

Questions about
ANXIETY

and the answers that may
SURPRISE YOU

A booklet for people who take a
BENZODIAZEPINE regularly for anxiety



You may find this booklet valuable if you are on one of the following medications:

Generic Name	Brand Name	Generic Name	Brand Name
lorazepam	ATIVAN®	chlordiazepoxide	LIBRIUM®
clonazepam	RIVOTRIL®	clobazam	FRISIUM®
diazepam	VALIUM®	clorazepate	TRANXENE®
temazepam	RESTORIL®	flurazepam	DALMANE®
oxazepam	SERAX®	nitrazepam	MOGADON®
alprazolam	XANAX®	triazolam	HALCION®
bromazepam	LECTOPAM®		

These medications are called **BENZODIAZEPINES**, or benzos. They work quickly and can relieve some symptoms of anxiety.

Will I need to take this for the rest of my life?



WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO ME IF I STOPPED IT?

COULD THIS PILL BE GIVING ME SIDE EFFECTS?



Why do I still struggle with anxiety even though my dose keeps going up?

Some people need to take a benzo every day (for example, people who are using it to prevent seizures). But other people might only need their benzo every once in a while, or at a lower dose, or perhaps not at all. **Keep reading to find out more...**

Can you tell which of these are **FACTS**, and which are **MYTHS**?

1. If I take my benzo exactly as prescribed, I won't have any side effects.
2. Using a benzo is the best long-term strategy to treat my anxiety.
3. If I quit my benzo suddenly, I will feel anxious.
4. If a benzo doesn't work for my anxiety, nothing will.

1. If I take my benzo exactly as prescribed, I won't have any side effects.

This is a myth. Even people who take their benzodiazepine exactly as prescribed can get side effects.

DID YOU KNOW?



Taking a benzodiazepine regularly can sometimes worsen your mood.

An overdose can occur when benzos are taken with other substances that affect the brain, such as alcohol or opioids, even if the benzo is taken at the prescribed dose.



Benzodiazepines can cause you to feel tired, forgetful, disconnected, and groggy ('brain fog').

Benzodiazepines increase the risk of falling and breaking bones, especially as people get older.



2. Using a benzo is the best long-term strategy to treat my anxiety.

This is a myth. You may remember the first time you took a benzodiazepine. It probably worked quickly and helped you feel calm.

When you took your benzodiazepine today – was it the same feeling as it used to be?

Chances are your body has become used to your benzodiazepine. This is normal. When used every once in a while (for example, every few weeks), benzodiazepines can help with episodes of anxiety. But when taken every day, they often stop having the same effect. In the long run, benzodiazepines can even **worsen** some conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and insomnia.

You may ask yourself: Is my life moving forward the way I want it to? Have I noticed side effects from my benzodiazepine? Am I still bothered by anxiety, even though I take my benzodiazepine regularly? Do I feel like I need my benzodiazepine in order to cope?

Carla started asking herself these questions after she had taken a benzodiazepine for eight years. You can read her story on page 6.

3. If I quit my benzo suddenly, I will feel anxious.

This is a fact. Almost everyone who takes a benzodiazepine for weeks or months will develop a physical dependence to it. This means that the body relies on it, and when the benzodiazepine is suddenly stopped, unpleasant withdrawal happens.

Withdrawal causes anxiety and makes it harder to sleep. Withdrawal can fool people into thinking their benzodiazepine is working. If you are a little late taking a dose, your anxiety might get worse. Then, after taking the benzo, you feel better. You might think the benzodiazepine made your anxiety go away - but **it may have only made your withdrawal go away.**

The good news is that:

- 1) There are other strategies you can use to manage your anxiety. See myth #4 below.
- 2) Your health care provider can help you make a plan to reduce your dose very slowly. This will help avoid withdrawal. **If you have been on a benzodiazepine for a long time, don't stop it suddenly.**

4. If a benzo doesn't work for my anxiety, nothing will.

This is a myth. There *are* effective ways to manage long-term anxiety.

The best way to treat anxiety is to use several different strategies at once. This may mean talking to a counsellor, joining a support group, exercising, meditating, using prescribed medications, and/or practicing Tai Chi or yoga.

You may have heard of medications for anxiety such as escitalopram, paroxetine, sertraline, venlafaxine, or duloxetine. They are often called antidepressants, but they can help anxiety too. Most people find that these medications have fewer long-term side effects than benzodiazepines. It can sometimes take a little while to find the right medication and the right dose that works best for you. Patience and determination are often needed.

Page 10 of this booklet describes different ways to address anxiety, and your health care provider can give you more information.

