

# Diagnosed with anxiety disorder: Managing stigma, treatments and support

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According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), “mental health care is underfunded by about \$1.5 billion.” GETTY IMAGES

Canadians are no stranger to anxiety. In fact, as much as 4.6 per cent of the population copes with at least one anxiety disorder daily. With such a high prevalence, it might be assumed that finding the proper care would be a breeze. Unfortunately, though, the opposite is true. People with anxiety disorders continue to fight an uphill battle when it comes to getting the right care after being diagnosed.

“My time with the commission has really solidified what I already knew to be true,” says Ed Mantler, Senior Vice President and Chief Program Officer with the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). “And that is, access to services is a big issue.”

Anxiety, used as a blanket term for many anxiety-based mental health disorders, can be challenging to cope with and treat because of the wide range of manifestations it can take on. While some people experience panic attacks, others form anxious fears of leaving their homes or being in social situations, for example.

Because of the complexities of anxiety, getting a diagnosis is only the first challenging step in overcoming the symptoms associated with the disorder. Why? Because as Mantler mentioned, access to care, even after a diagnosis, is nowhere near as seamless as it should be.

Mark Antczak, a Registered Clinical Counsellor and Clinical Educator with Anxiety Canada, echoes that same sentiment. "I do work in private practice as well, and it's unfortunately reaffirmed what's already known. There are a lot of barriers to mental health supports."

Knowing that there is a problem and addressing it proactively are two very different things. Since the system isn't going to be getting a complete overhaul any time soon, people diagnosed with anxiety will have to contend with what's already available to them.

Here's how you can manage an anxiety disorder diagnosis.

## **Overcome the stigma around anxiety**

According to a study published by the Canadian College of Health Leaders, people with mental illness often feel "devalued, dismissed, and dehumanized" by the healthcare workers they turn to when seeking help for their disorder. The stigma surrounding mental illness is often looked at through a societal lens. Still, in many cases, for people with anxiety, it's those who should be helping that make them feel as though their experiences are invalid.

The study also found that people often feel left out of the healing process by being "excluded from decisions, receiving subtle or overt threats of coercive treatment, being made to wait excessively long when seeking help, being given insufficient information about one's condition or treatment options, being treated in a paternalistic or demeaning manner, being told they would never get well, and being spoken to or about using stigmatizing language."

Mantler has also seen the effects that stigmatization by healthcare workers can have on people seeking help for their anxiety. "The stigma associated with mental illness continues to be one of the biggest barriers, and that can be stigma within the

health system itself. We often hear people experiencing a mental health problem or illness that the stigma they face is actually worse than the symptoms of their illness.”

“They sometimes feel most stigmatized when they’re seeking out help through the formal health system. So, it’s really important to change those attitudes and beliefs among healthcare workers. They’re not intending to be discriminating, although that’s what stigma leads to.”

While it’s hard for one person to address the stigma, especially as they navigate a new diagnosis, it’s important to remember that the only way to change things is to educate people in a way that allows them to see that their presence on one’s medical team is vital when working towards recovery together. If you don’t feel as though your medical team is working with you, finding a second opinion or seeking out other anxiety resources can be a great help when dealing with the aftermath of a diagnosis.

## **Start with the right support for anxiety**

While access to care continues to be a barrier when being diagnosed with anxiety, or any other mental health disorder for that matter, it’s essential to take note of supports that are currently in place to make the process easier. For example, when a person is waitlisted to see a psychiatrist for their anxiety, going to online resources or local community groups can be a great way to get involved and acquainted with their disorder, others who have fought the same battle, and ways to cope and reduce symptoms. It’s not about finding any type of support, though. It’s about finding what’s best for you.

“If you have a specific thing you need help with, look to see what individuals can help you with that,” says Antczak. “For example, if you’re diagnosed with panic disorder or OCD, look for supports that niche themselves in that. If you have more time and capacity to do self-work, there are a lot of resources, self-help books, workbooks, self-guided programs that exist.”

Finding the right resources isn’t always easy, but specific programs like Stepped Care 2.0 and Wellness Together Canada can make the process a little less daunting. Stepped Care 2.0 is a care model developed by Dr. Peter Cornish, Faculty and Senior Advisor at the University of California, Berkeley. The model aims to provide active recovery help for people based on person-centred approaches and informative access.

Wellness Together Canada, funded by Health Canada, was first implemented to combat rising mental distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, however, it can be used as a one-stop shop to help those with anxiety navigate the type of care they need based on their individual situation.

“It might be that you just don’t know where to look or how to navigate the system or know what parts of the system may be helpful for you,” Mantler said, describing barriers to care when it comes to finding support. “We’re putting energy into making the services that are available more accessible. Often, there’s a long wait time for services, and we have championed a model of care called Stepped Care 2.0 that, in its initial implementation across the province of Newfoundland, reduced wait times by almost 70%.”

Mantler continues, “There are online resources available to access services. For instance, Wellness Together Canada is an online portal that’s accessible to all Canadians online. It gives a wealth of tools and resources.”

