



Chronic physical illness, anxiety and depression

Living with or experiencing a chronic illness can result in many adjustments and changes, such as loss of independence and not being able to do all the active things you used to do or usually enjoy. Anxiety and depression are common in people with chronic physical illness.

The good news is that there are effective treatments for anxiety and depression. With careful management, the symptoms of anxiety and depression can be treated along with those of many chronic physical illnesses.

What is a chronic physical illness?

A chronic physical illness is an enduring health problem that will not go away – for example diabetes, asthma, arthritis or cancer. Chronic physical illnesses can be managed, but they cannot be cured. People who live with a chronic illness have a greater risk of developing anxiety and/or depression.

There are many different types of chronic physical illness and each presents its own challenges. Here is an overview of some of the more common types.

Heart disease

Of the different forms of cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease, coronary heart disease is the heart condition most closely linked with depression.

Coronary heart disease is a long-term condition that affects around 685,000 Australians¹ and is a common cause of death and disability.

Depression is a significant risk factor for heart disease.² Depression is more common among people with heart disease and it affects recovery and increases the risk of further heart-related incidents such as heart attack and sudden death.² People who do not have good social support networks (such as someone to confide in and opportunities to participate in social activities) are also at greater risk of developing heart disease. Anxiety can also be a risk factor for heart attack and other heart-related events.³

Stroke

Stroke is Australia's second biggest cause of death after coronary heart disease and is a leading cause of disability.⁴ In 2012, about 50,000 Australians suffered new and recurrent strokes – that is 1,000 strokes every week or one stroke every 10 minutes.⁵ In 2012 there were over 420,000 people living with the effects of stroke and 30 per cent of these people were under the age of 65.⁵

A stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. Having a stroke can result in many changes. On a physical level, it can lead to people finding it difficult to move and swallow. Having a stroke can also cause stress, worry and sadness, and affect the way in which people think and feel. There is a strong link between depression, anxiety and stroke.

Cancer

Cancer is a leading cause of death in Australia – more than 43,200 people are estimated to have died from cancer in 2011. An estimated 128,000 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in Australia in 2014, with that number set to rise to 150,000 by 2020. Half of Australian men and one in three Australian women will be diagnosed with cancer by the age of 85.⁶

Cancer is a disease of the body's cells. Normally cells grow and multiply in a controlled way, however, if something causes a mistake to occur in the cells' genetic blueprints, this control can be lost. Cancer is the term used to describe collections of these cells, growing and potentially spreading within the body. As cancerous cells can arise from almost any type of tissue cell, cancer actually refers to about 100 different diseases. The most common cancers in Australia (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) are prostate, bowel, breast, melanoma and lung cancer, accounting for over 60 per cent of all cancers diagnosed in Australia.⁷ Men with prostate cancer are nearly twice as likely to develop depression as men in the general community.⁸ Research shows that anxiety and depression are common among women with breast cancer, and one study found that up to 50 per cent of women with early breast cancer may experience anxiety and/or depression in the year after diagnosis.⁹



Diabetes

There are several types of diabetes, although people with diabetes all have one thing in common – too much sugar, or glucose, in their blood. The hormone that helps the body convert glucose to energy, insulin, is either no longer made by the body (type 1 diabetes) or not produced in sufficient quantities and/or the body becomes resistant to the effects of insulin (type 2 diabetes). Diabetes can lead to serious complications if it is not diagnosed and managed – including eye and kidney damage, nerve damage, heart attacks and stroke.¹⁰

Research shows there are strong links between anxiety and depression and diabetes. Approximately one in four people with type 2 diabetes experience depression and one in six with type 2 diabetes experience anxiety.¹¹ Among people with type 1 diabetes, approximately one in five experience depression and one in seven experience anxiety.¹¹

Arthritis

Arthritis is a name for over 100 conditions that cause damage to the joints, usually resulting in joint pain and stiffness. Arthritis can affect many different parts of the joint and nearly every joint in the body. In 2011/12, 3.3 million people in Australia reported having arthritis.¹² Many people think arthritis is a condition that affects

people when they get older. In fact, two out of every three people with arthritis are between 15 and 64 years old.¹³

