



Anxiety Disorders

a conversation guide to help people with
anxiety disorders receive high-quality care

**Health Quality
Ontario**

Let's make our health system healthier

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[Health Quality Ontario](#) is committed to helping patients, health care providers, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

We know that not everyone across the province receives the right care, every time.

So, to help address gaps in care, we produce quality standards, which outline **what quality care looks like** for specific conditions, such as anxiety disorders. Quality standards are **based on current best evidence and input from patients, caregivers, and health care providers.**

[Download Health Quality Ontario’s quality standard for anxiety disorders to read more.](#)

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The following pages contain questions to help you and your health care providers work together on a care plan for your anxiety disorder.

This patient guide is based on information from Health Quality Ontario's quality standard for anxiety disorders. It is not meant to be a complete guide to anxiety disorders but a tool to help you talk with your health care providers about the topics that matter to you.

Obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) is not an anxiety disorder, but it is often associated with anxiety. For more information on care for OCD, please read our patient guide on [obsessive–compulsive disorder](#).

Our goal: to empower you to ask for and receive the best quality care.

What are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety is a natural emotion that is part of everyday life. *Anxiety disorders*, on the other hand, happen when anxiety symptoms—such as worry or fear you can't control, trouble concentrating or sleeping, or increased heart rate—don't go away on their own and have a negative impact on your life.

These strong feelings and symptoms are often upsetting. They can make managing life at home and at work difficult, or they might cause you to avoid social situations or other daily activities. It can be frustrating to feel like you can't control your symptoms, but it is important to know it is not your fault – this is just how your brain is reacting to what's happening around you.

Anxiety disorders are common. One in three people is affected by an anxiety disorder at some point in their life. Each person's experience is unique, and while there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach, there are effective treatments and supports available to help you manage your symptoms.

There are different types of anxiety disorders, including specific phobias, social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and agoraphobia (fear of crowded or enclosed public spaces). Some people have more than one anxiety disorder at a time, and whether you have one or more, it helps to learn about the symptoms and become actively involved in your own care.

With the support of your health care providers, you can manage your disorder and improve your quality of life. This guide is designed to support you along the way.

Learn more

There's a lot of information out there about anxiety disorders, but it can be challenging to know what's reliable. The patients, caregivers, and clinicians we spoke with to put this guide together told us these are resources they find useful:

- [Anxiety Canada](#): Includes self-help tools and resources to help you manage your anxiety
- [“Why Are You Anxious?”](#) A video by AsapSCIENCE
- [Big White Wall](#): A safe and anonymous peer support community that you can access anytime, anywhere
- [BounceBack](#): A free program to help people age 15 and older to learn to manage anxiety and depression
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#): “One stop shops” to help youth ages 12 to 25 get help with a variety of needs, including their mental health
- [ConnexOntario \(1-866-531-2600\)](#): A 24/7 information and referral service that is free and confidential for people experiencing mental illness, problems with alcohol and drugs, and/or gambling
- [Kids Help Phone \(1-800-668-6868\)](#): National service offering bilingual professional counselling, information, referrals, and support for young people by phone, live chat, and texting

Though these resources may not always say the same thing as what's in the quality standard for anxiety disorders, we hope you find them useful.

Start talking

Living with an anxiety disorder is not easy – you can quickly feel overwhelmed by day-to-day activities. It is common – and OK – to feel self-conscious or scared of your symptoms. You might also feel frustrated that you're not able to make them go away on your own.

You may have done some research on your symptoms already. **Learning more is an important step toward feeling better**, although a complete treatment plan may include several things, such as education, self-help resources, and finding a psychological treatment and/or medication that works. It may also take time to find the right treatment combination.

Although it may feel difficult, it's important to talk with health care providers about your concerns and symptoms. These conversations are the first steps to getting a diagnosis and treatment that can help you feel well.

Use the topics outlined here to help guide your conversations with your health care providers as you work together on a care plan that's best for you:

- Getting assessed
- Learning about your disorder
- Managing your disorder
- Follow-up care and planning for the future
- Help for family and caregivers

You might not get all your answers in one visit or from one provider. **It's OK to ask lots of questions and to get advice from a range of health care providers.**

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Write it down

It may help you to take notes as your symptoms develop and change. Having written details on hand when you talk with your care providers will help you give a more complete description of your experience.

Consider making your notes right in this electronic file, or in a printed copy, and use this guide each time you visit and review your care plan with your health care providers.

“The emotions I was feeling and still do are terror and panic, and a tremendous amount of shame because you don’t get what’s happening and you’re embarrassed ... It’s very hard because when the moment of panic passes, I look so normal and so together.”

PERSON WITH PANIC DISORDER AND AGORAPHOBIA

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About you

It's okay to offer your health care providers some context about yourself—whether you're talking with them in your family doctor's or nurse practitioner's office or even a busy emergency department.

Information about your physical and emotional health history, your personal situation, and your preferences can help your providers give you the right care.