Carla's Story: You Can Feel Better Without It

Years ago, I was experiencing a lot of anxiety. I would be crying, panicking, upset about something. My family physician prescribed lorazepam for me. The drug helped calm me down. And within 5 minutes of taking lorazepam I would just be chill. Like everything was going to be OK. At first one pill was enough – **but then I started needing two pills to help me calm down.**

Even though I was taking lorazepam, I started waking up in the morning trembling. There were days I couldn't physically move because I was so frozen with anxiety. I kept trying different medications and different strategies but nothing seemed to work. I would cry for no reason. I took lorazepam every day. My prescription kept increasing. **Something inside me knew something wasn't right.**

I had taken lorazepam for eight years. I spoke up to my pharmacist. I said, **I don't want to do this anymore. Can you help me?**

It was liberating to stop. I didn't struggle too much. I worked closely with a pharmacist and was able to develop a tapering schedule that worked for me. He helped to coach me on listening to my body and going at my own pace. It took me exactly six months to taper. I didn't feel drugged up anymore. The lorazepam had been making things worse. **It was like a miracle when I started waking up not trembling.**

I still have anxiety about things. I still have my struggles. But stopping lorazepam was one of the best decisions of my life. **I was able to rid my life of something that was contributing to my problems.**

It's difficult, when you're on the drug, to think about what it would be like to quit. Your body depends on it. You have lots of reasons to keep using. You don't even want to contemplate quitting. But the drug was making my anxiety worse. **You can feel better without it.**

Carla's name has been changed to protect her identity.

CARLA'S TIPS FOR STOPPING BENZOS

Trust what you are feeling and experiencing. If you think that benzodiazepines are making the situation worse, they probably are. It isn't all in your head.

Find a pharmacist you trust who can discuss in depth the withdrawal symptoms and can help to map out a tapering schedule. Be prepared that at first you will feel worse and may have trouble sleeping.

My pharmacist recommended switching from lorazepam to clonazepam, because clonazepam would have less withdrawal. I don't think I would have had as much success if I hadn't switched first.

Go at your own pace. It's OK to take time to taper. It probably took a while to get up to your benzodiazepine dose, so it's OK for it to take a while to come down.

Find a support system or someone you can talk to and keep in touch with about your progress.

Find new ways to manage your anxiety. I use mindfulness practices. When I just stop to focus on one thing at a time – like literally, what's right in front of me, a moment or an object – I just immediately feel better rather than holding on so tightly to what I think will happen in the future. I bring myself back to what's in front of me.

Keep a calendar and diary. Make charts. They will help you see your progress and how far you've come.

It may seem hard or daunting to get off. But think about how good your mind, body, and spirit will feel after.

Once complete, treat yourself. Celebrate. You have done something amazing.

Choosing the Best Way

...to Treat Anxiety

Imagine...
you are canoeing
down a river.



Suddenly, you hit a rock.
Water starts to leak in.



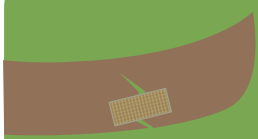
What do you do?
You have a few options.



You could ignore the leak
and continue paddling.



You could keep paddling,
and bail water out of the
canoe every once in a while.



Or you could head for shore
and fix the hole in your canoe.

Anxiety can be like a hole in a canoe.
Sometimes it can happen without warning.

Ignoring your anxiety is not a good plan. Just like water in a leaky canoe, it will keep rising until you eventually sink.

Using a benzodiazepine for anxiety is kind of like bailing the water out of your canoe. Sometimes this plan can work fairly well, especially if the leak is slow and you don't have to bail very often. But you may find yourself having to bail water more and more often as the leak gets bigger. You can feel like you're stuck – like you're not moving forward down the river anymore. Meanwhile, you might get side effects from your bailing – like soggy clothes or a sore back. And you might miss out on the beautiful riverside scenery because you're spending so much time taking care of the leaky canoe.

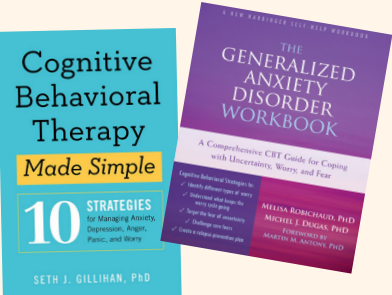
The problem with benzodiazepines is that in the long term, they don't fix the underlying causes of anxiety. You may become reliant on them to get through your day, while experiencing side effects like grogginess or 'brain fog'. This can keep you from living the life you want to live.

Luckily, there is a way to address anxiety & patch up the canoe. What helps anxiety the most is using several different strategies together. For more on this, turn the page and read on.

Patching Your Canoe

Getting to the root of your anxiety, or 'patching your canoe', takes time and effort. But it can make a difference, even in severe anxiety.

Learn how to manage anxiety from a book.



Take a free course online.

Positive Coping with Health Conditions
psychhealthandsafety.org/pcwhc

Saskatchewan's Online Therapy Unit
onlinetherapyuser.ca




Get some exercise, most days of the week. It:

- improves sleep
- gives a sense of accomplishment
- distracts from unhelpful thoughts
- releases endorphins (feel-good hormones)



Join a support group.

Most large cities have a local anxiety group.



See a counsellor or a therapist.

