



HOLISTIC WELLNESS EDUCATION

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY & DEPRESSION

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Anxiety is anticipation of danger or uncertainty. Sadness is a normal response to difficult experiences. Both can be temporary. Clinical disorders involve patterns of symptoms that cause significant distress or interfere with daily life. Depression can involve loss of interest or pleasure, even without obvious sadness. Anxiety and depression frequently occur together. The brain normally coordinates emotion, attention, motivation, and the body's stress response. These conditions involve changes in how those systems function – not simply lack of willpower.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BODY?

When the brain detects a threat, the autonomic nervous system, which controls automatic functions, activates the “fight-or-flight” response. Adrenaline increases heart rate and alertness; a linked hormone system releases cortisol to mobilize energy. This response is useful during danger. In anxiety, the alarm may activate too readily or remain active beyond the immediate situation, producing tension, sweating, and digestive discomfort. Depression is associated with altered activity in brain networks involved in reward, emotion, and concentration. This helps explain reduced enjoyment, motivation, and mental energy. Neurotransmitters – chemical messengers between nerve cells – participate in these networks. However, depression is not explained by a simple serotonin deficiency. Stress-hormone changes and inflammation occur in some people. Roles vary and remain under investigation.

CAUSES & CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Both conditions usually arise from interacting influences. Genetic differences can increase vulnerability without determining someone's future. Trauma, loss, prolonged stress, isolation, chronic illness, and recurring patterns of worry or self-criticism can contribute. Sleep disruption and emotional symptoms can reinforce one another. Thyroid disorders, certain medications, substance effects or withdrawal, and hormonal transitions can cause similar symptoms or contribute to a disorder.

SIGNS, SYMPTOMS, EFFECTS

Anxiety: difficult-to-control worry, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, racing heart, nausea, and disrupted sleep. Depression: low or empty mood, reduced enjoyment, hopelessness, guilt, fatigue, appetite changes, slowed or restless movement, and difficulty concentrating. Physical symptoms are real, but they can have other causes. Persistent symptoms can disrupt relationships, work, and daily functioning. Questionnaires estimate symptom burden; they do not independently confirm diagnosis. No routine blood test diagnoses either condition. Depression can also involve thoughts of death or suicide – suicidal thoughts require prompt evaluation.

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