Epilepsy, Depression, Anxiety and services available to adults living with epilepsy
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Living with a chronic medical condition, such as epilepsy, can be difficult for people as well as their family members. Seizures can affect a person’s ability to work, drive, and perform other activities independently. In addition, studies have shown that many people with epilepsy experience symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. In fact, rates of depression in people with epilepsy can range anywhere from 11 to 60% and rates of anxiety can range from 10 to 32%.

Symptoms of depression and anxiety may be related to a number of lifestyle factors including difficulty adjusting to seizures, frustration with the limitations imposed by seizures, increase in stressful life events, and/or financial stress.

However, it is important to realize that symptoms of depression and anxiety can also be related to the seizures themselves. People with epilepsy may be more likely than other people to experience emotional changes. In some people, changes in mood may occur before, during, or after a seizure. In others, mood changes are not related to the timing of a seizure, but relate to where the seizure is coming from in the brain. A seizure that comes from an emotional center in the brain may be more likely to produce a change in mood.

How often seizures occur also plays a role in depression and anxiety. People who have seizures frequently may be more likely to feel depressed than people who have well-controlled seizures. In some instances, the side effects of treatment, such as use of antiepileptic drugs, may affect mood. If this happens, a change of treatment may help.

Here at the Cleveland Clinic Epilepsy Center, we recognize the high prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms in our patients and are actively working to address these issues with a team approach to treatment. In addition to your epileptologist, there are nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, technologists, social workers, neuropsychologists, psychiatrists, and many support staff that work together with you and your family to manage your epilepsy and ALL of the related symptoms. Because of the broad expertise of the team, we will work with you to identify any potential mood and/or anxiety symptoms that you are having and assist you with needed treatment and services. Because of the high prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms associated with epilepsy, a psychiatric assessment is part of every patient’s standard pre-surgical evaluations. Most patients will also meet with a social worker to help assist in identifying community resources that may be beneficial.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Irritability
- Loss of interest and pleasure in activities you once enjoyed
- Significant weight loss or weight gain
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Fatigue
- Loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Indecisiveness or difficulty concentrating and/or
- Recurrent thoughts of death

If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, it is important to notify your doctor so that he or she can assist you in exploring appropriate treatment options. If you have thoughts of suicide, it is important that you contact your doctor immediately or seek treatment at your nearest hospital emergency department.

Symptoms of **anxiety** can include:
- Excessive worry occurring more days than not
- Difficulty controlling your worry
- Feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating or your mind going blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension and/or
- Sleep disturbances, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep

Some people find that they may also experience what some would call **panic attacks**. These may be characterized by:
- Heart palpitations or accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
- Feeling of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy
- Unsteady
- Lightheaded or faint
- Feeling detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations and/or
- Chills or hot flushes.

Panic attacks can occur in public or at home and generally develop abruptly and usually last about 10 minutes. However, these symptoms may be related to seizures in some cases, rather than a primary anxiety disorder.
If you feel at anytime that you may have symptoms of depression, anxiety, or panic attacks, we encourage you to discuss this with your doctor, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, and/or social worker. Any one of these professionals can assist you with getting the needed attention and treatment of your symptoms.

Living with Epilepsy can be challenging enough, let us work with you regarding any other symptoms you may be experiencing.

Here is a list of the Epilepsy Behavioral Health Team. Feel free to contact us if you have any concerns or questions.

- George Tesar, MD – Psychiatrist
- Teresa Fitch, LISW – Social Worker
- Robyn Busch, PhD – Neuropsychologist
- Jessica Chapin, PhD - Neuropsychologist