



# Taming the Anxiety Monster

by JUDY BERANGER

**I** felt so overwhelmed – balancing school, my own kids, my aging parents, not to mention finding time with my husband. I had itchy feet every night, was irritable and didn't sleep well. I didn't know what was wrong – the more I worried, the worse I became. I called EAP and they referred me to my doctor and to a counselor. The doctor said it was all part of anxiety and my counselor is helping me develop strategies to change my thinking and certain behaviours to tame this monster. I seem to be getting things under control again. (Teacher)

In *Overcoming Anxiety*, Elliott and Smith suggest that approximately 50% of us are struggling with anxiety to one degree or another. Anxiety can be a wakeup call, moving us back to behaviours that heighten wellness or, if we do not act, it can rob us of well-deserved quality of life by creating havoc with our peace of mind, our family, friendships, our school, zapping energy while compromising quality of life. Sadly, only a minority seek support to learn how to keep anxiety under control.

Health Canada defines anxiety as a state of worry, apprehension or unease. It is a natural alarm response, a stimulus that helps us avoid dangerous situations and motivates us to solve everyday problems. It becomes a disorder if we do not act on the uneasiness or panic and it becomes long lasting to the point that it interferes with life. Anxiety mobilizes our body for emergencies by preparing itself for fight or flight, glands and muscles switch to emergency status, adrenaline courses through our system, the heart rate increases, and we assume a red alert stance. The anxiety response is normal and healthy unless:

- It lasts uncomfortably long or occurs too often. If anxiety is present most days for more than a few weeks, be concerned.
- It interferes with daily activities (work output, concentration, sleep, etc.) and generally gets in the way of a balanced life.
- It exceeds the level of actual danger or risk. For example, if you are feeling like you are about to be buried by an avalanche when all that is happening is that the principal has asked to see you after school, your anxiety has gone too far.
- Stimulates endless worry and further distortion of thinking patterns. (You go into the staffroom, chat-

ting stops and you assume they were talking about you.)

Fears that trigger anxiety include: fear of small spaces, airplanes, rodents, heights, failure, dying, or rejection, fear of not being able to control students or otherwise manage the class, fear of poor academic success of students and fear of evaluation and of parent and system expectations. When anxiety is constant it can take lots of energy from the body and the challenge then is to explore the root of our *dis-ease* and how to move toward optimal health. It is like the monster our teacher spoke about above, taking precious energy and self-worth along with confidence and self-esteem.

Anxiety symptoms appear in three different areas:

1. Thinking symptoms: the thoughts that run through your mind;
2. Behaving symptoms: the things you do in response to anxiety;
3. Feeling symptoms: how your body reacts to anxiety.

## What Can Help

**Thinking therapies** – One of the most effective treatments for a wide range of emotional problems, known as cognitive therapy, deals with the way you think about, perceive, and interpret everything that's important to you, including views about yourself and events that happen in your life and future. When people feel unusually anxious and worried, they almost inevitably distort the way they think about these things. That distortion actually causes much of their anxiety. Deciding to change thinking and reframe to pleasant thoughts is very helpful. Identifying words that trigger anxiety and choosing different, more calming words can be very helpful.

**Behaving therapies** – This therapeutic approach deals with identifying the actions you can take and behaviors you can incorporate to alleviate your anxiety. Some actions are fairly straightforward, like getting more exercise and sleep and managing your responsibilities. On the other hand, one type of action that targets anxiety and can feel a little scary is exposure – breaking your fears down into small steps and facing them one at a time. Some people, with the

advice of their doctor, choose to take medications for their anxiety.

**Feeling therapies** – Anxiety sets off a storm of distressing physical symptoms, such as a racing heart-beat, upset stomach, muscle tension, sweating and dizziness. Suggested techniques to deal with this turmoil include:

- breathing and relaxation techniques – Russ Harris says it well: Slow breathing is like an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm: the anchor won't make the storm go away, but it will hold you steady until it passes.
- making changes in your lifestyle
- employing mindfulness, an approach that teaches you to connect with present moment experiences.