Up to two-thirds of people with arthritis say their condition has affected them emotionally.¹⁴

Osteoporosis

In Australia, 1.2 million people live with osteoporosis and a further 6.3 million people have low-bone density or osteopenia, which is often a precursor to osteoporosis.¹⁵ Reduced bone mineral density is a risk factor for osteoporotic fracture. Ten per cent of Australians are currently affected by osteoporosis-related conditions and osteoporosis-related fractures currently occur in nearly one-third of men over the age of 60.¹⁶

Musculoskeletal conditions such as osteoporosis may have significant psychological impacts on people, such as loss of independence and increased risk of experiencing depression.¹⁷

Asthma

More than 2 million Australians have asthma and research indicates that there is a link between asthma, anxiety and depression.¹⁸

Asthma is a condition of the airways. A person with asthma has symptoms that affect their breathing, often disturbing their sleep. Waking up at night and early morning due to asthma symptoms can

leave a person feeling tired during the day. Having asthma can make it hard to join in with everyday activities, such as playing sport and other recreational interests. This can lead to feeling unmotivated and socially isolated.

Chronic pain

Chronic pain is pain that lasts beyond the time expected for healing following surgery, trauma or other condition, or it can exist without any clear reason at all. Left untreated, chronic pain can have a devastating impact on all aspects of people's lives – such as sleep, sex, work, exercise and routine self-care. It can also severely impact personal relationships, social interactions and lifestyles.

Ninety per cent of people with severe and very severe pain find that their work is affected (inside and outside the home)¹⁹ and chronic pain accounts for 40 per cent of forced retirements.²⁰ The impact on personal life is greatest in young adults, with four in five people with chronic pain aged 20-24 reporting interference in daily life.²¹

Rates of depression are four times higher among people with chronic pain than people without pain, and almost one in three Australian adults with severe or very severe pain have high or very high levels of psychological distress.⁵ In people with chronic pain, depressive symptoms are characterised predominantly by mood-related symptoms and they are more likely to think about and attempt suicide.^{15,16} In Australia, one in five suicides are linked to physical health problems²², and some studies suggest the risk of death by suicide may be double in people who have chronic pain.²³

Dementia

Dementia is a term used to describe a set of symptoms including changes in thinking, memory, behaviour and mood, and difficulties with communication. Many conditions cause dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia and dementia with Lewy bodies.

There were over 322,000 Australians living with dementia in 2013.²⁴ In 2011, 9 per cent of Australians aged 65 and over, and 30 per cent of Australians aged 85 and over, had dementia.²⁴ There were an estimated 23,900 Australians under the age of 65 with dementia in 2011.²⁴

Older people with dementia are at greater risk of depression. Depression is thought to affect one in five people experiencing dementia.²⁴

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), commonly known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), is defined by the World Health Organisation as a neurological illness. The main symptom of CFS is having 'flu like' symptoms after exertion and not having enough energy for daily activities. Other symptoms include pain, disrupted sleep, difficulty thinking, and changes in blood pressure, hormones and body temperature.²⁵ Over 180,000 Australians of all ages have CFS.²⁶ For some people, a viral infection, toxic exposure, anaesthetic, immunisation, gastroenteritis or trauma may trigger the illness. In other people, CFS may develop slowly over a period of years.²⁵

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. Anxious feelings are a normal reaction to a situation where a person feels under pressure and usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or 'stressor' is removed.

However, for some people these anxious feelings happen for no apparent reason or continue after the stressful event has passed. For a person experiencing anxiety, anxious feelings cannot be brought under control easily. Anxiety can be a serious condition that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life. There are many types of anxiety and many people with anxiety experience symptoms of more than one type.



Living with chronic physical illness is one of many things – such as a family history of mental health conditions, stressful life events and personality factors – that may trigger anxiety. The combination of chronic physical illness, lost educational or employment opportunities and financial worries can lead to the development of anxiety.

