

# Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety Disorders

Fear, worry and anxiety are useful emotions, which enable you to react to new or threatening situations. However, if these emotions become excessive and out of proportion to their causes, or if they interfere with your well-being and disrupt your activities or relationships with those around you, you should consider the possibility that you are suffering from an anxiety disorder.

## / Understanding Anxiety Disorders

The expression “anxiety disorders” refers to a **group of illnesses** with the shared characteristic of provoking **anxiety intense enough** to disrupt the daily lives of the people who suffer from it. Symptoms include:

- Muscle tension, headaches, stomach aches
- Irritability
- Sleep disorders, fatigue
- Lump in the throat
- Racing heart, dizziness
- Concentration or memory difficulties
- Trembling, sweating
- Nausea, fear of vomiting
- Chest pain
- Feeling of unreality

### GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD)

Those who suffer this disorder tend to **worry uncontrollably** and to **imagine that things will go wrong**, over a period of at least 6 months. Their concerns may be related to such issues as their work, family, or health.

### OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD)

People dealing with OCD are invaded by repeated thoughts (**obsessions**) that create a feeling of anxiety. In an attempt to calm down, they react by repeating behaviour (**compulsions**) related to the source of their anxiety. For example, they may wash their hands constantly because they fear germs.

### PANIC DISORDER

A panic attack is a feeling of **intense fear, which strikes suddenly and for no apparent reason**. People suffering from this disorder may find themselves abruptly feeling as though something catastrophic is going to happen to them at a moment when they are in an otherwise common place, such as the grocery store.

If a person has a series of these attacks, to the point that they disrupt his or her usual activities, the person may be said to have a panic disorder. This disorder may be accompanied by **agoraphobia**, the fear that they will be unable to escape in the instance of another panic attack.

### PHOBIAS

A **specific phobia** is an excessive fear of an object, an animal, an element of nature (thunder, for example) or a specific situation (heights, for example).

**Social phobia** is the fear of being in a group or in public, meeting new people or being judged by others. People suffering from it may feel so paralysed in front of others that they tend to isolate themselves.

### POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Victims—or witnesses—of traumatic events (such as assault, accident, or neglect) often experience agonizing memories, dreams or other symptoms of stress that continue to haunt them long after the crisis that caused them.

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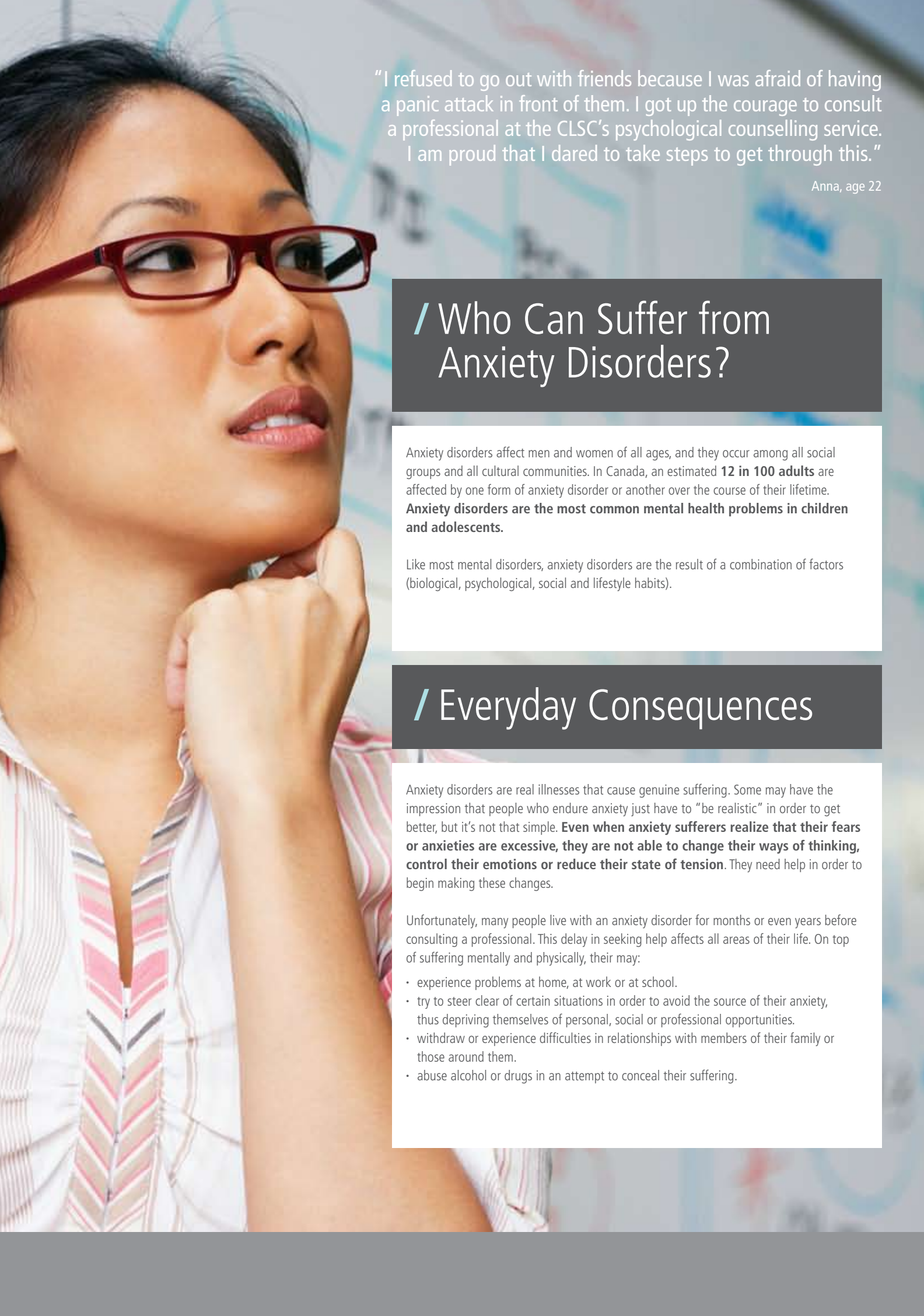
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"I refused to go out with friends because I was afraid of having a panic attack in front of them. I got up the courage to consult a professional at the CLSC's psychological counselling service. I am proud that I dared to take steps to get through this."

