

## **DOUBLE TROUBLE: ANXIETY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

**By: Nancy D. Losinno, LCSW, CASAC  
Employee Assistance Program Manager**

Practically everyone who comes asking for help in a general mental health setting has experienced anxiety at some time in their life. Anxiety is a most dreaded of human emotions and can range from mild sweaty palms, to racing thoughts, heart palpitations and inability to concentrate. Some people are quite adept at controlling the sources of anxiety in their lives, while others must struggle on a daily basis, especially when they are going through periods of emotional turmoil or stress. For these reasons, many “at risk” individuals might turn to substances to help them keep anxiety at bay.

What people may not know about anxiety is that it is one of the common human emotions. It can be the result of making positive changes in one’s life that the person may have welcomed but still finds uncomfortable. Anxiety can be increased when you are forced to make changes following a loss: a death, a promotion, a loss of job, divorce, retirement, etc. Because we may not have experienced any of these issues before, our mind struggles to adapt or adjust. Anxiety can also be a signal of imminent danger such as when we overspend and know that the checkbook will not be balanced this month. The feeling of anxiety tells us to let up on the car accelerator as we round a particularly sharp turn. Anxiety in these situations is a useful indicator that we are aware of our surroundings and the impact of our own behavior on our lives.

Overwhelming anxiety, however, can be difficult to understand. There are some individuals who are more at risk for anxiety because they have a family history of anxiety disorders. Certain common substances such as caffeine taken in excess can create anxiety in vulnerable individuals, and should therefore be avoided. Appetite suppressant aids can also create anxiety and heart palpitations and could cause serious harm.

The most challenging cases to diagnose cause or effect are those involving alcohol or substances of abuse. The withdrawal pattern from alcohol intoxication usually involves the individual experiencing some anxiety or psycho-motor agitation. At one end of the continuum, central nervous system agitation takes the form of irritability and can continue on through a slight tremulousness, to shakiness in the body. The most extreme form is a stereotypical withdrawal syndrome which includes sweats, shaking, vomiting, or DT’s (in chronic alcoholics). Persons who are withdrawing from alcohol may experience overwhelming anxiety, accompanying these physical symptoms, and may resort to resuming drinking in order to feel “normal.” If a person does not disclose their drinking behavior if they seek outside help, they may be misdiagnosed as having an anxiety disorder. Mixing alcohol and medications for anxiety disorders can have lethal consequences, as well as prolonging a process of addiction.

Other substances of abuse (cocaine, marijuana, etc.) also present anxiety issues. Did you know that the use of marijuana in some vulnerable individuals can open the door for a more serious psychiatric disorder because marijuana is a hallucinogenic drug? People underestimate marijuana for its power to ruin lives and create a “failure to flourish” syndrome, especially in young people. Cocaine and other drugs that “rev up the system” can create anxiety and depression as the person comes down from an episode of usage. This anxiety and depression can precipitate return to usage, and lay the groundwork for the process of addiction.

All drugs have side effects, though individuals who deliberately use alcohol and psycho-active substances for their mood-changing properties may not count on the “down-side” of their substances of abuse. Alcohol is our number one drug of abuse and is a legal one. Other drugs, even those prescribed for bona fide medical or psychiatric illnesses, can create anxiety or when mixed with other substances can certainly create much discomfort. Especially during the holiday season, when many people can become sad or melancholy, it is important to remember the potential for accidents at home or in the car, when there has been too much imbibing or when medications have been mixed with alcohol.

As always, if you are concerned about any of these issues in yourself or a family member you can call EAP at X4567 Mon-Fri 9-5. We are located in Bldg. 490, at the Occupational Medicine Clinic. At other times, 24/7 coverage is provided for employees and family members at 1-877-622-4327 where a live, trained counselor is available to help via Cigna Behavioral Health, our EAP contractor. You do NOT need to be a Cigna insured in order to access 24/7 EAP help. The Cigna website [www.cignabehavioral.com](http://www.cignabehavioral.com) is also a tremendous resource, whether you are just browsing for information on a particular subject, or would like a personalized stress assessment on Personal Stress Navigator. For User ID enter: BNL, for Password enter: employee. The website can provide free customized researches for local child care or pet care. You can obtain a free 30 minute legal consultation. It is a very deep website with lots of goodies. As we approach the holiday season, people tend to start substance abuse recoveries after the parties of the holidays have left their mark. It is always better, however, to start off any recovery by getting a thorough professional evaluation and referral rather than attempting a “do-it-yourself” recovery.