Peer support and connecting with others who have had similar experiences is also a vital piece of the healing journey for people with anxiety disorders. Speaking to someone who truly understands what you’re going through, who may have tips of their own, and who can be there for you in a way many others can’t is a great way to build a community for yourself that will help you navigate these new waters.

“It can be difficult to look for peer support,” says Mantler. He continues, “Peer support is incredibly beneficial for people.”

## **Prepare for barriers in support for anxiety**

Mental health care in Canada continues to lack the funding it needs to meet the demands of Canadians looking to treat their mood disorders, such as anxiety. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), “mental health care is underfunded by about \$1.5 billion.” This shortage of funding leads to a high number of people who don’t seek out care simply because they can’t afford it or those who continue to wait for the proper care while their disease continues to worsen.

Antczak finds that a financial barrier is likely the most harmful people experience when trying to navigate the system after being diagnosed with anxiety. “Finances or money available is probably one of the biggest ones. The unfortunate reality is that there’s a lot of great care out there, but a lot of people can’t afford it.”

Mantler has also seen financials pose an issue for people getting care. “Mental health is not considered a part of the Canada Health Act, so it’s not universally accessible.”

He continues, “We have a very complicated mix of people accessing services through out-of-pocket payments or through their workplace benefits, and those two systems don’t talk to each other very well. The fact that we have a limited publicly funded mental health system outside of hospitals and pay out-of-pocket or insurance-driven payer system running parallel is just really challenging.”

For Canadians who lack money and insurance or workplace benefits, getting over the financial hurdle is much more difficult. Free services are their only option unless they want to forgo care altogether. And with free services come long wait times.

People with anxiety disorders may also fear the changes and work it will take to get better, especially when they face the stigma of getting care or the financial burden of getting the correct type of therapy or medication. Antczak has seen this firsthand in his work with people with anxiety.

“Readiness and willingness to change, I would say, is a pretty significant one. Someone may want to change, but they may not be ready to do the work that involves. I see that a lot.”

## **Educate yourself on anxiety treatments**

The treatments available for anxiety are vast, and what works for one person may not work for another. It’s essential to inform yourself about what’s available and what you’re willing to explore to help calm your symptoms. There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to therapies addressing the wide range of anxiety disorders and their accompanying symptoms.

According to Antczak, treatment is “aggressively personalized.” He continues, “Everyone will be very different. When we look at the different ways that anxiety could be supported, one person gets medication, and they’re done and dusted. That’s enough for them. For others, they need to go on medication but also try therapeutic support and check in with a therapist once that’s managed for a pretty lengthy period of time. Some folks may get a diagnosis, and they get a self-help book and go through that on their own, and that’s enough.”

Reading up on all the viable treatments available for anxiety is a great place to start when educating yourself on the therapies available to you, but that’s only the first step. People must also work with their medical team in a way that allows them to

see all their options, know what each could mean for them, and how to choose the best one based on their symptoms and experience.

“It’s a very individualized decision to be made in partnership with the care provider. Certainly, there are opportunities, going online, for instance, to gather information to find out what’s available and what works. There are peer support networks. It’s often really helpful to speak to someone who’s had a similar experience to find out what worked for them, what didn’t work for them and how they navigated the system.”

He continues, “It’s best to be an informed consumer. Asking those questions of your primary care provider will probably get all of the answers you’re looking for, but there are other resources available. Organizations like the Mental Health Commission of Canada have a lot of information tools and resources on their website, and it’s worthwhile to take a look at those. Getting in touch with a local organization such as the Canadian Mental Health Association can often give direction as to what resources and tools are available locally within the community.”

## **Understand that healing for anxiety isn’t linear**

Healing from anxiety often comes with both progress and setbacks. Rarely do people experience an anxiety disorder, get treatment right away, and become anxiety-free. It can take time, effort, and a team of medical professionals to help shape a treatment plan that will eventually, over time, reduce someone’s symptoms, allowing them to cope with the disorder in a way that gives them their life back. Because of that, it’s important to remember that healing isn’t one-directional, and it’s important not to get discouraged.

“If it doesn’t work for them the first time, for example, they look at one therapist or doctor, it’s very easy to get discouraged. The unfortunate reality is that there are a lot of doctors that may not be familiar with how to navigate certain diagnoses or forms of anxiety. At the end of the day, if you have a discouraging experience, try another,” says Antczak.

When things get hard, it’s essential to refer to the unique resources available to you after being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Mantler finds that knowing the resources, having access to them, and using them when in need is the best way to fight back against becoming discouraged on your journey toward healing.

“I have to keep going back to Stepped Care 2.0. It’s such an important way of changing access to the system. It takes away the belief that every person who presents themselves to a mental health clinic needs to be immediately seen by a psychiatrist or the next available psychiatrist. It aligns the needs of the client with what’s available, and many people just need information or to be pointed in the direction of some resources available and don’t need to wait months to see a psychiatrist,” says Mantler.

Swimming through the mental health system can often feel like you’re out to sea without a paddle. But when you start with the proper support, educate yourself on your disorder and therapies, and prepare yourself for the ups and downs of healing through barriers, you’ll be far more equipped to handle the journey toward freedom from anxiety symptoms.

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