

Facts about Anxiety and Older Adults

Everyone feels anxious during their lifetime. Anxiety could build when bills are unpaid, when one's health is poor, when something in life is about to change. But, when extreme worry and tension continue for at least six months and the degree of worry is groundless, an older adult may be experiencing Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Approximately 10% of older adults experience anxiety. Many times depression and anxiety go hand in hand. An older adult with anxiety may have physical symptoms like fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headaches or irritability that may make it difficult for doctors to recognize the anxiety.

Anxiety appears differently in older adults than in younger people. It can be triggered by stresses and vulnerabilities unique to aging. Chronic physical problems, decreased reasoning abilities and emotional losses contribute to anxiety for older adults. The agitation seen in people with dementia is difficult to tell from anxiety. Memory problems can be a sign of dementia and anxiety alike.

An older adult with anxiety expects the worst to happen even when there is no sign of trouble. They are unable to relax and unable to sleep. Anxiety decreases the quality of life by interfering with social behavior. Someone with anxiety may become housebound because of the anxiety. Many older adults are already isolated due to physical problems. Anxiety just makes it worse.

What is the difference between "normal" anxiety and Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

- ▶ With Generalized Anxiety Disorder, the symptoms are excessive. The high degree of worry, the length of time symptoms continue and how often the worry occurs outweighs the chance that something bad will happen.
- ▶ With Generalized Anxiety Disorder, worry and tension doesn't stop for at least six months.
- ▶ With Generalized Anxiety Disorder, the symptoms are out of control.



Recognizing Anxiety

- ▶ Has there been intense worrying about several things at once?
If yes, the person may be experiencing anxiety.
- ▶ Is something going on in life that is causing this intense worry?
If no, the person may be experiencing anxiety.
- ▶ Is it hard to stop the worrying?
If yes, the person may be experiencing anxiety.
- ▶ What was happening when physical symptoms started?
If physical symptoms began when the person was anxious, the physical symptoms may be linked to the anxiety.
- ▶ What thoughts occurred when physical symptoms began?
If anxious thoughts were happening when the physical symptoms began, the thoughts may be triggering the physical symptoms.
- ▶ What thoughts prevent sleep?
If anxious thoughts or worry prevent sleep, the person may be experiencing anxiety.

Treatment

Anxiety among older adults is best treated with a combination of medications and learned techniques. Anti-depressants instead of anti-anxiety medications are preferred for older adults. Relaxation training teaches older adults how to relax when symptoms begin. Teaching older adults to replace anxious thoughts with more realistic thoughts has also been successful. Controlled exposure to the feared object or situation teaches the older adult that their fear is groundless.

For services in your area, contact: