

DOES SOMETHING FEEL WRONG?

In times like these, you'd be crazy not to experience stress. But if stress turns into ongoing anxiety or depression, proper treatment can get your life back on track.

When anxiety attacks: Women are more than twice as likely as men to experience anxiety disorders. "This is mostly due to hormonal differences—any time women go through a hormonal transition such as puberty, pregnancy, perimenopause or menopause, they're more susceptible to anxiety and depression," says Tracy Scheller, M.D., medical director of The Graf Center for Integrative Medicine at Englewood Health. But either sex can suffer from this condition. Recent or chronic exposure to stressful situations, including personal and family illnesses, can also induce anxiety that may be difficult to manage. "Other causes include trauma, finances, not sleeping or eating well and not being in a routine," adds Dr. Scheller. "People got off their routines during the pandemic, and that's become another source of stress and anxiety because we don't have control over what's happening."

Panic vs. generalized anxiety: One of the most prevalent anxiety-related diagnoses is generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD, which is often accompanied by depression. While panic attacks come and go, a person with GAD always has anxiety, which can center on everyday things from health to work. "Generalized anxiety disorder involves persistent and excessive worry that interferes with daily activities," says Gabriel Kaplan, M.D., chief medical officer of RWJBH Behavioral Health and Addictions Service Line, based in Springfield. "This may be accompanied by physical symptoms, such as restlessness, feeling on edge or easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension or sleeping problems."

Insight into depression: Like anxiety, depression is often triggered by the stress of filling multiple roles—as well as financial stressors, trauma or a difficult experience such as a job loss. "Symptoms of depression develop when there is a combination of genetic vulnerability and stressors," says Dr. Kaplan. "If someone has very little genetic vulnerability, it takes a large amount of stress to bring on depression, while a person with high genetic vulnerability may become ill after

suffering normal life events." He continues: "it is theorized that this combination of etiological [causal] factors disrupts the proper functioning of certain chemicals in the brain known as neurotransmitters, which leads to producing specific mood changes."

To diagnose depression, trained mental health experts look for symptoms, including an increase or decrease in appetite and/or sleep, along with a feeling of hopelessness. "A mental health professional will conduct an interview with the patient to determine if these cardinal symptoms of depression are present, obtain a personal and family history of the patient and rule out medical illness that could mimic depression," says Dr. Kaplan.

Talk therapy works: There are many types of therapy that can treat depression and/or anxiety; one is known as cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT. "The main principle of CBT is that our psychological problems are an unhealthy way of thinking or are learned patterns of unhealthy behavior," says Dr. Scheller. "Therapists help their patients seek out better ways of coping [with these thoughts]."

How to get help: As soon as you feel depression or anxiety is interfering with your normal functioning, it's time to seek out a professional. "A consult will rule out pathology but most importantly, in the presence of an illness, an early intervention carries better prognosis than waiting for problems to become very acute," says Dr. Kaplan. RWJBH, for example, provides evaluation and treatment for depression and anxiety in a variety of settings across the state, and has a call center which provides more information and resources.

Another resource is The Graf Center. There you'll learn more about your overall lifestyle and how it effects your mood, as well as about more holistic approaches to depression and anxiety. "We offer acupuncture, which has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, meditation classes, massage therapy, reiki, yoga, nutritional counseling and more," says Dr. Scheller. "Having a consultation really helps people put their health at the forefront and makes them realize that a few changed habits could make a huge difference."

DON'T FORGET TO TAKE CARE OF YOU

Women are notorious for making sure everyone else's needs are met before pausing to care for themselves. But of course they're best able to be present for those they love if they attend to their own needs too. Whatever your sex, showing yourself a little love through steps like these can help stave off both anxiety and depression:

- **Jot it down.** "Journaling is a technique to rid the body of any stored emotional energy," says Dr. Scheller.
- **Exercise regularly.** You should aim for about two and a half hours of moderate-intensity exercise per week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Exercise releases endorphins, the body's natural "feel-good" chemicals, which can reduce anxiety and depression.
- **Drink enough water.** Six to eight glasses of H₂O a day is a great starting point, but how much you drink ultimately depends on your level of activity. One tip from Dr. Scheller: "Looking at the color of your urine tells you if you're hydrated or not—it should be a pale color, not bright yellow."
- **Get enough sleep.** Sleeping at least seven to eight hours per night "has been proven by elegant research to be very helpful to keeping ourselves mentally and physically healthy," says Dr. Kaplan.