What Are Anxiety Disorders?

In addition to depression, anxiety disorders are the most common mental health issues encountered in the general medical setting. It is estimated that over 30 million Americans have a lifetime history of anxiety disorders that significantly impact individual functioning and overall costs to the medical system. Many of our health plan members feel most comfortable with their Primary Care Physician (PCP) as the initial point of contact for all health concerns. With that in mind, the significance of the role that PCPs play in identifying and referral for treatment of anxiety disorders cannot be understated. This toolkit is intended to provide a basic understanding of anxiety disorders by assisting PCPs in recognizing common signs of anxiety in patients, utilizing a reliable screening tool, initiating treatment and where to refer the member for additional treatment and support.

It is common for people to feel anxious and nervous at times when faced with stressful situations in everyday life. Anxiety is, after all, a normal human emotion. An anxiety disorder, however, is when the symptoms of anxiety cause such distress that it significantly impacts a person’s ability to lead a normal life. Evidence suggests that people living with an anxiety disorder are at greater risk for developing chronic medical conditions, and they may also have more severe symptoms and a greater risk of death when they become ill. As with all disorders anxiety can range from a mild impairment to a serious mental illness and therefore early identification and treatment is important.

There are several recognized types of anxiety disorders, including:

- **Panic Disorder**: People with this condition have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**: People with OCD are plagued by constant thoughts or fears that cause them to perform certain rituals or routines.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**: PTSD is a condition that can develop following a traumatic and/or terrifying event, such as a sexual or physical assault, the unexpected death of a loved one, or a natural disaster.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder**: Also called social phobia, social anxiety disorder involves overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about everyday social situations.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**: This disorder involves excessive, unrealistic worry and tension, even if there is little or nothing to provoke the anxiety.

Signs of anxiety can often be vague or generalized to other chronic health problems making it easy to overlook in a routine office visit. The following are considered common symptoms of anxiety disorders and should lead to a healthcare professional completing a preliminary mental health screening at the time of the visit.
Symptoms vary depending on the type of anxiety disorder, general symptoms include:

- Feelings of panic, fear and uneasiness
- Uncontrollable, obsessive thoughts
- Repeated thoughts or flashbacks of traumatic experiences
- Nightmares
- Ritualistic behaviors
- Problems sleeping
- Cold and sweaty hands and/or feet
- Shortness of breath
- Palpitations
- Dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- An inability to be still or calm

Best Practices

Interventions for the treatment of anxiety disorders categories: pharmacological and psychosocial interventions. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is a type of psychosocial treatment that helps patients to understand the thoughts and feelings that influence behaviors. Pharmacological management includes, most often, prescribing antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and beta-blockers. For additional information about the GAD-7 and other anxiety disorder screening tools, visit the following websites:

- www.nami.org
- www.nimh.nih.gov
- www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
- www.iccmhc.org

Intervention Strategies

Anxiety:

- Participate in a medical evaluation to rule out any medical conditions that may be causing or contributing to anxiety
- Participate in a psychiatric evaluation and take all medications as prescribed
- Develop and practice positive coping skills to manage stress and anxiety (such as adequate rest, proper nutrition, physical exercise and recreational activities/hobbies)
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and guided imagery
- Learn to recognize the difference between emotional and physical reactions to anxiety
- Participate in systematic desensitization of feared stimuli while practicing relaxation strategies
- Identify a social support team and increase participation in social activities
- Identify negative self-talk and replace with positive statements
- Involve family members in psycho-education about anxiety to increase understanding and support
- Recognize, verbalize and address unresolved emotional issues
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:

- Participate in a psychiatric evaluation and take all medications as prescribed
- Use a thought-stopping strategy to interrupt cognitive obsessions
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing
- Consider learning and practicing the Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) technique by confronting feared situations and objects (exposure) and resist performing compulsive rituals (response prevention)
- Recognize, discuss, and refute dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., magical or catastrophic thinking patterns)
- Develop and practice a daily ritual to interfere with the current compulsive pattern
- Identify, verbalize and address unresolved life issues
- Provide psychoeducation for family members and encourage their support for the patient during treatment
- Develop and practice positive self-talk

**Direction for Prescribing Psychotropic Medications**

Please reference this website for details on prescribing psychotropic medications:


**Screening Tools & Resources**

Simple general screening tools that can be completed by the patient or administered during an office visit include:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) is a simple screening tool that should be utilized in primary care settings if a patient exhibits any signs and symptoms of anxiety.
- PC-PTSD is a four-item screen designed for use in primary care and other medical settings to screen for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Online tests for anxiety that are quick and simple to administer during a typical office visit can be found at [www.AnxietyCentre.com](http://www.AnxietyCentre.com). These tests include the Anxiety Rating Test, Social Anxiety Test, Anxiety Potential Test and Anxiety Disorder Test.