

# Understanding *Anxiety*

One of the most common human experiences — and one of the most treatable.

Anxiety is your nervous system's alarm — built to protect you. When it misfires, it fires that same intense response at things that aren't truly dangerous. Your body means well; it has simply learned to overestimate threat. That is something you can change.

# What contributes to anxiety

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Anxiety rarely has one cause. It builds through several layers at once — and understanding yours is the first step toward addressing them.



## BIOLOGY & GENETICS

Anxiety runs in families. Some people are simply wired with a more reactive nervous system — not a flaw, just wiring you can work with.



## EARLY LIFE & TRAUMA

An unpredictable or overwhelming past can leave the nervous system stuck in “on alert,” long after the danger has passed.



## THINKING PATTERNS

Catastrophizing, overestimating danger, and perfectionism keep the anxiety cycle running.



## CHRONIC STRESS

Sustained stress with no real recovery — work, money, relationships, health — can lock the system in overdrive.



## SUBSTANCES

Caffeine, alcohol, and cannabis can trigger or worsen anxiety, even when they feel calming in the moment. The rebound is real.



## PHYSICAL HEALTH

Thyroid issues, hormonal shifts, poor sleep, and some medications can all mimic or fuel anxiety.

## THE ANXIETY CYCLE

A trigger sparks a thought (“I can’t handle this”), which sparks a body sensation (racing heart), which feels like proof something is wrong — fuelling more anxious thoughts. Avoidance brings short-term relief but teaches the brain the situation really was dangerous, making the cycle stronger. Recovery means learning to interrupt it: through the body, the mind, or your behaviour.

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# More of this is in your hands than it feels

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Some of what shapes anxiety is fixed. Much of it responds directly to what you do — which is exactly why anxiety is so treatable.

## WHAT YOU CAN'T CHANGE

### Fixed factors

- Genetic predisposition / temperament
- A naturally reactive nervous system
- Past experiences that have already happened
- Some physical-health contributors

## WITHIN YOUR INFLUENCE

### Modifiable factors

- Sleep quality and consistency
- Caffeine, alcohol, and cannabis use
- Avoidance vs. gradual facing of fears
- Breathing and body-regulation skills
- Patterns of thinking (with therapy)
- Movement and daily structure

*Anxiety shrinks when you stop avoiding and start regulating. The right column is where that work lives.*

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# Levers within your control

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Skills and habits with real evidence for calming an overactive alarm system. Begin with one and build.



## Breathing & the body STRONG EVIDENCE

Slow diaphragmatic breathing directly switches on your body's calm response. Progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, and tai chi work through the same pathway. **These are trainable skills, not tricks.**

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## Movement STRONG EVIDENCE

Regular aerobic exercise is one of the most effective anxiety treatments available. **20–30 minutes of brisk activity most days** measurably lowers baseline tension and improves sleep.

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## Sleep STRONG EVIDENCE

Anxiety and poor sleep feed each other. A tired brain is a more anxious brain, so steady sleep habits are foundational — not optional.

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## Caffeine & alcohol STRONG EVIDENCE

Caffeine mimics anxiety symptoms; alcohol calms briefly then rebounds into more anxiety and worse sleep. Cutting back often brings quick, noticeable relief.

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## Connection STRONG EVIDENCE

Isolation drives anxiety; a few meaningful relationships buffer it. Investing in connection is protective. For some people, faith or a spiritual community is one of the strongest sources of this connection and meaning — if it's part of your life, it's worth bringing into your care rather than setting aside.

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## Mindfulness STRONG EVIDENCE

Paying deliberate, non-judgmental attention to the present moment loosens the grip of “what-if” spirals and rumination. Brief daily practice is enough.

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# Therapy and medication

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The most effective long-term treatment for anxiety is skills-based therapy — with medication as a helpful support when needed.

## Therapy

**CBT is the gold standard** for all anxiety disorders, with strong evidence. It targets distorted thinking and — crucially — uses **gradual exposure** to teach the brain that feared situations are survivable. ACT and somatic or trauma-focused therapies add value, especially where trauma is part of the picture. Much of this fits within a brief, focused course.

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## Medication

SSRIs and SNRIs are first-line and safe for long-term use. They don't sedate you or change who you are — they lower the baseline “noise” so therapy and your own efforts can take hold. Allow 4–6 weeks for a meaningful effect.

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## WHAT RECOVERY LOOKS LIKE

# A different relationship with fear

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### RECOVERY IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF ANXIETY

It is reaching a point where anxiety no longer runs your choices or defines your life. Progress is rarely linear — there are harder and easier days. What matters is the overall direction and your willingness to keep moving. You are not broken; your nervous system learned some unhelpful patterns, and patterns can be unlearned.

### IF YOU'RE IN CRISIS

If you're thinking about suicide or harming yourself, you don't have to wait for an appointment. Call or text **988** (Suicide Crisis Helpline, 24/7), call or text the **Distress Centre Calgary** at **403-266-HELP (4357)**, or for health advice call **Health Link 811**. If you are in immediate danger, call **911** or go to your nearest emergency department.

