

Anxiety & Chronic Illness in the Aging

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Generalized anxiety may be frequently encountered in older adults who suffer from chronic illness. Due to lack of research, physicians may consider the symptoms as being part of the normal aging process and decide that no treatment is necessary, which may have a serious impact on the individual's quality of life. Anxiety disorders can often overlap at the same time as depression, heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, and other chronic medical conditions, making it even more difficult to evaluate and treat. Problems with cognition and thinking and changes in life circumstances can also complicate matters.



Experiencing stressful life events, being physically limited in daily activities, having multiple chronic medical conditions, and having had difficult childhood experiences can all increase a person's risk for developing an anxiety disorder later in life. For older adults, the development of a disabling illness or deteriorating health, loss of a loved one, retirement, moving from a family home, decreased financial resources, or other stressful events may bring about an onset of anxiety. It is normal for seniors to worry about such life-changing events, but those with a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorders worry excessively about routine activities for six months or more.

At times, the worrying alone that is associated with symptoms of a medical illness can eventually lead to an anxiety disorder. Side effects of medications and certain disabilities can also exacerbate anxiety symptoms. If untreated, anxiety conditions can also lead to chronic depression which can cause additional pain and suffering. Symptoms to be aware of include: fear, nervousness, overbearing dread, shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, chest pain, muscle tightness, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping.

Assessing an older adult's concerns during an initial assessment or evaluation is recommended in order to distinguish between worry and anxiety disorders. Interventions such as supportive counseling, various psychological interventions, and sometimes psychiatric medications can all be effective treatments for people with late-life anxiety and depression.

Here are some tips that may be helpful for older adults with anxiety and chronic health symptoms:

- Get as much information about treatment options as possible. Take an active role and discuss benefits, risks, and any side effects to help determine course of action.
- Make sure your health care provider understands your priorities of care.

- Let your health care provider know if a treatment doesn't seem to be working, or is too complicated to manage.
- Involve family members and/or caregivers in the treatment plan.

Recognizing anxiety in older adults can be a challenge for families, as well as health care providers. Afflicted individuals may not communicate directly about their feelings, worries, or physical symptoms because of fear of the stigma of mental illness. It is important to recognize behavior patterns and activity levels in the elderly which might be a sign of an anxiety disorder in order to advocate for appropriate care for a loved one and to promote a better quality of life for those afflicted.

With advances in treatment, including biofeedback, nutrition, physical activity, appropriate medication, and stress reduction techniques, there is hope that older adults will be able to manage their anxiety level, in order to help cope with their chronic illnesses.

Living Well Senior Solutions (LWSS) is a service of Episcopal Retirement Homes providing expert assistance with care management for older adults and their caregivers. For more information, visit livingwellseniorsolutions.com or call Peggy Slade-Sowers at (513) 561-0222.