

Stressed or Sad?

Anxiety and depression have more in common than many of us realize.

BY RACHEL MORRIS

DIAGNOSING MENTAL ILLNESS is a tricky business. To meet the clinical definition of major depression, for instance, you need to feel sad or hopeless most days of the week or experience a loss of motivation and interest in things you once enjoyed—for at least two weeks straight. Sounds pretty clear-cut, but here’s where the confusion starts: Depression shares a whole list of symptoms with anxiety, which many people think of as the other side of the same coin (to meet the clinical definition of generalized anxiety, you need to feel excessive anxiety and worry more days than not for at least six months). “There’s a huge overlap between depression and anxiety, and in some ways, the mind doesn’t distinguish between the two,” says John Lauriello, MD, chief of the department of psychiatry at the University of Missouri School of Medicine. The conditions can even trigger each other. For example, people who don’t find relief from anxiety might believe their worrying will never end and, in turn, become depressed, says Erin Spahr, a licensed counselor with the Baltimore Therapy Group in Towson, Maryland.

But even when symptoms look and feel the same, they might be occurring for different reasons. Several treatments can help both depression and anxiety at once, including psychotherapy (like cognitive-behavioral therapy) and medication (such as antidepressants like certain SSRIs). However, the approach (like what to focus on in therapy) and dosage or mix of meds may vary depending on which condition is causing most of the distress.

We asked our experts to sort out some of the symptoms. If you recognize them in yourself, talk to a doctor or a therapist.



ANXIETY	SYMPTOMS	DEPRESSION
Anxiety may cause tossing and turning at night, and sleep deprivation (due to any reason) can trigger more anxiety during the day. To cope with worrying, some people turn to food, while others may be too overwhelmed to eat.	CHANGES IN SLEEP OR APPETITE	Research suggests three-quarters of those with depression also experience insomnia symptoms; conversely, some people sleep too much. As with anxiety, depression can lead to an increase or decrease in appetite.
For anxiety sufferers, the thought of being around other people can be so terrifying that they start skipping out on gatherings—even those with close family or friends.	SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL	Pulling back from friends or avoiding social interactions because you’re too sad or exhausted could be a sign of depression.
As with depression, feeling anxious around the clock can be both mentally and physically draining, leaving you burned-out and exhausted.	FATIGUE	Your energy may be so diminished that even ordinary tasks such as doing the laundry require a seemingly impossible effort.
Memory and concentration may be compromised. Sufferers can feel like their brain never shuts off; excessive worrying can also cause your mind to suddenly go blank.	COGNITIVE TROUBLE	Depression can trigger forgetfulness, confusion, and difficulty concentrating or making decisions. It can seem as if your mind is constantly clouded over—especially if you’re sleep-deprived.
The body’s stress response can shift into overdrive, causing muscle tension, shortness of breath, sweating, and trembling. Thanks to the brain-gut connection, some people also experience cramps, bloating, gas, and other G.I. problems.	PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS AND PAIN	Depression can manifest as vague aches and pains (commonly in the joints, back, or abdominal area). One explanation: Some neurotransmitters that influence pain are also involved in mood. When they malfunction, you could feel it in your body and soul.