Anxiety is common and the sooner a person seeks support, the sooner they can recover.

Signs of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety can often develop gradually over time. Given that we all experience some anxiety, it can be hard to know how much is too much. In order to be diagnosed with an anxiety condition, it must have a disabling impact on the person's life. There are many types of anxiety, and there are a range of symptoms for each.

Anxiety can be expressed in different ways such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event.

Some common symptoms of anxiety include:

- hot and cold flushes
- racing heart
- tightening of the chest
- snowballing worries
- obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour.

There are effective treatments available for anxiety. For more information on anxiety and treatments see the *beyondblue Understanding anxiety* fact sheet or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/anxiety

What is depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason. Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on both physical and mental health.

Depression affects how a person feels about themselves. A person may lose interest in work, hobbies and doing things he or she normally enjoys. Some people may lack energy, have difficulty

sleeping or sleep more than usual, while some people feel anxious or irritable and find it hard to concentrate.

The good news is that depression is treatable and effective treatments are available.

Signs of depression

A person may be depressed if he or she has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time for more than two weeks and/ or has lost interest or pleasure in usual activities, and has also experienced some of the signs and symptoms on the list below.

It's important to note that everyone experiences some of these symptoms from time to time and it may not necessarily mean a person is depressed. Equally, not every person who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms. The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis – for that you need to see a health professional – but they can be used as a guide.

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- not going out anymore, loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- being unable to concentrate and not getting things done at work or school
- feeling overwhelmed, indecisive and lacking in confidence
- increased alcohol and drug use
- loss or change of appetite and significant weight loss or gain
- trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep and being tired during the day
- feeling worthless, helpless and guilty
- increased irritability, frustration and moodiness
- feeling unhappy, sad or miserable most of the time
- thoughts such as, "I'm a failure", "Life's not worth living", "People would be better off without me".

As with anxiety, there are effective treatments available for depression. For more information on depression and treatments see *beyondblue's Anxiety and depression: An information booklet* or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/depression

What are the links between anxiety, depression and chronic physical illness?

Research indicates there are strong links between anxiety, depression and chronic physical illness. Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia – one in four people will experience anxiety at some stage in their life.¹ Depression is also common – one in five women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime.¹ For people who live with a chronic physical illness, this figure is even higher. Research shows that 28 per cent of people with a chronic physical condition also have a mental health condition.⁴

People who experience persistent pain are four times more likely to experience anxiety or depression than people living without pain.¹⁴ Having a chronic physical illness puts a person at greater risk of developing anxiety or depression.⁵ The symptoms of chronic physical illnesses, as well as some of the treatments, can result in major lifestyle changes which may cause severe disruptions to a person's work/social life and create financial difficulties.

Depression also increases the likelihood of developing a chronic physical illness, particularly heart disease, stroke and diabetes.⁵ Continuing physical illness can also trigger anxiety, complicate the treatment of anxiety or the physical illness itself. Common conditions that can do this include hormonal problems (e.g. overactive thyroid), diabetes, asthma and heart disease.

For people with a chronic physical illness, anxiety or depression makes living with their condition even more difficult. It can make it harder for people to find the energy to eat healthily, exercise or take medication regularly. Depression is more debilitating than the feelings of frustration or disappointment at having a chronic health condition. There is a sense of loss of enjoyment, as well as the other characteristic changes described in the 'signs of depression' list. Some chronic physical illnesses, such as chronic pain, can be largely invisible so that people can feel misunderstood and stigmatised by co-workers, friends, family and even the medical profession.²⁷

Having a chronic physical illness can also make it seem like an effort to connect with family members and friends. This can make the person with the illness feel isolated and make it harder for them to recover from anxiety or depression.

What are the treatments for anxiety and depression?

Managing anxiety and depression can greatly improve people's wellbeing and quality of life. People with anxiety and/or depression can find it difficult to take the first step in seeking help. They may need the support of family, friends and a health professional.

