treatment, it is possible to live with this problem and restore your life to normality. So don't suffer unnecessarily and visit your healthcare centre as soon as possible, because the evolution your problem will improve the sooner it is detected.

Effective treatment will help you to reduce the symptoms, improve your self-esteem, and allow you to enjoy life once again.

There are often ups and downs during the process, but the obstacles and steps backwards are a normal part of the learning process. Don't get discouraged.

"I'm coming out of it...little by little, with effort and help, I'm doing it. It's a hard and painful path, but it's worth it. Now I know that I can beat it."

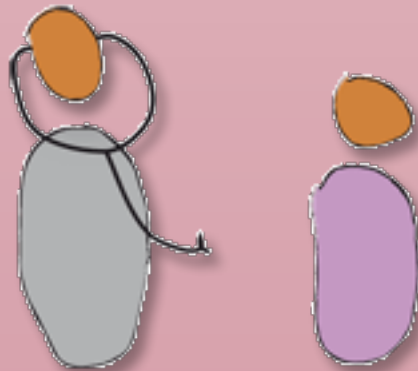
What should I keep in mind when I visit my healthcare centre?

It is important that the stigma that surrounds this type of disorder not prevent you from seeking professional help. Visit your healthcare centre. The following are some useful tips for your next visit to your family physician.

- You can trust the professionals at your healthcare centre. They are people close to you, and they will understand your doubts, fears, and problems.
- Prepare what you want to say to the doctor beforehand. - Tell your doctor your physical and emotional symptoms. It may be helpful if a family member or friend accompanies you.
- Don't be afraid to ask any questions that are still unclear to you.
- It is essential that you express your preferences in regard to the different treatment options.

Keep in mind that ***you are the most important part of this process.***

“And who can I tell about what’s happening to me? I’m embarrassed and afraid. I don’t even understand myself. How can someone else understand me?... I feel so alone. I need help but don’t know where to turn.”



How can I deal with my anxiety so that it will improve?

Advice for handling your anxiety

- If you are doing psychotherapy, at home, it is important to practice the exercises learned in therapy, such as relaxation and breathing, because they will be of great use to you.
- Medication sometimes has disagreeable side effects, which normally disappear or diminish after the first few weeks, but you have to remember that the most important thing is to continue with the treatment and not interrupt it.
- Plan your daily tasks rationally, prioritize your needs, and if for some reason you can't do everything, remember that another day will come after today.
- Try to leave space everyday to include activities that will be enjoyable and fun among your tasks: read, listen to music, exercise, take a walk, anything that is relaxing for you.
- Don't stop doing the activities that give you the feeling of "recharging your batteries". Energy needs to be restored.
- Don't "accelerate". Remember that doing things faster doesn't make you more efficient.
- Learn to handle your feelings. Positive thoughts also have a positive effect on your mood.
- It's important to recognize oppressive thoughts, in those situations that worry you (the "all", "nothing", "always", "never", "nobody") and replace them with other more rational ones ("something", "some", "sometimes").
- Take advantage of your mistakes and learn from them. To err is human and you don't have to do your tasks to perfection.
- Eat a balanced diet and try to eliminate or reduce the intake of substances that are bad for anxiety, such as: caffeine and other beverage stimulants.
- Remember that alcohol, cocaine, cannabis, and synthetic drugs can produce anxiety.
- If your sleep habits are not satisfactory, try to modify them. Try to get as much sleep as you need to rest.

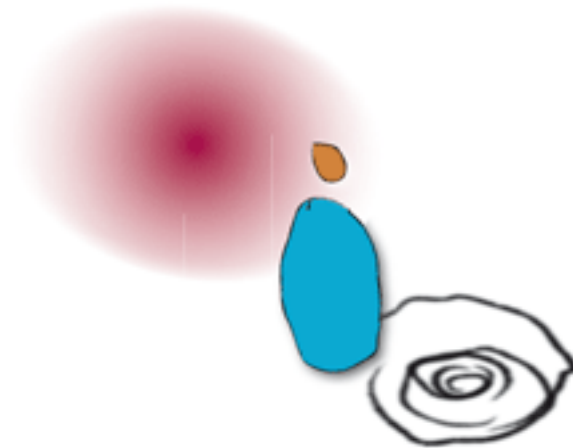
Lastly, remember that you can learn to control anxiety and reduce it progressively.

"I've learned how to relax, avoid stimulants, I exercise, and that helps me sleep. I plan the activities that are more difficult for me to do...I've regained hobbies that I had completely forgotten."

