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Ian Shulman began his professional career at the Anxiety Disorders Clinic of the former Clarke Institute of Psychiatry where he learned the basics of CBT. He completed his doctorate at the University of Calgary and has been in practice since 2000.

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## References:

1. Marciniak, M, Lage, MJ, et al. (2004). Medical and productivity costs of anxiety disorders: Case control study. *Depression and Anxiety*, 19, pp. 112-120.
2. Deacon, B & Abramowitz, JS. (2005). Patients' perceptions of pharmacological and cognitive-behavioral treatments for anxiety disorders. *Behavior Therapy*, 36, pp. 139-145.

## Understanding Anxiety

Unlike creatures that have hard shells or other means of protection, human beings are relatively soft and squishy. However, the human body has a number of inter-related systems that keep us safe from predators and other dangers. Together, these systems are called the “*fight-flight reaction*” and refer to a set of events that mobilize all of the body’s resources instantly, to deal with dangers. Sensing a threat, the brain sends messages to fight or flee through the central nervous system to the muscles and organs, which translate those messages into action. The fight-flight reaction directs our attention to the threat and creates an unpleasant, internal experience that compels us to take protective action. When the threat is over, the body returns to rest and activated systems return to normal functioning. In the interest of self-preservation, the body takes a ‘*shoot first, ask questions later*’ approach and reacts the same way regardless of whether threats are real *e.g., someone rushing at you in a dark alley* or imagined *e.g., a fleeting thought that some upcoming event might turn out badly*.

“*Anxiety*” occurs when our defense systems activate unnecessarily and the resulting bodily arousal of the fight-flight reaction itself becomes a frightening threat. Without an identifiable danger, anxiety sufferers mistakenly believe that the body’s sudden arousal signals a serious illness and tend to present to their doctor or, very often, to the emergency room for immediate care. Not surprisingly, people with clinical anxiety are more likely than those without to: use medical services and use them more often, have more emergency room visits and hospital stays, have higher outpatient and prescription drug costs, and are more likely to be absent from work.<sup>(1)</sup>

## The Treatment of Anxiety

Research clearly shows that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for anxiety and is as or more effective than medication. Treatment recipients frequently prefer it over medication, perceiving it to have more durable and longer-lasting effects.<sup>(2)</sup> At Shift

Cognitive Therapy we use CBT to teach anxiety sufferers to overcome the thoughts and behaviours that maintain anxiety.

Two persistent cognitive errors fuel the anxiety reaction. Anxiety sufferers:

1. overestimate the dangerousness of potential threats, and
2. underestimate their own ability to cope with those threats.

Together, these errors activate bodily defenses unnecessarily. Perceiving the resulting arousal as dangerous, anxiety sufferers then attempt to reduce their contact with any person, place, thought or thing that might re-activate those frightening feelings. Although intended to reduce anxious discomfort, that strategy of avoidance actually maintains symptoms by preventing the anxious person from learning that their erroneous beliefs are untrue.

CBT for anxiety often begins with education about the body’s defense systems and the power of thinking errors. By increasing a person’s understanding of the types of triggers that cause anxiety clients learn to experience anxious arousal from a more logical perspective and with less fear. They then begin the process of correcting thinking errors and building confidence by gradually facing their fears through individually tailored treatment plans. CBT treatments usually last between 10 and 20 one-hour sessions, often held at weekly intervals. Services are covered by extended health benefit plans and are tax deductible.

In addition to providing CBT treatment to adults, adolescents and children, Shift Cognitive Therapy also offers a lower-cost alternative of group CBT treatments, which allow for additional benefits like the chance to receive direct and unbiased feedback from others with the same struggles. Groups are also more affordable for those without insurance coverage.

**Enrollment for groups is currently open for adults with generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression.**