### **Anxiety Disorders**

A Health Canada report on *Anxiety Disorders and Their Treatment: A Critical Review* states that anxiety disorders are mental health problems characterized by excessive levels of alarm, fear or worry due to anticipated or perceived danger. They significantly interfere with day to day living. Anxiety disorders include: panic attacks; agoraphobia; specific phobia disorder (one of the best understood and one of the most treatable even though people with this disorder rarely seek treatment); social phobia; obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Reid Wilson, an expert on anxiety disorders, says the majority of anxiety disorders co-exist with other disorders such as depression or substance abuse. Reid is trying more provocative approaches to treatments as he actively assists his clients move from avoiding the discomfort to allowing it to surface and take charge of the anxiety. Reid tells his clients, “If you want a new jacket, you have to take the old one off.” He supports clients in embracing their symptoms and developing strategies to reduce them.

### **Screening Tool for Anxiety**

The Mental Health Commission of Canada recommends the Goldberg Anxiety Scale as a preliminary screening tool for anxiety. This is not intended to diagnose anxiety but rather give a heads up as to the need to consider a professional assessment that will accurately diagnose whether or not clinical anxiety is present.

### **The Anxiety Scale**

(Score one point for each “yes” if the symptoms occurred most of the time over the past 2-4 weeks).

(cont'd on page 24)

1. Have you felt keyed up, on edge?
  2. Have you been worrying a lot?
  3. Have you been irritable?
  4. Have you had difficulty relaxing?
- (If yes to two of the above, go on to 5-9:)**
5. Have you been sleeping poorly?
  6. Have you had headaches or neck aches?
  7. Have you had any of the following: trembling, tingling, dizzy spells, sweating, urinary frequency, and diarrhea?
  8. Have you been worried about your health?
  9. Have you had difficulty falling asleep?

Teachers with anxiety scores of at least five are highly encouraged to seek a professional assessment and see your family doctor. Other anxiety screening tests are readily available. Another example can be found at: [www.anxietycentre.com/anxiety-tests.shtml](http://www.anxietycentre.com/anxiety-tests.shtml).

**A**nxiety can be influenced by genetics, family of origin or any past traumatic event. We have no control over such variables but we do have considerable control over how we respond. Here are some simple, practical strategies that can help to effectively manage your anxiety:

- Talking with someone you trust. Research shows that social support helps people deal with almost any type of distress. Find a trusted person to confide in during troubled times. Consider calling your Employee Assistance Program.
- Breathing techniques can be done anywhere. Go to [www.yogawonders.com](http://www.yogawonders.com) for focused exercises. (Anxiety makes breathing shallow and rapid which has a way of increasing anxiety.)
- Your favorite exercise. If you don't have one, find one. Anxiety floods the body with adrenaline, a chemical produced by our body which causes our heart to beat faster, muscles to tighten, and various other body sensations that can feel distressing. Nothing burns off adrenaline faster than aerobic

exercise. Walking, jogging, dancing, making love, hula-hooping – whatever you love to do will reduce stress and thus anxiety.

- Listen to your favorite music, read a good book or watch a movie.
- Having a hot bath, shower, massage, whatever helps soothe your body. Johnson Inc.'s plan has an option for professional massage that is worth checking out.
- The way you think strongly influences the way you feel. Anxious people inevitably think about things in ways that increase their anxiety. Consider making a list of worries along with possible reframes for each worry and write what you are willing to do to reduce worry and negative thinking. We are told that approximately 90 percent of what we worry about never actually happens.

Sometimes people start on the path to change with the best intentions but like travelling on an icy road, they move along, lose traction, spin their wheels, and slide off the road. A few tools, intervention strategies and a willingness to seek help can give you ways to throw salt and sand on the ice and keep moving forward. An awareness of the barriers that block the way to change can help you to adopt effective strategies to keep you safely on the road to overcoming anxiety.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada reports that obtaining the proper treatment for anxiety early will allow most of us to avoid much unhappiness and suffering while returning to good mental health and optimal performance at school and home in a timely fashion. Your Employee Assistance Program is available to help.

*Judy Beranger is a Wellness and Employee Assistance Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Judy Beranger (ext. 265) or Gail Carroll (ext. 242). Suggestions for future articles for this section are welcomed.*

### Additional Resources

- Canadian Psychological Association ([www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca))
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health ([www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net))
- Centre for Suicide Prevention ([www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca))
- Mood Disorders Society of Canada ([www.mooddisorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca))
- Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression ([www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org))
- Canadian Mental Health Association ([www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca))
- The Hakomi Institute ([www.hakomiinstitute.com](http://www.hakomiinstitute.com))
- Health Network ([www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=240&np=298&rid=2008](http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=240&np=298&rid=2008))