



What is seizure anxiety?

Seizures by their very nature are unpredictable. It is this unpredictability and the possible loss of control during seizures that people with epilepsy fear the most. Anxiety about having seizures, particularly in public, is very common.

Anxiety is a core emotion that many people experience at certain points in life. Feelings of anxiety are normal when we sense that something bad is going to happen. But anxiety can become a disorder if it gets out of hand, causing a constant feeling of nervousness, distress and unease for no apparent reason.

Anxiety can create uncomfortable feelings and obvious changes. These can include:

- ⚡ Rapid breathing
- ⚡ Racing heart
- ⚡ Tense muscles
- ⚡ Increased blood pressure
- ⚡ Dry mouth
- ⚡ Sweating
- ⚡ Tightness in the chest
- ⚡ Nausea and vomiting

How is anxiety related to epilepsy?

Anxiety can be an issue for someone with epilepsy. In any medical illness, people may become anxious after diagnosis, but anxiety is also related to epilepsy in more specific ways. It can occur not only as a reaction to the diagnosis, but also as a symptom of the epilepsy, and, in some cases, as a side-effect of seizure medicines.

You need to do something about anxiety if your response is inappropriate or it affects your ability to function day to day.

Anxiety as a symptom of epilepsy

The relationship between brain abnormalities and anxiety is complex and not well understood, but there is a relationship. Anxiety is not a purely psychological or psychosocial phenomenon, it can also occur as a direct result of neurobiological factors like abnormal brain function and seizures.

In fact, some factors that cause seizures may also lead to anxiety, for instance many people report symptoms of anxiety as part of their 'aura'. Some components of anxiety, such as obsessiveness and agitation, may be seen in people with brain damage or epilepsy-related psychosis. Psychological and biological components of anxiety are particularly apparent in people with seizures.

Seizure anxiety

One common cause of anxiety in epilepsy is the fear of having a seizure. Knowing a seizure can occur at any time and place without much or any warning is a major point of anxiety for many people. Some also become anxious about social rejection due to their condition, particularly during adolescence.

When you are anxious, you may:

- ⚡ Focus on the possibility that something bad is about to happen to you.
- ⚡ Overestimate the possibility of it happening.
- ⚡ Exaggerate the negative impact if what you fear happens.

When to get help

- ⚡ When the fear and anxiety about having seizures occurs too often.
- ⚡ When seizures are well controlled but the fear remains.
- ⚡ If you are isolating yourself from your community.
- ⚡ If you think that the anxiety is related to antiepileptic medications.

What to do**1 Learn to manage stress in your life.**

Keep an eye on pressures and deadlines and make a commitment to take time out from study or work.

2 Learn a variety of relaxation techniques.

Physical relaxation methods and meditation techniques really can help.

3 Look after your physical needs.

Eat healthily, exercise regularly and try to keep to a routine sleep pattern. Avoid alcohol, cannabis and junk food.

4 Practice deep abdominal breathing.

Breathe in deeply and slowly through your nose, taking the air right down to your abdomen. Visualise the air travelling down to your abdomen and say the word "calm" to yourself as you breathe in. Then breathe out slowly and gently through your mouth.

As you breathe out, visualise the stress and tension leaving your body with your breath and think the word "relax." Deliberately let your muscles go floppy as you breathe out. Take three deep breaths at a time. If you breathe deeply for too long you may feel dizzy from the extra oxygen. You can repeat the three breaths after a short time of breathing normally.

5 Learn to replace negative self talk with coping self talk.

When you catch yourself thinking negatively, try to change it to something more positive. For e.g. replace "I can't do this, it's just too hard," with: "This is hard but I can get through it." It can be helpful to think of changing the tape that runs through your mind. Make a list of frequent negative thoughts and another of positive, believable thoughts to replace them.

Anxiety can be exhausting and debilitating. Don't suffer alone for too long. It helps to talk to a counsellor or psychologist, who can help you find ways to deal with stress in your life and teach you skills to manage anxiety.

These strategies are just some suggestions that may help you to manage your feelings of anxiety about having seizures. If your fear is having a major impact on your life, ask your doctor or Epilepsy Action about finding a psychologist or counsellor to help you identify and express your fears and provide more intensive support. Alternatively you can seek advice from the Australian Psychological Society.

Taking anti-anxiety medication brings the risk of becoming dependent on the medication. This is more likely to happen to people with epilepsy because some medications used to reduce anxiety also suppress seizures, and vice versa. Thus the person can become even more dependent on the medication and have considerable difficulty discontinuing it. For people with both epilepsy and anxiety, the neurologist may recommend seizure medication that also has anti-anxiety effects.

Can panic attacks and seizures be confused?

When diagnosing epilepsy, it is very important to eliminate other disorders. In some situations, panic attacks have been confused with epilepsy, and epilepsy with panic attacks. Panic attacks occur suddenly and without warning, they are extremely frightening and the person usually believes that they represent a serious medical condition. At the same time, symptoms of anxiety can be present during a seizure. So it is important to use techniques such as MRI and EEG scans to tell the difference.

REFERENCES

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- > http://www.neurologyreviews.com/apr00/nr_apr00_seizures.html
- > http://www.epilepsy.com/epilepsy/mood_anxiety.html
- > Change Your Thinking, Sarah Edelman, 2003
- > Gladys Williams, Psychologist

This information is given to provide accurate, general information about epilepsy. Medical information and knowledge changes rapidly and you should consult your doctor for more detailed information. This is not medical advice and you should not make any medication or treatment changes without consulting your doctor.