

Anxiety Fact Sheet

What is Anxiety versus an Anxiety Disorder?

Anxiety is defined as an emotion filled with worried thoughts and often accompanied with acute physical changes such as high blood pressure or high heart rate. Anxiety is a normal experience and usually a future oriented response to a broad threat (ex: money, relationships, school, etc.).^{1,2} An anxiety disorder is a recurring/building bout of anxiety that may not go away for long periods and as such often interferes with daily activities.^{1,2} With anxiety disorders, the feelings of anxiety are usually out of proportion to the perceived threat and very difficult to control.^{2,3}

What are the Types of Anxiety Disorders?

Although there can be anxiety as a response to any perceived threat, anxiety disorders can be categorized into four main types.^{2,4} These four types are: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, and Phobia- Related Disorders.^{2,4}

How to be Screened for Anxiety

The primary care physician is a great starting point to be screened for anxiety when it is interfering with your health or daily activities.³ If it is more severe, a referral to a psychiatrist or other mental health specialist will be made for further diagnosis and treatment.³

Older Adults and Anxiety

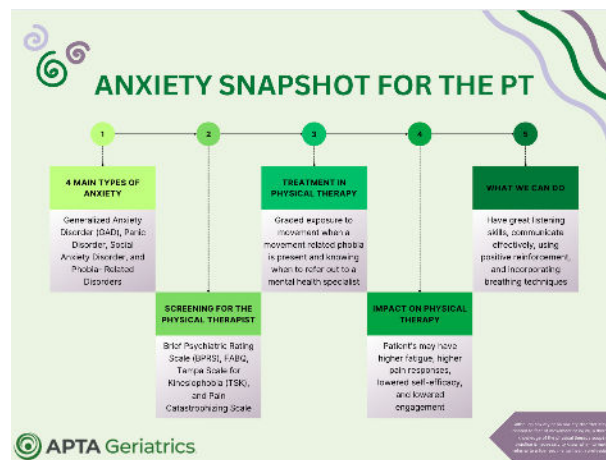
Around 50% of older adults report clinically relevant anxiety symptoms.⁵ Although most anxiety disorders develop in younger age, GAD is reported to onset just as regularly in older age.⁵ In fact, multiple studies have shown that half of patients reported GAD onset after the age of 50.⁵ Another factor to consider is anxiety and cognitive decline.⁵ It is not fully understood if cognitive decline triggers anxiety, or vice versa, as this causal relationship is likely bidirectional.⁵ Newer research however, is showing an association between anxiety and neurodegeneration.⁵

Treatments for Anxiety

There are two main treatments for anxiety and anxiety disorders: psychotherapy and medications.^{2,3,4} Psychotherapy can include cognitive behavioral therapy (gold standard) or counseling.^{2,3} Depending on the type of anxiety disorders, medications can be used for treatment when there are physical health issues or other mental health issues stemming from the anxiety disorder.^{2,3} These medications are usually antidepressants.^{2,3}

Impact on Physical Therapy

Physical therapists should be aware that anxiety impacts pain response, fatigue levels, self-efficacy, engagements, and adherence.⁶ A patient may have anxiety or an anxiety disorder as part of their medical history. A patient may also have a phobia or heightened anxiety about movement or injury. The two skills that were deemed most important for physical therapists to have when working with a patient with anxiety were effective communication and good listening skills.⁶ It is also important to note that offering advice was deemed least effective in the treatment of patients with anxiety.⁶ Positive reinforcement, breathing skills, and goal setting were also skills that held value in musculoskeletal physical therapy treatments of patients with anxiety.⁶ Physical therapists should be aware of the scope of practice as it relates to cognitive health and be confident in making referrals when to mental health professionals when necessary.



References

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