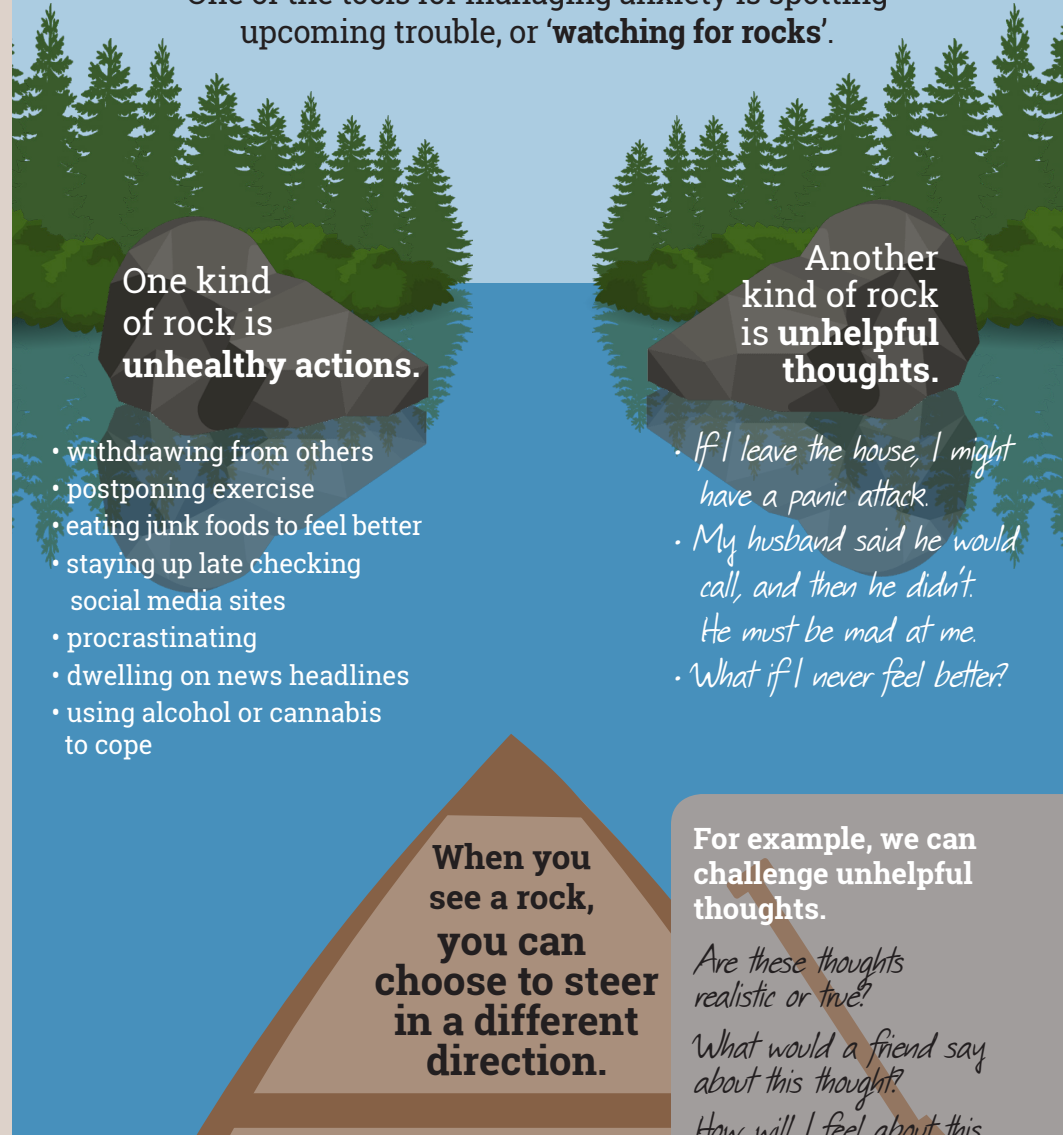
Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness helps us let go of stress by becoming more aware of the present moment.

Meditation is a type of mindfulness that involves choosing something to focus on. You may find the website mindful.org to be helpful.

Watching for Rocks

One of the tools for managing anxiety is spotting upcoming trouble, or 'watching for rocks'.



One kind of rock is unhealthy actions.

- withdrawing from others
- postponing exercise
- eating junk foods to feel better
- staying up late checking social media sites
- procrastinating
- dwelling on news headlines
- using alcohol or cannabis to cope

Another kind of rock is unhelpful thoughts.

- *If I leave the house, I might have a panic attack.*
- *My husband said he would call, and then he didn't. He must be mad at me.*
- *What if I never feel better?*

When you see a rock, you can choose to steer in a different direction.

For example, we can challenge unhelpful thoughts.

Are these thoughts realistic or true?

What would a friend say about this thought?

How will I feel about this situation in six months?

Would I say or think this about someone I love?

Of course, not every rock can be avoided. Some rocks might be hiding. **But if you have a plan you will be ready for the bumps.**

Are you using a BENZODIAZEPINE FOR ANXIETY?

Do you use a benzodiazepine every day?

Do you still have anxiety?

Are you worried you might be getting side effects?

This booklet was written to support people who may no longer want, or need, a benzodiazepine for anxiety.

LOOK INSIDE FOR

- facts and myths
- a true patient story
- how to nourish your mental health
- and more...

Funding for the creation and printing of this booklet was supported by Health Canada's *Substance Use and Addictions Program*.

This booklet represents the views of RxFiles Academic Detailing, and not necessarily the views of Health Canada.



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