There is no one proven way that people recover from anxiety or depression and it's different for everybody. However, there is a range of effective treatments and health professionals who can help people on the road to recovery. There are also many things that people with anxiety, depression and asthma can do to help themselves to recover and stay well. **The important thing is finding the right treatment and the right health professional that works for you.**

Different types of anxiety and depression require different types of treatment. This may include physical exercise for preventing and treating mild depression or anxiety, through to psychological and medical treatment for more severe episodes. The treatment for anxiety, depression and chronic illness involves a coordinated approach that monitors the symptoms of anxiety, depression and the illness.

Psychological treatments

Psychological therapies may not only help with recovery, but can also help prevent a recurrence of anxiety or depression. These therapies help build skills in coping with stressful life circumstances and can be provided by a psychologist, psychiatrist or other trained health professional.

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** is an effective treatment for people with anxiety and depression. It teaches people to evaluate their thinking about common difficulties, helping them to change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations.
- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT)** is also effective for treating depression and some types of anxiety. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.

Medication

Antidepressant medication, alongside psychological therapies, can also play a role in the treatment of moderate to severe depression and some anxiety conditions.

Making a decision about which antidepressant is best for a person can be complex. The decision will be made in consultation with a doctor, after careful assessment and consideration. The doctor should discuss differences in effects and possible side-effects of medications. Stopping medication should only be done gradually, with a doctor's recommendation and under supervision.



A doctor or treating health professional will take into account several factors when suggesting the most suitable treatment. Regular contact with and ongoing assessment by a doctor to check that treatments are working effectively is an important part of becoming and staying well. Most people taking medication will also benefit from psychological therapies, which will reduce the likelihood of relapse after the person has stopped taking the medication.

Who can assist?

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good first step to discuss your concerns. Your GP can:

- make a diagnosis
- check for any physical health problem or medication that may be contributing to the condition
- discuss available treatments
- work with the person to draw up a Mental Health Treatment Plan so he or she can get a Medicare rebate for psychological treatment
- provide brief counselling or, in some cases, psychological therapies
- prescribe medication
- refer a person to a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist.

It is recommended that people consult their regular GP or another GP in the same clinic, as medical information is shared within a practice.

Psychologists are health professionals who provide psychological therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Psychologists are not doctors and cannot prescribe medication in Australia.

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychiatric assessments, conduct medical tests, provide therapy and prescribe medication. Psychiatrists often use psychological treatments such as CBT, IPT and/or medication. If the condition requires hospital admission, a psychiatrist will be in charge of the person's treatment.



Mental health nurses are specially trained to care for people with mental health conditions. They work with psychiatrists and GPs to review a person's mental health, monitor medication and provide information about mental health conditions and treatment. Some have training in psychological therapies.

Social workers in mental health are specially trained to work with people who are experiencing difficulties in life. Social workers can help people find ways to manage more effectively some of the situations that trigger these conditions such as family issues, financial problems, work stress and living arrangements. Mental health social workers can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies.

Occupational therapists in mental health help people who, because of a mental health condition, have difficulty participating in normal, everyday activities. Mental health occupational therapists also provide focused psychological self-help strategies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers understand the mental health issues of Indigenous people and what is needed to provide culturally safe and accessible services. Some may have undertaken training in mental health and psychological therapies. Support provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers might include, but is not limited to, case management, screening, assessment, referrals, transport to and attendance at specialist appointments, education, improving access to mainstream services, advocacy, counselling, support for family and acute distress response.

The cost of treatment from a mental health professional varies. However, in the same way that people can get a Medicare rebate when they see a doctor, they can also get part or all of the consultation fee subsidised when they see a mental health professional for treatment of anxiety or depression. See *beyondblue's Getting help – How much does it cost?* fact sheet at www.beyondblue.org.au/resources

To find a mental health practitioner in your area, visit www.beyondblue.org.au/find-a-professional or call the *beyondblue* Support Service on 1300 22 4636.



