

Anxiety On The Rise During Pandemic

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there have been increased reports of individuals experiencing anxiety. According to the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Census Bureau, one third (33%) of Americans reported recent symptoms of anxiety compared to just 11% overall at the same time last year. Within the age group 18-29 years, 46% reported dealing with financial uncertainty and missed opportunities as part of the reporting. The percentages of affected individuals decreased with the following increased age ranges over successive age groups (30-39, 40-49, 50-59 etc.).

Among racial groups Hispanics (46%) and Blacks (39%) had the highest representation affected which also corresponds to a noted exacerbation of underlying problems including mental health strain in communities of color who have been hardest hit and most affected by the pandemic.

In May there were reports that prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications (anxiolytics) had increased 38% over the same time period last year.

As the impact and effects of the pandemic approaches six months in duration in the United States here are some specific symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):

Excessive anxiety/worry (apprehensive expectation) occurring more often than not (total number of days) for a minimum of 6 months, about a number of events or activities, (such as work or school performance).

Difficulties trying to manage, contain or control the worry.

The anxiety/worry are connected to three (or more) of the following symptoms (with at least some symptoms present for more days than not for the past 6 months) children do not need to meet as many criteria—only 1 is needed).

- Restlessness or feeling pent up energy or being on edge
- Low energy periods, easily fatigued
- Difficulty with focusing or concentrating; noticeable forgetfulness
- Irritability
- Muscle tension or increased aches
- Sleep disturbances, interruptions, insomnia, waking frequently, restlessness, unsatisfying sleep)

In the United States alone it is estimated that nearly 7 million people suffer from generalized anxiety disorder. With women being more likely to be affected than men. Anxiety usually occurs first during adolescence with an escalation of symptoms over time. Below are common symptoms in women:

- Unrealistic perception of problems.
- Worrying about simple, everyday tasks,
- Muscle tension, aches and body pains
- Tension an or fatigue, stomach pains and nausea

- Inability to relax, difficulty concentrating
- Frequent urges to go to the bathroom
- Irritability and mood swings, Depression symptoms
- Difficulty swallowing, Sweating
- Restlessness and being “on edge” or easily startled
- lightheadedness or short of breath
- Frequent headaches, trembling or twitching
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep

According to Margarita Tartakovsky MS and John M. Grohol PsyD, the first-line treatment and gold standard for treating generalized anxiety disorder is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT for GAD is a multimodal treatment, meaning that it includes various components that target the different symptoms of the illness: physical, cognitive, and behavioral. <https://psychcentral.com/author/science-editor/>

For moderate GAD, CBT and or (medication) a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) or serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRI) are recommended. For severe GAD, the most effective option is a combination of CBT and medication.

For most people who are newly diagnosed with GAD, UpToDate.com also recommends either an SSRI or SNRI, CBT, or both, because these are the best-studied treatments for effectively treating GAD.

Co-occurring conditions also are common with GAD—and will guide the specifics of your treatment. For instance, some individuals who have GAD and severe depression might not be able to fully participate in CBT. So they would start taking an SSRI and may or may not start CBT then, as well.

Both the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Canadian treatment guidelines for anxiety disorders recommend psychological interventions (often CBT) as the first-line treatment, and an SSRI or SNRI for individuals who haven’t benefited from therapy (along with other medications as second-line options).

In other cases, major anxiety is treated with sedative hypnotic drugs such as the benzodiazepines class: Xanax, Valium, Klonopin and Ativan are some of the medications utilized. However patients taking prescribed narcotic drugs are at risk of developing physical dependence which makes alternative approaches more desirable.

Some natural tips for alleviating pandemic related anxiety include staying connected, focusing on things you can control or that are within your sphere of influence. Paying increased attention to your 5 senses. Viewing the situation as a challenge rather than an ominous threat. What can I do today to address the challenge? (Beth Kurland PhD)

Lastly, remember the inherent power of the human breathing cycle and its capacity to reduce stress and relieve tension in the body almost instantaneously.

For additional assistance, referrals or to speak with an Employee Assistance Professional call:

LECSA EAP: 631-851-1295