

Choosing to Live with Severe Anxiety: A Paradox of Success and Medication Rejection

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Introduction

From a young age, anxiety has acted as a tool that has driven me to success in fear of failure. As someone who has lived with severe anxiety for most of my life, I have wondered why I, and others like me, have chosen to not take medication for our anxiety disorder. This paper explores the contradiction of anxiety as both a debilitating condition and a source of motivation, raising the question of why some people choose to live with severe anxiety rather than seek medication to get rid of it completely.

Understanding Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by persistent and excessive worry about everyday events and activities, accompanied by symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, and disrupted sleep—as well as headaches, stomachaches, and irritable bowel syndrome. Individuals with GAD experience these symptoms most likely every day for months or years consistently at a time, finding them difficult to control. Unlike specific phobias or panic disorders triggered by identifiable cues, GAD involves pervasive worries that can shift from one concern to another based on daily circumstances (GP, 2008; GP, 2009; Australian Nursing & Midwifery Journal, 2013)

GAD annually affects 6.8 million adults or 3.1% of the U.S. population. (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA, 2024). Additionally, in recent years the number of GAD diagnoses found in children has risen to larger percentages (Mazzone et al., 2007). GAD significantly impairs daily functioning, contributing to difficulties in work/academic performance, social interactions, and overall quality of life. Individuals with GAD frequently seek medical help for its physical symptoms like tension headaches and gastrointestinal distress, leading to increased healthcare utilization and sometimes unnecessary medical tests (Gale, 2008).

Treatment for GAD typically includes a combination of medications, psychotherapy, and lifestyle changes. Medications such as benzodiazepines, buspirone, and serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are commonly prescribed to ease symptoms. Psychotherapeutic approaches, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), help people manage anxiety by addressing distorted thinking patterns and improving coping skills. Complementary therapies like yoga and biofeedback—a mind-body technique you use to control some of your body's functions, such as your heart rate, breathing patterns, and muscle responses—may also be beneficial in reducing physiological stimulation associated with GAD (Gale, 2008).

The causes of GAD can stem from many different sources, involving a combination of genetic predisposition, environmental stressors, and neurobiological factors. Research indicates

a genetic component with GAD often runs in families. Environmental factors such as chronic stress, trauma, and childhood misfortunes can increase the likelihood of developing GAD. Additionally, personality traits like behavioral inhibition and negative affectivity contribute to the risk of developing the disorder (Gale, 2008).

Fear of Losing Anxiety's Motivational Effect

Some individuals with GAD resist treatment or medication out of fear that reducing their anxiety will diminish their motivation and drive for success. They perceive their anxiety as a necessary force that drives them to achieve goals and maintain productivity. This paper explores the complex interaction between anxiety and personal success, highlighting why some individuals may choose to manage their anxiety rather than seek treatment that could completely erase symptoms. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions that address both the symptoms of GAD and individuals' motivations and aspirations.

Perceived Benefits of Anxiety

Anxiety, often viewed negatively, can paradoxically serve as a motivator and enhancer of focus under certain circumstances. According to psychologist Dawn Potter, PsyD, from the Cleveland Clinic, anxiety activates our body's stress response, also known as the "fight-or-flight" response, which prepares us to react swiftly to perceived threats.

"A little anxiety can keep you alert and hypervigilant. In the right situations, that helps keep you safe," says Dr. Potter (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

This physiological reaction releases hormones that heighten alertness, sharpen focus, and increase physical readiness, all aimed at ensuring survival in dangerous situations.

Anecdotal Evidence and Beliefs

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some individuals attribute their success to anxiety, believing it drives them to achieve their goals. For instance, individuals facing impending deadlines often report that anxiety compels them to concentrate intensely and complete tasks efficiently. Meaning, little to no procrastination out of fear of failure to complete tasks in the amount of time given.

"If something causes some stress, you'll be more likely to want to do something about it because we don't like feeling stress," notes Dr. Potter (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

This heightened state of alertness, while uncomfortable, can push individuals to tackle challenges head-on and remain vigilant to potential obstacles.

