



## Anxiety and Substance Abuse

More people in the U.S. suffer from anxiety disorders than any other type of mental illness. According to a recent American Psychiatric Association (APA) poll, 37% of adults say they are currently experiencing anxiety-related mental health problems.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports that people with anxiety are twice as likely to suffer from substance abuse disorders as the general population.

Too often, those with anxiety problems attempt to self-medicate which only intensifies their anxiety. Alcohol and drug use worsens the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety. At first, the use of drugs and alcohol might seem to relieve tension, but this effect is short-lived. This brief feeling of relaxation leads to the need to use drugs and alcohol more often in order to function normally. The resulting cycle of substance abuse can develop into a substance use disorder: alcoholism or drug addiction.

## Anxiety Disorder Indicators

What are some of the signs and symptoms exhibited by an individual suffering from anxiety?

There are many forms of anxiety such as PTSD, Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and many specific phobias. But all of these have some signs and symptoms in common. Irrational fear, intrusive fear that occurs most days, repeated failed attempts to overcome fear, problems in relationships due to unwarranted fear, and

the use of alcohol or drugs to try and manage anxiety are some examples of warning signs.

It is important for people who are experiencing disabling fear on most days of the week for six months or more to seek professional help.

## What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

Many people experience occasional anxiety as a normal part of everyday life. But individuals with anxiety disorders suffer from intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear.

Incapacitating anxiety can be caused by many factors. Long-term depression can lead to anxiety disorders, along with a family history of anxiety, a history of trauma, exposure to violence, overexposure to stress, and other mental health issues. Loss of sleep for long periods of time can lead to high levels of anxiety as can medical illnesses such as thyroid problems and respiratory disorders.

## When to Seek Help

When feelings of anxiety and fear interfere with daily life and are out of proportion to the actual danger, it may be time to seek professional help. Individuals should definitely see a doctor if worrying too much is interfering with work and personal relationships.

If feelings of anxiety have led to trouble with alcohol or drug use and/or other mental health issues, it will be necessary to see a professional for dual diagnosis treatment options. Getting help is also extremely important if there are feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts or behavior.

***The following suicide prevention information, while provided by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, will also be helpful to those in states other than Georgia. Online resources listed are available to users nationwide.***

**“It is not good for people to be alone.”**

Did you know that suicide rates have been lower on Super Bowl Sundays than other Sundays?<sup>1</sup>

**Isolation** is a big risk factor for suicide. Its opposite, **connectedness**, is a protective factor. It is important for our mental wellness to be connected to other people, to family, to community, and to social institutions.

A recent research study looked at patterns in rural counties in America that had increased suicide rates. Two key issues were “high social fragmentation” (which included the number of single-person households, unmarried residents, and residents moving frequently) and “low social capital” (few opportunities to engage with organizations and community programs). No surprise—the study found “that greater opportunities for social engagement and connection...are associated with lower suicide rates.”<sup>2</sup>

Certain middle-aged and older men are at higher risk for suicide than other groups. Why? Psychologist Thomas Joiner suggests one possible reason: “...it is the tendency of this group in particular not to replenish their social connectedness as they age. U.S. men in general, and white men in particular, seem to form some close friendships in childhood and early to late adolescence, but the forming of new and deep friendships in adulthood is relatively rare.”<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Joiner also argues that two of the main reasons why people start to think about suicide are not feeling a sense of belonging, as well as feeling like a burden to others.

So what about you? Or your neighbor, coworker, friend, relative, or loved one? If you feel isolated, or you notice others who are isolated—reach out! Invite someone. Get involved. Whether it be church, a bowling league, a fantasy football league, connecting to your local VFW post, or just some neighbors having a cookout—making connections can save a life.

<sup>1</sup>Joiner, Thomas & Hollar, Daniel & Orden, Kimberly. (2006). On Buckeyes, Gators, Super Bowl Sunday, and the Miracle on Ice: “Pulling Together” is Associated With Lower Suicide Rates. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology—J SOC CLIN PSYCHOL.* 25. 179 -195. 10.1521/jscp.2006.25.2.179.

<sup>2</sup>Steelesmith DL, Fontanella CA, Campo JV, Bridge JA, Warren KL, Root ED. Contextual Factors Associated With County-Level Suicide Rates in the United States, 1999 to 2016. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2019;2(9):e1910936. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.10936

<sup>3</sup>Joiner, T. (2005). *Why people die by suicide.* Harvard University Press.

If you experience any thoughts about suicide, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**.

To learn more about suicide prevention, visit the DBHDD website at:  
<https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/suicide-prevention>.

Or contact the Suicide Prevention Director, Rachael Holloman, at:  
[rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov](mailto:rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov).

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**  
1-800-273-TALK (8255).