

## ANXIETY

### Did you know?



The physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a pounding heart and muscle tension, are part of our “fight or flight” response. Do we stand our ground and face the threat, or do we flee?

There are mechanisms in our bodies that control how we respond to anxiety. When these mechanisms break down, people express anxiety in inappropriate or excessive ways.

Twenty percent of older Americans suffer from a mental illness. Of that number, over half suffer from an anxiety disorder (with depression being the second most common mental illness). Anxiety and depression also often occur together.

*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General (1999).*

**Symptoms of anxiety make it harder to help people choose benefits. Learning about anxiety can help you understand people’s situations and work with them effectively.**

💡 Causes for anxiety disorders aren’t completely understood at this time. Possible factors include:

- **Brain chemistry:** Areas of the brain have been identified that control our responses to fear. Imbalances in these areas may result in excessive anxiety.
- **Genetics:** Per the American Psychiatric Association, anxiety can “run” in families.
- **Traumatic events or long-term environmental stresses:** War veterans or individuals who have lived in abusive relationships sometimes suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. They have fears about going out in public and often have difficulty holding down jobs.

💡 There are many different types of anxiety disorders:

- **Panic disorder**, characterized by panic attacks. Symptoms can be so severe that people think they are having a heart attack.
- **Phobia**, which is a fear of an object, situation, or activity.
- **Obsessive-compulsive behavior**, in which people engage in repeated behavior (such as compulsive hand washing) to control an obsessive preoccupation.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder**, marked by feelings of numbness, floods of emotion during flashbacks of painful events, and an impression of being under constant threat.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)** People with GAD feel helpless.

💡 As with depression, treatments for anxiety disorders include medications and psychotherapy. Many people with these disorders are too embarrassed or emotionally paralyzed to seek help.

# Fact Sheet

## Common signs of anxiety

- Overwhelming feelings of panic or fear
- Uncontrollable obsessive thoughts
- Painful, intrusive memories and recurring nightmares
- Feeling unreal or disconnected
- Physical symptoms such as feeling sick to the stomach, fluttering in the stomach, heart pounding, trembling, lightheadedness, perspiration, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath, feeling of choking, hot flashes, and muscle tension
- Avoidance of situations that set off an attack of anxiety
- Overwhelming desire to hide
- Inability to make decisions

*Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General (1999, p.40); American Psychiatric Association*

## Common signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome

- Flashbacks of traumatic events that may be so strong and vivid that it feels as if the events are being relived
- Depression, based on a feeling of failure at working through the grief, anger, or fear associated with traumatic events
- Avoidance of close relationships with others
- Inability to hold down a job
- Sudden irritability and explosiveness, even when unprovoked, as if the person is being threatened

*Source: American Psychiatric Association*

## Quick tips: Helping people with these symptoms make benefit selections

- Know your limits. Your SHIP program has guidelines on what to do in a situation where you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Recognize the symptoms of rising tension, such as rocking, stuttering, pacing, and high color in the face.
- Recognize what the person is saying, and then redirect the conversation to a different topic.
- Break down the process of benefit selection into its steps.
- Go over the information on a person's pill bottles one at a time.
- Focus on one task at a time.