Psychological Mechanisms Behind the Belief

The belief that anxiety contributes to success can be understood through various psychological mechanisms. The Yerkes-Dodson law illustrates that moderate levels of anxiety can optimize performance by enhancing motivation and focus.

"Sometimes, we need a bit of unpleasant motivation," suggests Dr. Potter (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

This law suggests that performance improves with physiological or mental arousal. At optimal levels, anxiety can prompt individuals to stay attentive and responsive, enabling problem-solving and adaptive behaviors.

Moreover, anxiety's role in motivation stems from its association with goal-directed behavior. When individuals perceive a threat or challenge, anxiety can act as a signal to prioritize tasks and hand out resources effectively.

"Anxiety exists to protect us from scary situations. But in our lives, we have to do things sometimes that might feel scary," reflects Dr. Potter (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

This prioritization mechanism ensures that important goals receive attention and effort, potentially enhancing productivity, achievements, and personal safety.

Evidence Supporting Anxiety's Role in Academic and Work Efficiency

Research indicates that in some contexts, anxiety can enhance academic and work performance. The study by Mazzone et al. (2007) published in BMC Public Health examines the prevalence and impact of anxiety symptoms on school performance among children and adolescents. It highlights that while high levels of anxiety are generally associated with poorer academic outcomes, there are degrees to this relationship that suggest anxiety can also enhance performance under specific conditions.

"Anxiety symptoms are extremely common in childhood and adolescence, and can negatively interfere with general well-being, social life, academic performance, and development of social skills," the study notes (Mazzone et al., 2007). However, it also points out that anxiety symptoms, particularly those not reaching clinical thresholds, may contribute positively to academic and work performance by enhancing focus and motivation.

Several studies have linked moderate anxiety with increased performance, highlighting that anxiety can serve as a motivational force. Mazzone et al. (2007) specifically found that while anxiety symptoms were more prevalent among students with poor academic grades, the association was complex. For instance, among high school students, 37% of those with anxiety scores above the range had insufficient grades, compared to 18% of those without such scores. This suggests that high levels of anxiety are detrimental when they exceed a certain threshold but may enhance performance at moderate levels.

"Anxiety interferes with school functioning only when an abnormal anxiety level is reached, whereas within the 'normal' range, being more anxious does not automatically imply

worse school functioning and indeed may to a certain extent be motivating and enhancing to academic performance,” the study concludes (Mazzone et al., 2007).

Expert opinions also support this view. According to Dr. Dawn Potter from the Cleveland Clinic, while anxiety can be debilitating, it also has the potential to heighten alertness and focus, especially in high-stakes situations. “A little anxiety can keep you alert and hypervigilant. In the right situations, that helps keep you safe,” she states (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). This perspective aligns with the findings of Mazzone et al. (2007), who observed that anxiety symptoms could sometimes enhance cognitive functions and memory, particularly when they are not overwhelming.

Additionally, the study highlights the increasing prevalence of anxiety symptoms with age, noting a significant rise from 2% in elementary school to 13% in high school. This increase is consistent with the onset of disorders like generalized anxiety and social phobia during adolescence. The study highlights, once again, that while anxiety can impair school performance when severe, moderate anxiety might be beneficial, enhancing motivation and cognitive sharpness (Mazzone et al., 2007).

The research by Mazzone et al. (2007) and insights from experts suggest that the relationship between anxiety and academic/work performance is not strictly negative. Many individuals with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) choose to forgo medication or therapy, believing their anxiety enhances their success and motivation. This view is supported by the study’s findings, which show that anxiety when within a manageable range, can contribute positively to academic and work efficiency. But let us remember that individuals with GAD all experience their anxiety a bit differently, some may experience a more severe form of anxiety that may not align with these findings, while others may view themselves as understood through these findings.

