

# *Overcoming Anxiety*



From Short-Term Fixes to  
Long-Term Recovery

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## Preface

In 1988, I completed work on my first book, *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic: Taking Charge and Conquering Fear*, and became the first person to present an integrated, “multimodal” treatment approach at a national conference on anxiety. In the years that followed, this approach became the standard course of treatment for people working with anxiety, and *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic* became the book of choice among individuals, treatment facilities, therapists, and self-help groups working with anxiety both in the United States and in Europe.

As I completed revisions for the updated second edition of *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic* in 1992, I knew that, as good as it was, something more was needed. In conversations with therapists and leaders of self-help groups nationwide, I became increasingly aware that while the treatment models being used were providing relief from anxiety, they were not enough. Like many other therapists, I was focusing more and more in my own practice on helping clients move beyond the initial stages of symptom control to what I now call long-term recovery.

## PREFACE

As a result, I began working on this book in 1993 with the goal that it would move beyond my first work, break new ground, and show people suffering from anxiety how to achieve long-term recovery. After completing an outline and four chapters, I had to delay work on the initial draft for a year and a half to work on another project. This delay helped me develop the ideas that had been roughed out with numerous clients and has made the final work much more mature.

Because this book focuses on achieving long-term recovery and the “messages” behind anxiety, it presents the “basics” of symptom control in a simplified manner. Readers who want a more detailed explanation of this aspect of managing anxiety will find it useful to refer to my first book, *Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic*.

It is my hope that the struggles and victories of the people described in this book will help you live a fuller and more satisfying life. If you take the time to follow their example, I sincerely believe that you will succeed in your struggle with anxiety and achieve long-term recovery.

# A New Way of Looking at Anxiety

Since I first began working with anxiety-related problems in 1981, there has been an explosion of knowledge in the causes of and treatments for them. Today there's a flood of books and audio and video cassettes that describe programs for overcoming anxiety-related problems, as well as an increasing number of centers and therapists who specialize in treating them. Amid all this good news there is a sour note that is often not heard: Research has shown that the approaches currently being used to treat anxiety-related problems do work and provide relief, but they often fail as long-term solutions.

A tremendous number of people with anxiety-related problems go to a specialist or work through a self-help program and experience good results. However, after a period of time that can range from a few weeks to many years, the symptoms return. For some, the symptoms return in full force with debilitating anxiety and panic attacks and the redevelopment of avoidance behaviors or rituals. For others, the symptoms return at a level that is lower than originally experienced, or take a somewhat different form,

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which might include excessive worry or nervousness. It might also include avoidance behavior or nervous rituals that are different from those that accompanied the original onset of severe anxiety.

There are also many people who go through programs or read books and never find the relief they are seeking. Their initial intense symptoms may be greatly reduced, but they continue to experience a significant level of anxiety-related symptoms in spite of treatment. When anxiety symptoms return, or are never fully resolved, the sense of failure, anger, confusion, and depression that occurs can be overwhelming.

This book takes the next step in the evolution of solutions for anxiety and shows you how to move beyond what have been found to be short-term fixes to achieve long-term recovery. As you work your way through the chapters, you'll meet three people who have taken this next step, battled the crippling effects of severe anxiety, and won. Their battle was not an easy one nor was it over quickly. However, all three did eventually achieve long-term recovery. As you read about how they accomplished this, you will learn many new things about yourself, gain many new skills, and develop a new way of looking at anxiety.

One of the central themes of this book is that anxiety is simply a "messenger" that is telling you that you have one or more important life issues to address. Sometimes symptoms develop because a person is overwhelmed by too many things going on at the same time, such as problems with health, money, children, or work. However, anxiety can also be connected with problems in relationships (your ability to connect and be intimate with others) as well as with what are often called "existential" issues (how we answer the questions "What is the meaning of life?" and "How do I find happiness?").

The purpose of this book is to help you understand the message your symptoms are sending you. All too often, it is easy to become so focused on the symptoms of anxiety (the messenger) that you

fail to understand the message. Learning to identify the message lifts the feeling of shame and demoralization that develops when you're focused on the elimination of symptoms. It's also the key to achieving what I call long-term recovery.

Once this idea is accepted, the goal shifts from the *absence* of anxiety to the *management* of anxiety. This is a more reasonable goal. Once the focus becomes the message (the underlying issues generating the anxiety) rather than the messenger (the symptoms), long-term recovery is possible.