Some things you might want to discuss with your health care providers:

- Whether talking about your experience or symptoms makes you feel scared or self-conscious
- Whether certain things at home, work, or school make your symptoms better or worse
- Your mental and physical symptoms
- Who you want involved in your care (partner, friend, family member)
- If you have a family history of anxiety or mood disorders
- If you have any other physical or mental health concerns
- What treatments you've tried in the past, and whether they worked or not
- If drug or alcohol use is having a negative impact on your life
- Your goals for treatment and recovery

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Start talking: Getting assessed

What causes an anxiety disorder and the way it makes you feel depend on the type of disorder you have. You may experience more worry or fear, panic, nervousness, and uneasiness than you feel you can manage. You may also experience physical symptoms, such as restlessness, tense muscles, sweating, or trouble sleeping.

Try to share as many details about yourself and your symptoms as you can. Your health care providers are there to help – and sharing more about you will build a stronger relationship with them, so they can support you in managing your condition.

Some things you might want to ask your health care providers:

How do we figure out if I have an anxiety disorder?

Do I have an anxiety disorder? If yes, what kind?

Could I have other mental health disorders, too?

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What are my treatment options?

How can I get these treatment options?

Will I get better?

“It’s family, friends, or employers who see the symptoms first, or who we reach out to first. Things have almost reached a crisis point by the time we get to health care providers.”

PERSON WITH ANXIETY DISORDER

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Start talking: Learning about your disorder

Learning more about why anxiety disorders happen can help you recognize how your brain is reacting to what’s happening around you and realize this is not your fault—it’s not something you did to yourself. Gathering information about your specific disorder and using self-help resources can help you develop ways to cope and make decisions about your care.

Here are some things you might want to ask your health care provider:

Can you tell me more about my type of anxiety disorder?

What do people who have this anxiety disorder usually experience over time?

What types of self-help resources, such as workbooks or websites, should I use?

What should my family and caregivers know about my anxiety disorder?

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What are some things I can do to look after myself? What role does self-care play in managing my anxiety disorder?

What peer support groups are available in my area?

“I had a very positive experience with self-help. I found it very empowering ... For me, putting [the responsibility] back on me and [realizing] things I can change, and there’s a way out of this, was hugely helpful.”

PERSON WITH AN ANXIETY DISORDER

Start talking: Managing your disorder

1. Cognitive behavioural therapy

The first treatment usually offered for anxiety disorders is cognitive behavioural therapy (sometimes known as CBT). This type of psychotherapy helps you learn to replace negative thinking patterns with positive ones.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is the best treatment for most anxiety disorders. It can be just as effective as medication, or it can be used along with medication. You and your health care provider will decide together what's best for you based on your disorder and personal preferences.

Here are some things you might want to ask your health care provider:

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Why might cognitive behavioural therapy be a good choice for me?

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What will this treatment involve? Are there different types?

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What are the benefits and risks of cognitive behavioural therapy?

.....
What is my role in cognitive behavioural therapy?

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How often will I have appointments?

When will I start to feel better? What should I do if I don't feel better or my symptoms are getting worse?

Who provides CBT? What kind of training do they have? How can I find a health care provider who is a good fit for me?

How much will this treatment cost? Are there free or low-cost options?

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2. Medication

The type of medication your health care provider will offer depends on the type of anxiety disorder you have. Medications commonly used for anxiety disorders include *selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors* (SSRIs) or *serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors* (SNRIs). These medications are commonly known as “antidepressants,” but they are also used to treat other conditions, including anxiety disorders.

Depending on how severe your symptoms are, you might want to start taking medication right away, but people usually try self-help, cognitive behavioural therapy, or other non-medication options first. Medication is rarely used to treat specific phobias because psychotherapy is so effective for these.

Here are some things you might want to ask your health care provider:

Why might medication be a good choice for me? What kind of medication do you recommend?

What are the benefits and risks of this medication?

Are there any side effects?

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When will I start to feel better? What should I do if I don't feel better or my symptoms are getting worse?

How long should I take this medication?

Do I need follow-up appointments?

Are there other treatments we should consider?

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Start talking: Follow-up care and planning for the future

Even after feeling better for awhile, it is possible for old symptoms to return (a relapse), or to feel new symptoms related to anxiety disorder. Your treatment plan should include information and education about preventing a relapse. The more you know and the more you plan, the better prepared you will be to face any challenges in the future.

Some questions you might want to ask your health care provider:

What should I expect as things get better? How can I keep progress on track?

How often do I need to see my health care provider if I'm doing well?

What can I do to prevent my symptoms from getting unmanageable again?

Where can I get help for a relapse? Will I have to be put on a wait-list?

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What happens if I change health care providers? How will that affect my treatment for an anxiety disorder?