Counterarguments and Risks

While some individuals with severe anxiety believe their condition contributes to their success and choose to forgo medication, it is crucial to consider the negative impacts of untreated anxiety. Anxiety disorders are often alongside physical illnesses, meaning they occur simultaneously and can worsen each other. Untreated anxiety can significantly affect the course and outcome of physical diseases. For instance, a survey reported in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* revealed that 19.5% of patients in primary care practices had at least one anxiety disorder, yet only 41% received treatment (Mind, Mood & Memory, 2007). This lack of treatment can lead to worsened medical problems, increased disability, and a lower quality of life, countering the belief that anxiety alone is beneficial for productivity.

Long-term health consequences of untreated anxiety can be severe. Research has shown a significant link between anxiety and various physical ailments such as migraines, gastrointestinal diseases, respiratory diseases, thyroid diseases, and cardiac issues (Mind,

Mood & Memory, 2007; GP, 2008). Anxiety disorders have been associated with higher risks of sudden cardiac death and other severe conditions.

Moreover, untreated anxiety can lead to substance abuse, as individuals might turn to alcohol or sleep aids to manage their symptoms. These risks highlight the importance of considering treatment options. Psychotherapy and medications, such as SSRIs and SNRIs, have been proven effective in managing anxiety and improving overall health and functioning. So, while some individuals believe that their anxiety drives their success, the potential long-term health risks and overall benefits of treatment present a compelling argument for seeking professional help. You can only be so productive until you are left in a debilitating condition, no longer able to do what you used to be able to.

Balancing Anxiety and Treatment

For individuals who believe their anxiety enhances their success, managing the condition without eliminating its perceived benefits can be a fine balance. Instead of focusing solely on medication, there are various strategies to manage anxiety effectively. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a powerful tool that helps individuals reframe their thinking about anxiety, developing more effective coping mechanisms without weakening the drive that anxiety may provide. Techniques such as mindfulness, progressive muscle relaxation, and stress reduction exercises can help mitigate the negative physical symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate and muscle tension while preserving the heightened awareness and motivation that some individuals find beneficial, and the key to their success.

Combining different treatments can also help maintain high performance while reducing the negative impacts of anxiety. For example, incorporating regular exercise into one's routine can release tension and improve physical symptoms without needing medication. Aerobic workouts are particularly effective in alleviating anxiety symptoms and improving overall mood (Mind, Mood & Memory, 2007). Additionally, individuals can seek support from mental health professionals to address specific anxiety-related challenges and develop personalized strategies. This approach allows individuals to harness the positive aspects of their anxiety, such as increased focus and drive, while minimizing its more negative side effects on their health and daily functioning.

Ultimately, the goal is not to eradicate anxiety but to find a balance where individuals can continue to utilize its perceived benefits while reducing the potential for long-term harm. By focusing on holistic and multiple approaches to anxiety management, individuals can maintain their high performance and success, acknowledging that anxiety can be both a motivating force and a health risk that requires careful management.

Conclusion

Overall, we have looked into why some individuals with severe anxiety believe it enhances their success and choose not to take medication, highlighting a complex balance between perceived benefits and significant health risks. Many individuals attribute their anxiety to increased motivation and improved performance, believing that it drives their success. However, untreated anxiety can lead to long-term health consequences, including increased disability and poor quality of life. Despite these risks, the decision to avoid medication is deeply personal, and no one can force individuals to take it. Effective management strategies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and exercise can help decrease negative symptoms without diminishing the perceived positive effects of anxiety, allowing individuals to maintain their motivation and success—even if that drive does stem from the fear of failure that their anxiety instills in them.

Moreover, future research should explore the specific factors that contribute to the belief that anxiety enhances success and how these perceptions vary across different populations. Additionally, comparing the long-term outcomes of individuals managing anxiety through non-medication strategies versus those using medication can provide further insights. Practically, individuals must seek comprehensive evaluations to identify effective management strategies that emphasize preserving anxiety's perceived benefits. Ultimately, each person must weigh the trade-offs between maintaining their anxiety-driven motivation and the potential costs to their mental, physical, and emotional health. This reflection can help individuals, like myself, in making informed decisions about our well-being while striving to balance our life's successes and health.



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