Anna, age 22

## / Who Can Suffer from Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders affect men and women of all ages, and they occur among all social groups and all cultural communities. In Canada, an estimated **12 in 100 adults** are affected by one form of anxiety disorder or another over the course of their lifetime.

**Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems in children and adolescents.**

Like most mental disorders, anxiety disorders are the result of a combination of factors (biological, psychological, social and lifestyle habits).

## / Everyday Consequences

Anxiety disorders are real illnesses that cause genuine suffering. Some may have the impression that people who endure anxiety just have to "be realistic" in order to get better, but it's not that simple. **Even when anxiety sufferers realize that their fears or anxieties are excessive, they are not able to change their ways of thinking, control their emotions or reduce their state of tension.** They need help in order to begin making these changes.

Unfortunately, many people live with an anxiety disorder for months or even years before consulting a professional. This delay in seeking help affects all areas of their life. On top of suffering mentally and physically, they may:

- experience problems at home, at work or at school.
- try to steer clear of certain situations in order to avoid the source of their anxiety, thus depriving themselves of personal, social or professional opportunities.
- withdraw or experience difficulties in relationships with members of their family or those around them.
- abuse alcohol or drugs in an attempt to conceal their suffering.

# / Overcoming Anxiety Disorders

## Getting Support

By consulting a health care professional quickly, such as a doctor or a psychologist, **you increase your chances of recovering completely and reduce the risk of a relapse.**

A professional will assess the situation, suggest an appropriate course of treatment and recommend supplementary resources.

**Community organizations** also have people on staff who will listen to you and answer your questions (see the list of such organizations on the last page of this brochure).

## Adapted Treatment

People suffering from an anxiety disorder usually recover very well thanks to a course of treatment that **may include several complementary components.**

## Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is central to the treatment of anxiety disorders. It allows people suffering from anxiety to identify the emotions, thoughts and behaviours that are harmful to their well-being, and helps them **develop their strengths** and implement strategies to regain their emotional balance.

Getting involved in treatment and establishing a relationship of confidence with your therapist are the keys to successful psychotherapy. From the very first meeting with the professional you have chosen, you should be sure that you find the suggested approach and treatment plan suitable.

## Medication

Medication (generally **antidepressants** or **anxiolytics**) is sometimes necessary to help you overcome the symptoms of anxiety disorders. When taking medication for anxiety, as with any other kind of medication, it is important to follow the recommendations of your doctor and pharmacist and to consult them if you have any questions or experience adverse effects.