## **What Is Long-Term Recovery?**

Long-term recovery is really the final stage of the *process* that people recovering from anxiety go through. As people move through this process, they achieve progressively higher levels of recovery. For the sake of simplicity, I've divided these into the following three basic levels:

### ***Level One: Basic Symptom Control***

At this stage of recovery a person is focused on controlling symptoms. Indeed, this is always my initial focus with new clients. When they're experiencing intense symptoms, people simply aren't interested in long-term answers. They want relief and they want it *now!*

By the end of this stage, however, a person has made much improvement. Anxiety symptoms are greatly reduced with only occasional episodes of intense anxiety or panic, and there is usually the ability to function comfortably in at least half of the everyday situations that were formerly uncomfortable.

A person at the end of this stage also has a good understanding

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of the mechanisms of anxiety, along with a broad range of coping skills for managing symptoms. While no longer *hypervigilant* (always on guard, watching for symptoms), this person is still moderately on guard. For many, medication continues to play a major role in symptom management.

### ***Level Two: Advanced Symptom Control***

A person in this stage of recovery is gaining greater confidence in his skills due to the absence of most, if not all, avoidance behavior. Intense episodes of anxiety are now infrequent. To at least a moderate degree, he has come to terms with those aspects of his personality that can cause problems and, when present, the genetic predisposition that makes him prone to anxiety. He has gotten to the point where he will not let symptoms interfere with his behavior. He knows how to avoid the anxiety-panic cycle and use his various skills effectively. There is some understanding that symptoms are messengers.

A person at this stage who relied heavily on medication while at level one is now no longer using medication, using it at a reduced level, or reserving its use for situations that are especially anxiety provoking.

Although anxiety is still a fearful thing, there is now more awareness of the issues that trigger anxiety. The focus has shifted, at least in part, away from the symptoms to the causes of anxiety. However, because this understanding is incomplete, periodic flare-ups of moderate to intense symptoms still mysteriously occur. When this happens there is a tendency to move back to level one and again become preoccupied with symptoms and develop avoidance behaviors.

### ***Level Three: Long-Term Recovery***

A person at this level perceives anxiety in a completely different way from a person at the first two levels. Anxiety is seen as a natural part of life rather than as something to be avoided. A person at this level can easily identify her core issues and understand clearly and fully the various messages anxiety sends. When anxiety is experienced, she realizes that high levels of anxiety are *supposed* to occur when real-life issues are present, so she focuses on the issues generating her anxiety rather than on the symptoms. This, in turn, allows her to experience high levels of anxiety without the distress or escalating symptoms she experienced when her anxiety-related problems began. A person at this stage who formerly relied on medication for symptom control finds it is no longer needed.

Before proceeding, take a moment to decide which of the above levels best describes you at the moment. If this is the first book you've read on anxiety, you may still be caught in the initial intense symptoms and have yet to experience any relief. If you've been battling anxiety for years, you've probably read many books, been through one or more programs, or seen several therapists in your quest for recovery. In this case, you may have cycled back and forth between levels one and two. In either case, my goal is to give you the tools and the knowledge you need to achieve long-term recovery.

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### How to Get the Most out of This Program

This book is designed to be used as a *workbook*. In order to get the most out of it, you need to read through it slowly; I suggest you spend at least one week on each chapter and do as many of the recommended activities as possible. While it's best to work through the book systematically, some people just can't wait to learn what each chapter contains. If you are one of these, go ahead and read through the entire book to get a general idea of what it covers. Once you've done this, read the book all the way through, slowly.

In order to achieve the long-term recovery described in this chapter, you need more than just a general understanding of ideas. Your goal is to internalize the information and skills presented in each chapter, to make them a natural and automatic part of your behavior. The recommended activities play a key role in this process. The more time and energy you spend on them, the more successful you will be.

Beginning with the next chapter, plan to spend at least one week on each chapter before you move on to the next one. Start by reading the headings to get an overview of the material. Then read the whole chapter at your usual reading rate. It is best to read each chapter at least three times, more if you find the information difficult. The second and third readings will increase your understanding of the material and reveal ideas that were missed during the first reading.

There may be times when you could spend more than one week on a chapter. While it is important to be thorough, it is also important to maintain your momentum. Therefore, spend no

more than two weeks on a chapter, and do as many of the recommended activities as possible. After completing the program, you can spend additional time on those areas where you feel more work is needed.