A note to family and caregivers

If someone you care about has an anxiety disorder, this whole guide is for you too. Anxiety disorders can change from day to day, and month to month. Sometimes the person may be very involved in their own care; at other times, they may rely more on you. So, it may be helpful for you to know who their health care providers are, and to understand their goals for managing their disorder. And in all of this, your own well-being is also important.

Here are some things you might want to ask their care provider:

What do I need to know about anxiety disorders and their treatment?

What can I do to help and support my family member or friend?

What do I need to know as a parent or guardian of a child with an anxiety disorder (for example, arrangements for support at school)?

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Who is the main health care provider to contact if I have more questions?

Because your well-being is just as important, you might consider asking:

What peer support groups for family and caregivers are available to me?

Do you know of any workshops, family therapy sessions, or other supports for family and caregivers?

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What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The care plan you land on with your health care providers and the support you require will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is meant as only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your health care providers. It's important to speak to them about any other questions or concerns.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on anxiety disorders, read the quality standard at: hqontario.ca/qualitystandards

For your reference: The quality standard in brief

The quality standard for anxiety disorders is a document for health care providers that outlines what quality care looks like for this condition. It is based on the best evidence and input from clinicians, patients, and their caregivers.

Below is a summary of the quality standard. For further reading, download the full version [online](#).

Identification and Screening

People suspected to have an anxiety disorder are identified early and screened using (1) a validated screening tool or recognized screening questions and (2) validated severity-rating scales.

What this means for you

Your health care professional should ask you questions about your symptoms to find out whether you might have an anxiety disorder. The screening questions aren't used on their own to diagnose an anxiety disorder, but they are an important first step.

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Comprehensive assessment

People suspected to have an anxiety disorder or who have screened positive for an anxiety disorder receive a timely comprehensive assessment to determine whether they have a specific anxiety disorder, the severity of symptoms, whether they have any comorbid conditions, and whether they have any associated functional impairment.

Stepped-Care Approach

People with an anxiety disorder receive treatment that follows a stepped-care approach, providing the least intensive, most effective intervention first.

What this means for you

You should be offered a full assessment to determine whether you have a specific kind of anxiety disorder. Your health care provider should also ask questions about how bad your symptoms are, whether you have any other conditions, and whether your anxiety is making it hard for you to manage your life at home, school, or work.

What this means for you

Your treatment plan should be based on a stepped-care approach. Your health care professional should offer you the most appropriate treatment option for you. If your symptoms don't improve, you should be offered the next most appropriate treatment option.

Self-Help

People with an anxiety disorder are informed about and supported in accessing self-help resources, such as self-help books, Internet-based educational resources, and support groups, considering people's individual needs and preferences.

What this means for you

You should be offered education and information about your anxiety disorder. You should also be connected with self-help resources so that you can learn more about your anxiety disorder and its treatment. Let your provider know your needs and preferences; this will help them recommend the right self-help resources for you.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

People with an anxiety disorder have timely access to cognitive behavioural therapy, considering their individual needs and preferences. The cognitive behavioural therapy is delivered by a health care professional with expertise in anxiety disorders.

What this means for you

You should be offered cognitive behavioural therapy as a treatment for your anxiety disorder. If you choose this treatment, you should be able to receive this therapy promptly, from someone who has expertise in anxiety disorders.

Pharmacological Treatment

People with a moderate to severe anxiety disorder, or people who are not responding to psychological treatment, are offered pharmacological treatment based on their specific anxiety disorder, considering their individual needs and preferences.

What this means for you

If you have moderate to severe anxiety disorder, or if your symptoms are not getting better with cognitive behavioural therapy, your health care provider should offer you the option of medication. The type of medication should be based on your type of anxiety disorder.

Monitoring

People with an anxiety disorder have their response to treatment (effectiveness and tolerability) monitored regularly over the course of treatment using validated tools in conjunction with an assessment of the person's clinical presentation.

What this means for you

After you start treatment for your anxiety disorder, your health care professional should follow up with you to check how you are responding to the treatment. For psychotherapy, they should check in with you about how the treatment is working at every session. For medication, they should check how the treatment is working every week or two when the medication is started and if the dosage changes, and at least every month until your condition is stable.

Specialized Expertise in Anxiety Disorders

People with an anxiety disorder who have not responded adequately to treatments are connected to a health care professional with specialized (additional) expertise in anxiety disorders.

Relapse Prevention

People with an anxiety disorder who are receiving treatment are provided with information and education about relapse prevention.

What this means for you

If your anxiety disorder is not getting better after trying cognitive behavioural therapy or medication, your health care professional should consult with or refer you to another health care professional with specialized expertise in anxiety disorders. This person should reassess you and offer a treatment option that is the most appropriate and takes into account your individual needs and preferences.

What this means for you

Your health care team should give you information and education about how to prevent and manage a relapse. They should talk with you about:

- The nature of anxiety disorders
- What to expect when you're in recovery and no longer in treatment
- When to follow up with your health care team
- What strategies to use to manage your symptoms
- How to access mental health services if you need more support

For more information, please visit: hqontario.ca

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