## Strategies for Regaining Your Balance

Lifestyle habits and attitudes influence your physical and mental health. Here are some strategies that can be adopted to regain your balance... and keep it.

- Eat healthy foods, be active almost every day and make sure you sleep well.
- Be careful with substances that act on the nervous system: alcohol and caffeine should be consumed in moderation, medication should be taken only as prescribed, and illicit drugs and tobacco should be avoided completely.
- Manage your stress: organize your time by setting priorities and make time to relax, have fun and enjoy life's little pleasures.
- Surround yourself with people with whom you enjoy spending time, and whom you can count on when things are not going well.
- Reinforce your self-esteem by learning to appreciate your qualities and accept your limits.

## Getting Involved in Your Treatment

Recovery from anxiety disorder happens when you become fully committed in all aspects of your treatment.

- Attend appointments with health care professionals.
- Participate actively in your psychotherapy.
- Respect the dosage and duration of your medication.
- Adopt and maintain a balanced lifestyle.

- Do not give up any aspect of your treatment without first discussing it with a health care professional; if you have questions or concerns, talk about them with your health care professional.
- Keep track of the things that influence your level of stress or anxiety.
- Work together with loved ones and all of the people who can help you maintain your balance.





## Helping a Loved One

If someone around you shows signs of an anxiety disorder, find the courage to talk to him or her about it. Listen to him or her and encourage the person to get help.

Living with someone suffering from an anxiety disorder can be challenging. Confusion, frustration, feelings of guilt and helplessness are just a few of the emotions you may experience when facing such a situation. It is important to remain conscious of your own limits. Many community organizations that offer services to people suffering from mental disorders also offer support to their loved ones.

## Preventing Suicide

Because of the suffering they endure, some people with anxiety disorders feel such intense despair that they consider taking their own lives. However, **it is possible to work through such situations.**

**If you are thinking about suicide or if you are worried that someone you know is considering suicide, get help immediately.**

- **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide, 1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)**
- **9-1-1 if it is an emergency**

## Resources Available to You

### HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- Your **doctor** or **pharmacist**
- The **CLSC** or **CSSS** in your area  
[www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss](http://www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoires/csss)
- **Ordre des psychologues du Québec**  
[www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/) / 1 800 561-1223
- **Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec**  
[www.optsq.org/](http://www.optsq.org/) / 1 888 731-9420
- Professional services at **school or work**
- **Info-Santé**  
Dial **8-1-1**  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Douglas Institute**  
[www.douglas.qc.ca](http://www.douglas.qc.ca)

### COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- **Mental Illness Foundation**  
[www.mentalillnessfoundation.org](http://www.mentalillnessfoundation.org)  
1 888 529-5354
- **Canadian Mental Health Association**  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)
- **Revivre**  
Quebec Anxiety, Depressive and Bipolar Disorder Support Association  
[www.revivre.org/](http://www.revivre.org/) / 1 866 REVIVRE (738-4873)
- **Phobies-Zéro**  
Support and help group for young people and adults suffering from anxiety disorders  
[www.phobies-zero.qc.ca/](http://www.phobies-zero.qc.ca/) / 1 866 922-0002
- **ATAQ**  
Association Troubles Anxieux du Québec  
[www.ataq.org](http://www.ataq.org)

- **Fondation Québécoise pour le Trouble Obsessionnel-Compulsif**  
[fqtoc.mtl.rtss.qc.ca/](http://fqtoc.mtl.rtss.qc.ca/) / 1 888 727-0012
- **Help Online**  
[www.aideenligne.ca/en/](http://www.aideenligne.ca/en/) / 1 866 766-5620
- **Fédération des familles et amis de la personne atteinte de maladie mentale**  
(Federation of families and friends of people with mental illnesses)  
[www.ffapamm.com/](http://www.ffapamm.com/) / 1 800 323-0474

- **Association québécoise de prévention du suicide**  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week everywhere in Québec  
[www.aqps.info](http://www.aqps.info)  
**1 866 APPELLE (277-3553)**
- In case of an **emergency, dial 9-1-1.**

### PASS THIS BROCHURE ON!

The information in this brochure should not be interpreted as providing a medical diagnosis, and should not take the place of consultation with a health care professional.

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