

## **THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY**

Depression and anxiety are like flip sides of the same coin. In fact, in some cases, chronic depression masks an underlying anxiety disorder. In other cases, anxiety is a symptom of depression. It is also not uncommon for someone in the beginning stages of treatment for depression to suddenly experience an increase in anxiety symptoms, such as nervousness, increased heart rate, upset stomach, dry mouth or racing thoughts.

### **Is it depression or anxiety?**

While anxiety and depression do not always go together, many people experience symptoms of both anxiety and depression symptoms at different times. Some of the symptoms overlap, too, making it difficult to determine whether a person is suffering from depression or a full-blown anxiety disorder.

Worry and rumination — reviewing a problem or experience in one's head repeatedly without relief or resolution — are symptoms of both anxiety and depression. Feelings of restlessness and fatigue are common to both conditions as well.

Certain symptoms suggest a person probably has an anxiety disorder instead of depression. These include a constant and overwhelming feeling of fear, obsessive thoughts, panic, frequent heart palpitations, cold or sweaty hands and gastrointestinal problems. Symptoms that are more characteristic of depression include sadness, feelings of hopelessness and despair, lack of interest in activities that were once enjoyable and feelings of worthlessness.

### **Depression can cause anxiety**

The consequences of depressed behavior can also trigger episodes of anxiety. For example, a person with depression may be unable to work effectively or make new friends, causing anxiety about finances or one's social situation. A person who is trying to get through school while depressed may worry excessively about not being able to graduate.

### **Attacking anxiety and depression**

Since the two conditions are so closely related, anxiety and depression treatment is similar in many ways to treating either condition alone. For those who chose to try prescription medications, many drugs are used for both anxiety and depression, primarily the class of medicines known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs. These medications, which include Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro and others, work by keeping up the levels of an important mood-enhancing chemical in the brain known as serotonin. The more serotonin you have, the less depressed or anxious you'll feel.

Not all medications for depression are appropriate for someone who also has anxiety or for someone whose symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder and not depression. In fact, the use of some antidepressants in a person with an anxiety disorder can raise serotonin levels too high, a condition known as serotonin syndrome.

Both depression and anxiety disable the brain's limbic system, the system responsible for mood. The production of neurotransmitters — chemicals like serotonin and others — produces feelings of happiness, contentment and joy. The inability to produce these chemicals leads to feelings of sadness, emptiness and anxiety.

While drugs can repair the brain's ability to produce or maintain neurotransmitters, you do not necessarily need prescription drugs to regulate your body's serotonin levels. There are other ways to do the same thing.

### **Natural Ways to Regulate Emotions**

Exercise, sunlight and good nutrition are all involved in the processes that produce serotonin. So staying active, spending time outdoors and eating well will help regulate the mood chemicals in your brain. You can also raise serotonin levels by changing the way you think, which is the goal of psychotherapy.

There are several mind-body approaches to dealing with anxiety and depression as well, and these approaches are especially useful for people with anxiety. Practices like tai chi, yoga, and meditation all focus on controlling emotions by controlling the body and mind. The goal is to still the mind and calm the body, preventing extremes of emotion.

Another way to deal with depression and anxiety is through hypnotherapy or guided meditation. In both cases, you are guided to change the thoughts and thought patterns that may cause symptoms of anxiety or depression.

Some people find herbal remedies helpful in treating minor depression and anxiety. If your anxiety is closely related to depression, there are herbs that may be useful in boosting your mood. Examples include St. John's Wort, Valerian and Kava Kava. The mineral magnesium, which helps to promote relaxation, is also useful for many depression and anxiety sufferers.

### **There's hope**

As you can see, there are many ways to treat both anxiety and depression. The first step is to recognize the symptoms and know that you're not alone.