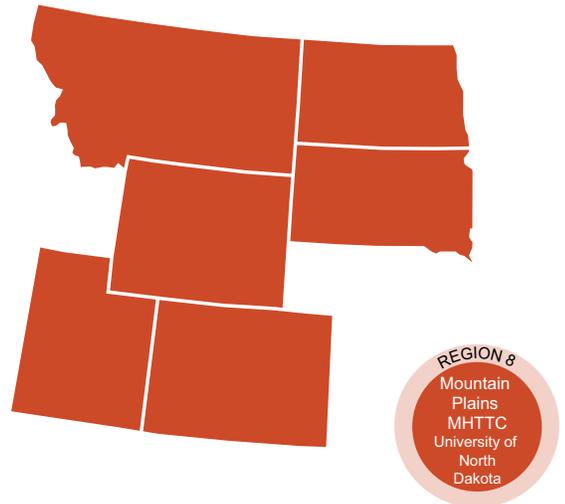




Understanding Anticipatory Anxiety

In response to the recent pandemic (COVID-19), the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC) is providing up-to-date mental health resources for addressing self-care and provider well-being. The Mountain Plains MHTTC^a serves a six-state region. Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration^b (SAMHSA), the Center is focused on providing free training, products, and technical assistance to individuals serving persons with mental health disorders.

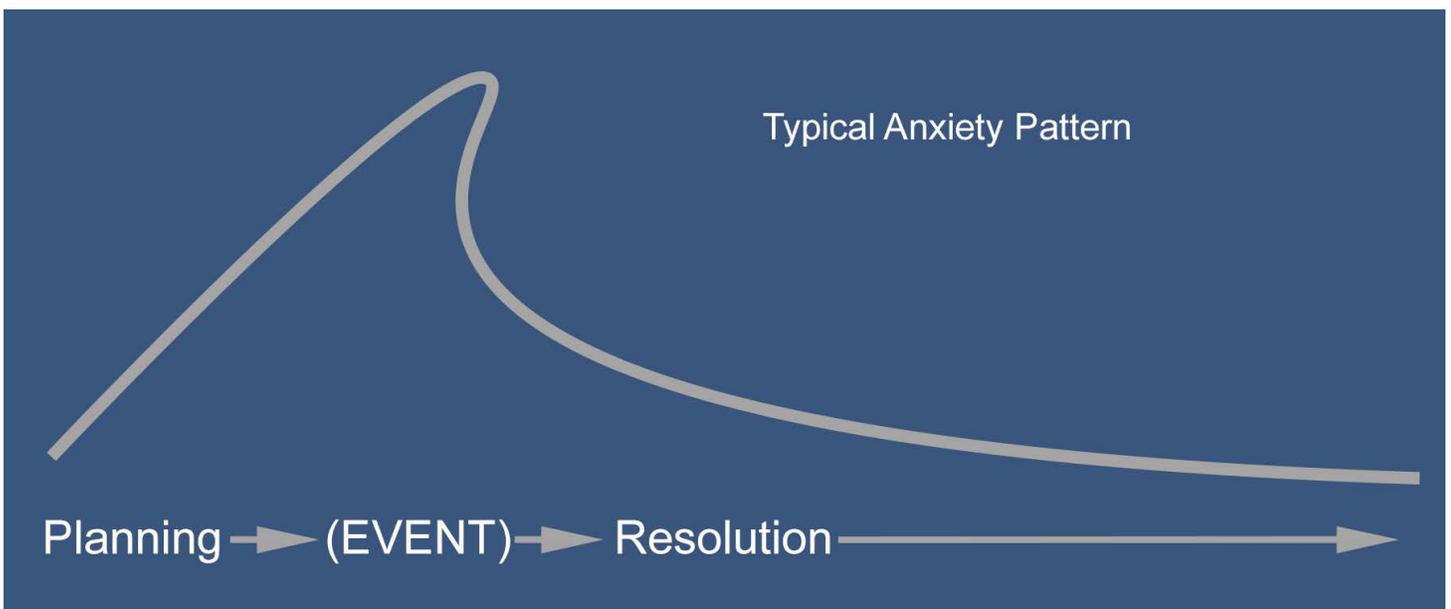


What Is Anticipatory Anxiety?

