

# Anxiety: Occasionally Useful, Frequently Problematic

By Molly Ranns

It's still dark when your eyes open, several minutes before the alarm goes off. Already, a feeling of uneasiness rises in your stomach and dread fills your mind about the day ahead. As you think about the slew of meetings that begin in just a couple of hours and the highest-pressure meeting scheduled for later that afternoon, you can feel your heart race, your breathing escalate, and your palms become sweaty.

While this may sound like nothing more than a bad dream to some, it's a daily occurrence for many. Anxiety is defined by the American Psychological Association as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes," and it affects approximately 40 million people in the United States, making anxiety disorders the most common group of mental illnesses in the country.<sup>1</sup> When one takes into account that attorneys experience anxiety at higher rates than the general population — 23% of lawyers acknowledge the experience of mild or moderate anxiety<sup>2</sup> — let us move to end the stigma of mental health difficulties and the help-seeking behaviors needed to address them. The truth is anxiety can be both occasionally useful and frequently problematic.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of anxiety varies from person to person, but it's important to first understand that not all anxiety is bad.<sup>4</sup> Bio-

logically and historically, anxiety has boosted heart rate and breathing and quickly pumped oxygenated blood to one's muscles to prepare for a fight-or-flight response.<sup>5</sup> These bodily alarms enable action and cause a rush of adrenaline, a chemical messenger in the brain, to prepare humans to physically confront or flee potential threats.<sup>6</sup> In today's world, running from a predator is a much less pressing concern than the anxieties that relate to one's personal life, finances, physical health issues, and work-related stressors.<sup>7</sup> Anxiety can help one prepare for deadlines, meet billing pressures, address client demands, learn about ever-changing laws, and tackle the many other stressors that exist within the practice of law. High achievers, such as many of you reading this article, have had to accomplish tasks efficiently and effectively to achieve educational and professional success and, thus, it is assumed that anxiety has played a role, if albeit minor, in your lives. If experiencing some amount of anxiety is normal and, in some cases, helpful,<sup>8</sup> how do we know when it's problematic?

Unnecessary and persistent worry can lead to heightened levels of anxiety.<sup>9</sup> Many people worry about the future by catastrophizing, or assuming the worst will hap-

pen.<sup>10</sup> This can mean believing one is in a worse situation than they are and/or exaggerating the difficulties they face. Often, this is done to prepare for a worst-case scenario or even to feel relief when a worst-case scenario doesn't happen. The problem with this logic is that anxiety isn't preventable, like the flu.<sup>11</sup> Worrying doesn't change the outcome of the event and rarely, if ever, is the future exactly as we imagine it to be. When one is constantly worrying or on edge, emotional, mental, and physical health are impacted, resulting in a decreased ability to cope with stress.<sup>12</sup> If catastrophizing sounds familiar and you question whether your anxiety has surpassed the point of being helpful, the following questions may be useful:

- 1) *How intense is the anxiety?* If the unease is accompanied by physical indicators such as increased heart rate, feelings of panic, or social withdrawal, the intensity may be causing significant discomfort or intolerable symptoms.<sup>13</sup> Excessive worry, restlessness, or agitation could also be evidence of elevated intensity.
- 2) *How long does the anxiety last?* If you're worried about an upcoming

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trial, does the anxiety linger even after the trial is over? If the anxiety-inducing experience has passed but the anxiety has not, it may be more problematic than useful.

- 3) *Is the anxiety interfering with day-to-day life?* This is the big question. How much does the anxiety impact your functioning? Consider what life would be like without the anxiety — would it be significantly different? If work, relationships, hobbies, emotional health, or physical health is impacted, it may be time to seek professional help.<sup>14</sup>

Increasing one's awareness of anxiety is imperative, and anxiety is highly treatable.<sup>15</sup> Yet, only 36.9% of those suffering from it seek treatment.<sup>16</sup> Not only does research show that lawyers experience elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and stress, but it also indicates they are reluctant to seek help for these issues, fearing others will find out they need help or concerned about privacy and confidentiality.<sup>17</sup>

If your anxiety is mild and sporadic, there are ways to take control of the situation and alleviate symptoms. Question your thought patterns. Are you catastrophizing? Imagining the worst will happen, all-or-nothing thinking, and other negative thought patterns can distort the reality of the situation and increase unease.<sup>18</sup> Practice focused, deep breathing. Controlling one's breathing, like the 4-7-8 technique — breathing in for four seconds, holding the breath for seven seconds, and exhaling for eight seconds<sup>19</sup> — evens out breathing, slows the heart rate, and calms anxiety. Also, write down your thoughts. Getting anxious thoughts out of your head and on paper can make circumstances feel less daunting.<sup>20</sup>

As always, when self-soothing isn't enough, seek help! The State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program is an excellent resource available to you. Call the confidential helpline today. As we've learned, anxiety is more common than one might think and, while anxiety is occasionally useful, it is also frequently problematic. ■



*Molly Ranns is director of the State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program.*

## ENDNOTES

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## MONEY JUDGMENT INTEREST RATE

MCL 600.6013 governs how to calculate the interest on a money judgment in a Michigan state court. Interest is calculated at six-month intervals in January and July of each year, from when the complaint was filed, and is compounded annually.

For a complaint filed after December 31, 1986, the rate as of July 1, 2021 is 1.739 percent. This rate includes the statutory 1 percent.

But a different rule applies for a complaint filed after June 30, 2002 that is based on a written instrument with its own specified interest rate. The rate is the lesser of:

- (1) 13 percent a year, compounded annually; or
- (2) the specified rate, if it is fixed—or if it is variable, the variable rate when the complaint was filed if that rate was legal.

For past rates, see <http://courts.mi.gov/Administration/SCAO/Resources/Documents/other/interest.pdf>.

*As the application of MCL 600.6013 varies depending on the circumstances, you should review the statute carefully.*