

Why Anxiety Drugs are Addictive

by [Dr. Mercola](#) | March 04 2010

Valium-like drugs use the same potentially addictive "reward pathways" in the brain as heroin and cannabis, according to new research.

Researchers found that so-called benzodiazepine drugs, such as Ativan, Xanax and Valium, exert a calming effect by boosting action of a neurotransmitter called gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) in the same way as addictive drugs like opioids and cannabinoids.

This in turn activates the gratification hormone, dopamine, in the brain, showing that the same brain "reward pathways" are used by both types of drugs.

People with higher levels of dopamine in the brain tend to be more prone to addictive behavior.

Sources:

» [Reuters February 10, 2010](#)

Dr. Mercola's Comments:

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems in the US. According to the US [National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH), just over 18 percent, or about 40 million American adults aged 18 and older, have an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders include:

- [Panic disorder](#)
- [Obsessive-compulsive disorder](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder](#)
- [Generalized anxiety disorder](#)
- [Phobias](#)

Anxiety is an enormously crippling problem. Unfortunately, most people who suffer with it either do nothing, or resort to pharmaceutical drugs – many of which are ineffective, and capable of destroying your health and sanity further.

Likewise, most of the research is being done in order to develop newer drugs, rather than finding truly healthy solutions.

As most of you know, drugs are rarely ever the solution for treating the cause of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, which are frequently the result of bioenergetic malfunctioning due to either emotional, biological or environmental stress.

And, despite the popularity of drugs, research has shown that the two most successful conventional treatments of anxiety disorders are psychotherapy and behavioral therapy.

Behavioral therapy is defined as targeting the issue through breathing exercises and small increments of exposure to what is causing the person anxiety. Cognitive behavioral therapy on the other hand, is designed to help the person deal more effectively with situations that fill them with anxiety.

The Addictive Nature of Anxiety Drugs

Anxiety disorders are commonly treated with anti-anxiety drugs in conventional medicine. Commonly prescribed drugs include benzodiazepine drugs like Ativan, Xanax and Valium.

They exert a calming effect by boosting the action of a neurotransmitter called gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) in the same way as opioids (heroin) and cannabinoids (cannabis) do. This in turn activates the gratification hormone, dopamine, in your brain.

Since the identical brain "reward pathways" are used by both types of drugs, they can be equally addictive.

Interestingly, another recent [study](#) found that people with higher levels of dopamine in the brain tend to be more prone to addictive behavior, which may explain why some people fall into addiction more easily than others, whether the substance of choice is a prescription drug or an illicit drug.

Unfortunately, pharmaceutical drug abuse has become one of the greatest threats of modern society. In fact, prescription drugs are now used more frequently for the purpose of satisfying addiction than illegal drugs!

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) [data](#) show that from 2002 through 2006, rates of prescription narcotics abuse among individuals 18 and older was not only much higher to begin with but increased over the years, while rates of abuse for cocaine, crack, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, and MDMA either remained stable or declined.

The National Institutes of Health estimates that nearly 20 percent of people in the United States have used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons.

Other Side Effects of Anxiety Drugs

Even if you're not abusing your medication, anti-anxiety drugs like Xanax come with a slew of dangerous and potentially lethal side effects.

The web site www.worstpills.org lists [benzodiazepines](#) as "Do Not Use" drugs, as they are addictive, can cause hip fractures, and because there are safer related drugs available.

Common side effects of this class of drugs include:

- Unsteady gait, and falling
- Dizziness
- Increased risk of car accidents

- Drug induced or drug-worsened impairment of thinking
- Memory loss

Another important point to remember is that older adults have a much more difficult time eliminating benzodiazepines and similar drugs from their bloodstreams. Over time, these drugs can thus accumulate in your body, which will increase your risk of an accidental overdose.

In addition, older adults are generally more sensitive to the effects of many of these drugs than are younger adults, so their risk of having a [serious adverse drug effect](#) is significantly increased.

This can be a significant risk, considering the fact that some drugs, including [Xanax, have also been found to cause or worsen dementia](#).

The question is, why do so many people rely on drugs to treat their mental health issues, despite the fact that researchers have concluded, again and again, that most of these types of drugs simply don't work?

Antidepressants, for example, have repeatedly been proven to [work only slightly better than a placebo!](#)

Your Mental Health May Be Rooted in Infancy and Early Childhood

Quite a few studies suggest that [stressful events that occur during early infancy](#) and childhood can have a significant impact on both your [physical](#) and [mental/emotional](#) health later on in life.

Medication will merely serve as a Band-Aid to these “patterned” emotional challenges, and most people would greatly benefit from practicing stress reduction techniques and exercise rather than resorting to drugs as their first choice.

Drug-Free Treatment Options for Anxiety and Depression

I believe cardiovascular [exercise](#) is a marvelous physical therapy for anxiety, and others like [Dr. James Gordon](#), a world-renowned expert in using mind-body medicine to heal depression, anxiety and psychological trauma, uses exercise as an essential part of his treatment plan.

“What we’re finding in the research on physical exercise is, the physical exercise is at least as good as antidepressants for helping people who are depressed. And it’s even better for older people,” Dr. Gordon says.

“Physical exercise changes the level of serotonin in your brain. It increases your levels of “feel good” hormones, the endorphins. And also -- and these are amazing studies -- it can increase the number of cells in your brain, in the region of the brain, called the hippocampus.

... [This is] very important because sometimes in depression, there are fewer of those cells in the hippocampus, but you can actually change your brain with exercise. So it’s got to be part of everybody’s treatment, everybody’s plan.”

If you’re not sure how to use exercise like a drug, including the correct variety, intensity, and frequency, [this previous article will help you get started](#).

Learning to address your stress is imperative both for mental and physical health. Exercise is very helpful for this aspect. Other common stress reduction tools with a high success rate include [meditation](#) and yoga, for example.

Other tools that offer impressive results are the inexpensive and highly effective energy psychology techniques such as the [Emotional Freedom Technique/Meridian Tapping Technique](#) (EFT/MTT).

Consider Your Entire Lifestyle When Combating Anxiety

By using the above mentioned strategies, you can teach your body how to maintain an alert yet relaxed state, which will help strengthen your inherent coping mechanisms when faced with stressful situations that trigger your anxiety symptoms.

Last, but certainly not least, please remember that your mind and mood is significantly affected by your diet!

For [an inspiring testament](#) of how one man (who had suffered with a debilitating anxiety disorder for 11 years) managed to resolve his anxiety through dietary changes alone, when everything else had failed, please read this previous [article](#).

Related Links:

- » [Discover the Secrets of Relieving Anxiety Without Drugs](#)
- » [One Simple Solution Addresses 6 Different Types of Anxiety Disorder](#)
- » [An Effective Drug-Free Approach to Anxiety](#)

Reference website: <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2010/03/04/why-anxiety-drugs-are-addictive.aspx>