

Depression and Anxiety—Double Trouble

At first glance, depression and anxiety seem to be quite distinct conditions. We think of depressed people as sad and lethargic and we think of anxious people as agitated and nervous. However, many people with depression also experience anxiety, which can include excessive worrying, heart palpitations, sweating and stomach ills. These individuals are coping with two problems at the same time. When this occurs, symptoms can be more severe, and the road to recovery can be even more difficult than when depression or anxiety occurs alone.

How often do anxiety and depression occur at the same time?

The emerging scientific evidence indicates that most people have symptoms of depression *and* anxiety at the same time. In a large national study, researchers found that 58 percent of respondents with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) also had major depression, while almost 18 percent of respondents with major depression also had generalized anxiety disorder.

The mood spectrum

So, how do you tell if you are struggling with depression and anxiety or just having a bad day? Generally, depression and anxiety “cover” for each other. For example, if you often feel anxious about yours or someone else’s health, you might also feel depressed thinking about loss or death. Or perhaps you are feeling sad, lack energy or are irritable and your body is trying to jump-start activity by creating a “fight or flight” response creating anxiety.

How do I know if I have anxiety, depression or both?

The symptoms of depression include a loss of interest in daily activities or feelings of sadness or hopelessness and at least five of the following symptoms:

- a change in eating patterns that causes either weight gain or weight loss
- sleeping too much or not enough
- feeling restless and unable to sit still, or feeling that moving takes a great effort
- feeling tired all the time
- feeling unworthy or guilty without an obvious reason
- having problems concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- thinking often about death or suicide

People with generalized anxiety disorder experience excessive worry that lasts for at least six months. In addition, people with GAD have at least three of the following symptoms:

- muscle tension
- fatigue
- restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
- difficulty concentrating

- irritability
- sleep disturbance

Treatment

Because the depression and anxiety occurring together usually results in more serious and debilitating symptoms such as increased rates of suicide, greater social and occupational impairment, and poorer response to treatment, new and more aggressive treatment approaches are emerging.

Historically, anxiety disorders have been treated with benzodiazepine medicines such as Valium® and Xanax®. These medications provide effective short-term relief from acute symptoms but can also cause undesirable side effects such as sedation and dependence.

Recently, antidepressants are now replacing benzodiazepines as the first line of treatment for many anxiety disorders. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Prozac® and Paxil®, as well as selective serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) such as Effexor®, are gaining favor among mental health professionals because they are effective for both anxiety and depression, are nonaddictive, are easily tolerated and have impressive safety profiles. The fact that these medications are effective for both depression and anxiety suggest that the biological mechanisms for both disorders are very similar.

If you think you may have depression or anxiety, get professional help immediately. Calling your employee assistance program (EAP) is a good place to start.

Sources:

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