This may sound like a lot of work; it is. But keep in mind that it took you all your life to develop the behaviors and thinking patterns that produced your condition. It will take you time, energy, and a strong commitment to learn new and effective ways of thinking and acting. If you work through the material in the manner outlined, chances are excellent that you will succeed.

### **Summary of Key Ideas**

1. Anxiety is a normal part of life. It is a “messenger” that indicates the presence of a problem or issue that needs to be resolved. The more intense the anxiety, the more important the issue. People with severe anxiety often have important life issues they are not dealing with effectively.
2. Long-term recovery focuses on the *management* of anxiety rather than on the *absence* of anxiety.
3. There are three different levels of recovery possible. Many people become stuck at the first or second level, or cycle back and forth between the first two levels.
4. People who achieve long-term recovery perceive anxiety differently from those at the first two levels of recovery. When anxiety occurs, they understand the message and respond to it in an effective way. Because of this, they can experience high levels of anxiety without the distress or escalating symptoms they experienced when their anxiety-related problems began.
5. In order to achieve long-term recovery, you need to work through the program presented in this book in a slow and systematic manner.

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### Recommended Activities

#### *Getting the Most out of the Recommended Activities*

At the end of each chapter is a set of activities many people have found valuable in achieving long-term recovery. You may find that some of the activities involve information or skills that are already a part of how you usually think and act. Or you may find that the material seems awkward, uncomfortable, or difficult. This is to be expected since this program is designed to meet the needs of many people and you are unique, with your own personal requirements and abilities. Spend less time with activities you find easy and more time with those that seem difficult.

The easy activities probably involve skills you have already practiced and ideas you have already internalized. The difficult ones probably involve skills and ideas that are new to you or that you've never really mastered. These are the ones that are the most important for you. However, if a particular activity causes undue stress or anxiety, it means you are not ready for it. Skip it and work on exercises that are less difficult. Then return to the stressful exercise later. You may find that it is not as stressful as when you first tried it.

One of the keys to achieving long-term recovery is developing the ability to hear the message that your symptoms are sending. Often this can be difficult. So, even though a particular exercise may not seem like it applies to you, do it anyway. You may be surprised by the results.

No one can say exactly how long it will take you to achieve long-term recovery. It depends on the genetic makeup of your body,

your personality, and the complexity and difficulty of the issues from both your childhood and your present circumstances. It should also be noted that when you do achieve long-term recovery, you probably won't know it until you've been there for quite some time. This is the way personal growth takes place. However, if you have a strong commitment to use the book as it is designed—to do the reading and apply as many of the suggestions to your life as possible (even though you may think they are silly or may not fully understand why they are suggested)—it is very likely you will succeed.

### ***Establish a Regular Study Time***

As you work through this book, keep in mind that it is a *self-directed study program*. Establish a regular time to work with the activities at the end of the chapters, and make this scheduled study time as important as your regular meals. If you use a calendar or appointment book, record your study times in it. Having a regular study time helps you avoid the common mistake of working only when you are experiencing high levels of anxiety. Remember the “good day rule”: *You can make the most progress when you are feeling good and your life seems to be running smoothly*. It is during these times that it is easiest to look at yourself objectively and do the activities listed in the chapters. It is also when you are least motivated to do them. Do them anyway. It is during your good days that you will be most able to develop the skills and understanding you need to achieve long-term recovery.

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### ***Write a Brief Explanation of Your Condition***

Before you go on to the next chapter, write a brief explanation of why you think your symptoms developed and why they continue to be a problem. This explanation can range from one paragraph to a page in length. Keep this explanation so you can refer to it later.

### ***Consider Using Supplemental Materials***

This book can be used by itself, however, you may find supplemental materials helpful, especially if you are having trouble understanding or sticking with the written material. Helpful materials are described in the "Supplemental Materials" section at the end of the book.

### ***Consider Psychotherapy***

Although many people have used the approach in this book to achieve long-term recovery without the help of a psychotherapist, others have found it best to use it in conjunction with professional psychotherapy. If you are experiencing extreme difficulty coping with life, find a therapist experienced in working with anxiety-related problems. Guidelines on how to select a therapist are given in appendix 2.

### ***Find a Study Partner***

Although it is possible to work through this book on your own, many find it helpful to have a friend or relative read and work

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