

Anxiety

Many people have times where they feel stressed or anxious when under pressure, but these feelings usually pass once the stressor or stressful situation has gone away or been removed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't subside. It is when they are ongoing and present without any particular reason or cause. It makes it hard to cope with daily life. When a person experiences anxiety, these feelings cannot be easily controlled.¹

Anxiety and epilepsy

People with epilepsy are twice as likely to experience an anxiety disorder as the general population, yet it is often underrecognised and undertreated.² Up to 50 or 60% of people with epilepsy have various mood disorders including depression and anxiety. The relationship between epilepsy and depression has received a lot of attention, but less is known about anxiety disorders, despite anxiety being perhaps even more common than depression and just as disabling.^{2,3}

Anxiety - especially panic attacks and severe anxiety reactions - are an overwhelming experience. They can cause severe physical and emotional responses. Some people with epilepsy worry that their anxiety may cause a seizure and some are concerned that their epilepsy may be causing their panic attacks. Anxiety or panic attacks usually have a combination of factors as to why they happen.

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
- Headache
- Disturbed sleep



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, severe or constant anxiety can become an intrusive disorder causing a constant feeling of nervousness, distress and unease.

What is seizure anxiety?

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

How is anxiety related to epilepsy?

Any medical illness can cause people to become anxious, particularly in the early days of 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 physical symptom of the epilepsy, and, in some cases, as a side effect of antiepileptic medications.

If you feel you have anxiety and it is affecting your ability to function day to day, then seek help.

1 <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety>

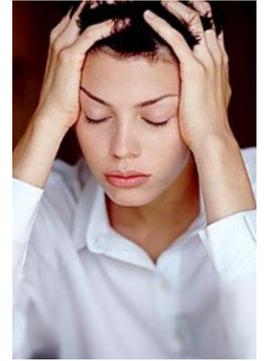
2 <http://www.epilepsybehavior.com/article/S1525-5050%2805%2900206-4/fulltext>

3 Erik K. St Louis, David M. Ficker, Terence J. O'Brien. Epilepsy and the Interictal State: Co-morbidities and Quality of Life February 2015, Wiley-Blackwell.

Anxiety as a symptom of epilepsy

The relationship between brain abnormalities and anxiety is complex and not fully understood, but there is a relationship. Anxiety is not a purely psychological or psychosocial event, it can also occur as a direct result of biological factors like a family history of mental illness, abnormal brain function and seizures.

Everyone is different and it's often a combination of factors that can contribute to a person developing anxiety. It's important to mention that you can't always find the cause of it or change difficult circumstances. ¹



Sometimes seizures or neurological 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 obsession and agitation, may occur in people with structural damage to the brain or epilepsy-related psychosis. Psychological and biological components of anxiety are evident in people with seizures.

Seizure anxiety

One common cause of anxiety in epilepsy is the fear of having a seizure. Epilepsy can be unpredictable. Not knowing when a seizure might happen, without much or any warning is a major feature of anxiety for many people. Some people also become anxious about social rejection due to their epilepsy, particularly during adolescence.

When to get help

It can be difficult to take those first steps in getting help. Anxiety (and depression) can reduce your motivation or confidence to take action and you may feel uncomfortable talking about it. However, effective treatments are available so while you might be hesitant, it's worth seeking support. Seek professional help if:

- the fear and anxiety about having seizures occurs frequently or all the time.
- your seizures are well controlled but the anxiety remains.
- you are isolating yourself from your friends, family and community.
- you think that the anxiety is related to antiepileptic medications.

Beyond Blue provide a good guide as to who can help: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/who-can-assist>

What to do

Treatment of anxiety differs for each person. For someone with epilepsy and anxiety, better seizure control (if relevant) also needs to be considered. Most people have therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and sometimes antianxiety medication may need to be used.

Taking antianxiety medication can help but discuss this with your doctor as some medications used to reduce anxiety can also suppress seizures or may make them worse. For people with both epilepsy and anxiety, the neurologist may recommend antiepileptic medication that also has anti-anxiety effect.

Things that you can do are:

1) Learn to manage stress in your life.

- If you have pressures and deadlines, 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. There are a number of relaxation CDs available.

3) Look after your physical needs.

- Eat a healthy diet, keep active and exercise regularly. Try to keep to a routine sleep pattern.
- Avoid alcohol, too much caffeine, mood altering drugs and junk food.

4) Practice deep abdominal breathing.

- Close your eyes and 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. 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 find you are 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 will get through it." It can be helpful to change thoughts that run 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 will suggest ways for you to deal with stress in your life and teach you skills to manage anxiety.

6) Join an online support group or forum

- to meet people with similar symptoms and discuss ways to deal with it

7) Online therapies

- Online therapies or computer-aided psychological therapy, can be just as effective as face-to-face services for people with mild to moderate anxiety and depression. Go to <http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au/> for more information.



These strategies are just some suggestions that may help you to manage your feelings of anxiety about having seizures.

Can panic attacks and seizures be confused?

When diagnosing epilepsy, it is very important to eliminate other disorders. 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 may believe they have a serious medical condition. At the same time, symptoms of anxiety can be present during a seizure. A good history of the attack, from you and also a witness can be invaluable to help distinguish between the two. Often medical tests will be needed if the doctor has difficulty determining if you are having seizures or panic attacks, or both.

If your anxiety is having a major impact on your life, ask your doctor or Epilepsy Action Australia about finding a psychologist, counsellor or psychiatrist to help you identify and express your fears and provide more intensive support.

For more information go to:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety> To learn about anxiety, the treatments, who can help and useful resources.

https://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/anxiety/ For useful tips and resources.

<http://headspace.org.au/get-info/anxiety/> For information about anxiety for youth

References:

- Change Your Thinking, Sarah Edelman, 2003
- Gladys Williams, Psychologist

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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.