Recommendations for overcoming your panic attack

- It's important to remember that you are not facing a danger that is as serious as you may believe. Nothing worse will happen.
- Don't allow panic to increase with other scary thoughts. Interrupt what you are thinking and you'll notice that the fear will begin to disappear on its own.
- Try to calm down and relax little by little.
- Relax and slow your breathing. Imagine that you are a balloon that slowly inflates and then deflates.
- Wait and give the fear time to pass.
- Think of the progress that you've made thus far, despite all of the difficulties. Think of how satisfied you will feel when you succeed.
- When you start to feel better and are ready to continue, start out relaxed and calm. There is no need for effort or rushing.
- Try to distract yourself, now that the nervousness has diminished. Talk with someone, take a walk, etc.

The more you learn how to handle fear, the less afraid you'll be and you'll feel freer!!



How can my family and friends help me?

Your family and friends play a very important role in this whole process. For this reason, there are some recommendations specifically for them. It is important:

- Not to trivialize what is happening and make the person feel understood.
- To listen without being critical; avoid the “come on, it’s nothing.”
- To accompany the person to the healthcare centre if necessary or helpful.
- To inform yourself regarding the type of treatment that the person is following. Knowing the different treatment options also helps to learn more about anxiety.
- To observe and pay attention to changes in the behavior of the person who has the problem.
- To encourage the person to do activities that may be enjoyable or fun.
- To support the person to face his or her fears, always by mutual agreement and without pressuring.
- To help the person obtain additional useful information about anxiety.

“I’m still in treatment...and thanks to that and the help of my family, I’m doing better.”

Where can I learn more about anxiety?

Associations of patients and families

- **FEAFES: Spanish Confederation of Family Groups and Individuals with Mental Illness**
Telephone: 91 507 92 48 (Madrid)
E-mail: feafes@feafes.com
Website: www.feafes.com/
- **FEMASAM: Madrid Federation of Mental Health Associations**
Telephone: 91 472 98 14 (Madrid)
E-mail: info@femasam.org
Website: www.femasam.org/
- **ACTAD: Catalan Association for the Treatment of Depression and Anxiety Disorders (formerly AADA and Camins Oberts)**
Telephone: 93 430 12 90 (Barcelona)
E-mail: info@actad.org
Website: www.actad.org/
- **Associació Gironina d'Agorafòbics**
Telephone: 669 00 78 87 (Girona)
E-mail: quimvencells@yahoo.es
Website: <http://www.agorafobia.es.vg/>
- **Association of Anxiety Disorders – Mutual Assistance Groups**
Telephone: 646 71 53 94 and 666 29 29 73 (Barcelona)
E-mail: atagam@ansietat.org
Website: <http://www.ansietat.org/>
- **ADEA: Albacete Association of Agoraphobia Sufferers**
Telephone: 967 61 18 83 and 967 52 31 44 (Albacete)
E-mail: adealba_2000@terra.com
Website: http://www.geocities.com/adealba_2000/index.html
- **AMADAG: Madrid Panic and Agoraphobia Association**
Telephone: 617 83 79 30 (Madrid)
E-mail: amadag_asociacion@hotmail.com
Website: <http://www.amadag.com/>
- **A.C.E.D.: Association against stress and depression**
Telephone: 91 532 84 14 (Madrid)
E-mail: aced@estresydepression.org
Website: <http://www.estresydepression.org/index.html>

- **AGORAMUR: Association for anxiety, panic and/or agoraphobia sufferers of Murcia**
Telephone: 654 52 94 48 (Madrid)
E-mail: agoramur@hotmail.com
- **ASATRA: Aragon Association of Anxiety Disorders (Zaragoza)**
Telephone: 687 47 76 69 (Madrid)
E-mail: asociacion-asatra@hotmail.com
- **CAPAZ: Aragon Panic and Agoraphobia Centre – Zaragoza collective of panic and agoraphobia sufferers**
Telephone: 976 25 98 07 (Zaragoza)
- **AGOS: Association of persons affected by anxiety disorders and agoraphobia of the province of Cadiz**
Telephone: 956 27 19 37 (Cádiz)
E-mail: carmenblanca35@hotmail.com
- **Leku irekiak - A.A.D.A.: Association for Agoraphobia Assistance and Awareness of the Basque Country**
Telephone: 94 493 78 33
E-mail: lekuirekiak@terra.es
Website: www.terra.es/personal6/lekuirekiak/
- **Horizontes Abiertos**
Telephone: 928 24 91 68 (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria)

Internet Resources

- www.centrodeapoyoapa.org (American Psychology Association)
- www.lasalud.com/pacientes/ansiedad.htm
- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/spanish
- www.juntospodemos.com/

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