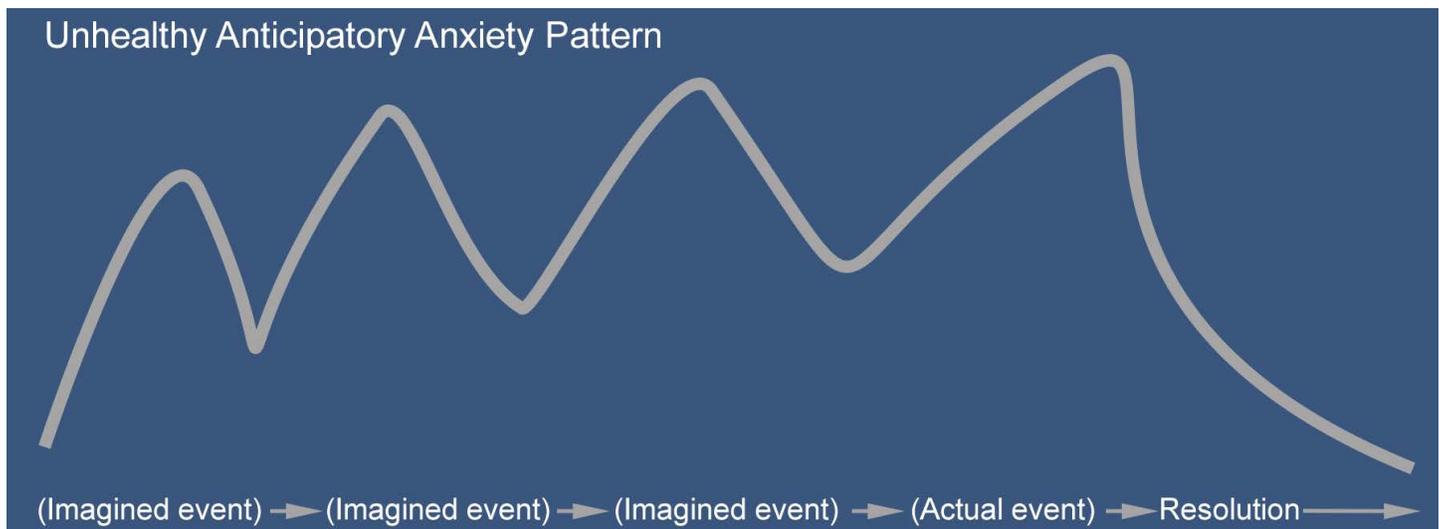
Anticipatory anxiety develops when the mind attempts to predict, process, and adapt to future events. It often manifests as fear and worry as the body expends energy anticipating potential periods of stress or crisis. Like all emotions, anticipatory anxiety has a great purpose. It helps us prepare for what may come. However, an overabundance of anxiety can be unhealthy.

To understand unhealthy anticipatory anxiety, one must understand a typical anxiety pattern for upcoming events. In most cases, an uptick in stress can be observed as planning for the approaching event. This is followed by a short-lived peak in anxiety as the event occurs and then moves quickly into the resolution phase. In this pattern, most time is spent in either the planning phase or the resolution phase of the cycle, both of which provide a sense of control over the situation.

Typical Anxiety Pattern



Unhealthy Anticipatory Anxiety Pattern



When Is It Unhealthy?

During an unhealthy anticipatory anxiety pattern, instead of the anxiety uptick driving the individual toward planning, it causes the individual to repeatedly imagine the worst possible scenarios.

In this pattern, the emotional brain does a poor job of distinguishing between a real and imagined event. Instead, the mind plays out several possible outcomes. While a positive visualization of an upcoming event can be advantageous, the mind often anticipates undesirable outcomes, causing distress and desperation for a quick resolution. When this happens, individuals often look for instantaneous relief. Sometimes, this is achieved in healthy ways, such as through distraction, relaxation, and planning. Other times, this pursuit of relief leads in unhealthy directions, such as using alcohol to “shut off” the brain, entering a state of denial that the event exists, and engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors to force the resolution phase early.

Anticipatory anxiety is one of the primary sources of self-sabotaging behavior. The global health pandemic provides a timely example of the urge to force a resolution. Individuals who are tired of taking precautions might wish they would contract COVID-19 to “get it over with.” This line of thinking can encourage risky behavior and force a potentially life-threatening resolution.

Resolving Anticipatory Anxiety

The following tips can help resolve anticipatory anxiety in healthy ways:

- Distract, but don't avoid. Use rewarding distractions to take your mind off of unproductive worry, and set aside a specific time to consider the situation and develop a plan.
- Use relaxation to “ride the wave.” One reason anticipatory anxiety can be severe is because the brain attempts to find relief by increasing anxiety until a decision is made. In essence, the brain causes more anxiety in effort to eventually relieve anxiety – akin to a fever breaking. Learn to ride the wave of anxiety by reminding yourself that it is a temporary state and will pass. At first, this may feel worse, but if the urge for instant relief can be avoided enough times, eventually the brain will learn that the best way to feel better is to decrease anxiety rather than increase it.
- Imagine the resolution not the peak. Anticipatory anxiety keeps individuals trapped in the worst part of the cycle – the imagined event. If you are imagining the worst-case scenario, instead, try to purposefully imagine resolving the scenario effectively. Draw upon existing strengths to help visualize a solution.
- Reach out for the right kind of support. Talking out anticipatory anxiety helps prevent dwelling on worst-case scenarios. Take a moment to think of people you can trust to be calm, rational, and supportive when you talk with them about anxiety. If you cannot think of someone who fits this description, consider reaching out to a professional who can help you learn healthy patterns of coping and ways to increase healthy social supports.

Seek Help

If you think you need to speak with someone about your concerns but do not know where to start, you can access the [Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#)^c provided by SAMHSA. The Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator is a confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the U.S. or U.S. territories for substance use/addiction and/or mental health problems.

Author

Sara Durbin, PsyD
Psychologist
North Dakota Department of
Corrections and Rehabilitation
Behavioral Health Department
sadurbin@nd.gov

Editor and Contributor

Per Ostmo, BA
Outreach Specialist
Mountain Plains MHTTC

Connect with Us

 mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/home

 @Mountain-Plains-MHTTC

 @MPMHTTC

 mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/subscribe

Cited URL's

- a. mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mountain-plains-mhttc/home
- b. samhsa.gov/
- c. findtreatment.samhsa.gov/



This publication was prepared for the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (TTC) Network under a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). All material appearing in this publication, except that taken directly from copyrighted sources, is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from SAMHSA or the authors. Citation of the source is appreciated. Do not reproduce or distribute this publication for a fee without specific, written authorization from the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center. For more information on obtaining copies of this publication, call 701-777-6367. At the time of this publication, Tom Coderre, served as SAMHSA Acting Assistant Secretary. The opinions expressed herein are the views of Dr. Shawonda Schroeder, PhD, and Professor Thomasine Heitkamp, LCSW, and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this document is intended or should be inferred.