Helpful strategies and tips

Coping with a chronic physical illness and its treatments can be challenging enough, but if you experience mental health conditions as well, it can be very difficult to work out how to manage – both emotionally and practically. Remember, you don't have to sort everything out at once. It may take some time to deal with each issue. Ask for help if you need it – your doctor or other health professional can refer you to a mental health professional who has special training or experience in supporting people with chronic physical illness. Remember, it's important to seek help early – the sooner the better.

The following tips may be helpful in managing depression and anxiety:

- Speak to your doctor about your concerns and discuss treatment options. Make sure you attend all of your appointments and have regular check-ups.
- Learn as much as you can about depression and the chronic physical illness.
- Accept help, support and encouragement from family and friends.
- Avoid feeling isolated by becoming involved in social activities, if you are able.

- Talk to others who are going through a similar experience, such as in a peer support group.

It's important to be kind to yourself, eat well, get regular exercise if you are able, try to get enough sleep and avoid alcohol. Make time for activities that you enjoy and allow yourself time to relax. You can find helpful tips for recovery and staying well at www.beyondblue.org.au/staying-well

Advice for family and friends

When a person has a chronic physical illness and anxiety or depression, it can affect family members and friends. Carers may be at increased risk of anxiety and/or depression, so it's important that you look after your own health by doing the following:

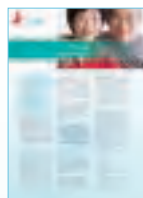
- Make sure you eat well, exercise regularly, get enough sleep and avoid alcohol and other drugs.
- Allow yourself time to relax and do what you enjoy. Plan activities like social outings and exercise.
- Look for symptoms of depression in yourself and seek help at the earliest sign.
- Seek support from professionals. This may involve having counselling or attending a carer support group.
- Find ways to ease the load, for example take Carer's Leave from work.

- Involve other family members and friends and accept offers of help and encouragement.
- Acknowledge you are going through a difficult time and are likely to experience periods of grief.
- Remember that allowing others to help is not a sign of weakness – rather it is an act of generosity to allow them to show their concern and support for you.

For more information, see *beyondblue's* free booklet *A guide for carers* available from www.beyondblue.org.au/resources or by calling 1300 22 4636.

Resources

beyondblue has a number of free information resources available in addition to this booklet. To download PDF files or order hard copies of available resources please visit www.beyondblue.org.au/resources to access *beyondblue*'s online ordering catalogue, or call 1300 22 4636.



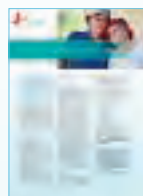
Coronary heart disease, anxiety and depression



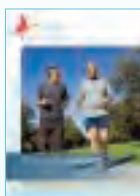
Anxiety disorders and depression in men with testicular cancer



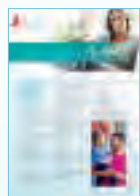
Arthritis, anxiety and depression



Depression and anxiety after stroke



The journey ahead: Maintaining positive mental wellbeing in men with prostate cancer and their partners



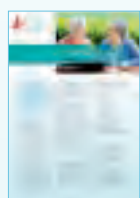
Asthma, anxiety and depression



Depression and Breast Cancer



Brain tumours, anxiety and depression



Dementia, anxiety and depression

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Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at
www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

Alzheimer's Australia

www.fightdementia.org.au

1800 100 500

Provides advocacy, support services, education and information about dementia

Arthritis Australia

www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

1800 111 101

Information about arthritis

Asthma Foundations of Australia

www.asthmaaustralia.org.au

1800 645 130

Information, advice, education, counselling and support for people with asthma

Pain Australia

www.painaustralia.org.au

1300 340 357

Provides information and support services to prevent and manage pain

Diabetes Australia

www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

1300 136 588

Information about diabetes

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) Australia

www.mecfs.org.au

03 9529 1344

Information about ME/CFS

National Heart Foundation of Australia

www.heartfoundation.org.au

1300 36 27 87

Information on a range of heart-health topics

National Stroke Foundation

www.strokefoundation.com.au

1800 787 653

Information on stroke

Osteoporosis Australia

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Information about osteoporosis

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