

## CHAPTER TWO

### Signs of Anxiety and Depression Caused by Overwhelming Stress

Overwhelming stress can cause a lot of damage before we are even aware of it. We often become obsessed with the things we can no longer control. We often find ourselves in a never-ending spiral and don't know how to pull ourselves out of it. Our health and our enjoyment of life are often hurt or lost. We lose hope.

It is very important that we identify this level of stress before damage is done. There are many ways people react to overwhelming stress. They can be divided into three broad categories.

#### EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Emotional reactions may not always be easy to see, but they impact almost every moment of our lives.

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#### SITUATIONAL STRESS

Situational Stress is an emotional response to a real or perceived threat. It occurs when we think "I have to solve this problem or something bad is going to happen". These types of situations have an ending. We find a solution to the problem and the stress disappears. Situational stress can cause short term health problems.

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#### ANXIETY

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease. It is typically about an upcoming event or an unknown outcome. It often results in compulsive behavior or panic attacks. Some signs of Anxiety are:

- **Excessive worry**
- **Sleep problems** – trouble falling asleep or staying asleep or waking up feeling wired with your mind racing without being able to calm yourself down.

- **Irrational fears** – these may not always be obvious. In fact, they may not surface until we face a specific situation and discover we are incapable of overcoming our fear.
- **Muscle tension** – near constant muscle tension like clenching your jaw or balling your fists
- **Chronic indigestion** – Irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and/or diarrhea
- **Self-consciousness**
- **Panic Attacks**
- **Compulsive behaviors** – either mental (like telling ourselves “*It’ll be alright*” over and over again), or physical (like constantly straightening things over and over again).

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## DEPRESSION

Depression is a feeling of deep, deep sadness, despondency, and dejection. It negatively affects how we feel, the way we think, and how we act. It causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in things we used to enjoy. It is common in dialysis patients and is often a natural reaction to our situation. Some signs of depression are: \*

- **Always feeling sad**
- **Loss of interest** or pleasure in things we once enjoyed
- **Changes in appetite** – weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting
- **Trouble sleeping** or sleeping too much
- **Loss of energy** or increased fatigue
- **Increase in purposeless physical activity** like hand-wringing and pacing or slowed movements and speech
- **Feeling worthless** or guilty
- **Difficulty thinking**, concentrating or making decisions
- **Thoughts of death or suicide**

*\* Please note that some of these signs are also a natural, physical result of dialysis and do not necessarily point to depression. These are only general signs of depression.*

## BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS

Behavioral reactions are often easier to notice. They are often noticed by our family and caregivers.

- **Addiction** – To alcohol, drug, cigarettes, overeating, gambling, etc. This list is endless.
- **Aggression** – This can be minor and temporary, or it can evolve into frequent volatile mood swings. It can be abusive toward others or toward ourselves.
- **Insomnia** – Our thoughts may spiral out of control in the quiet of night.
- **Inability to Stay Awake** – Stress and tension cause our brains to work overtime and may create excessive fatigue, especially during the day.
- **Withdrawal** – Our self-esteem and confidence take a hit. We may no longer believe in our ability to cope with social situations and begin to shut down and isolate.

## PHYSICAL RESPONSES

Many of us don't realize the physical damage that anxiety and depression can cause. Because we are already in a weakened state, this damage can be more severe on us than on those who are not on dialysis. There are a lot of overlapping issues involved with anxiety and depression.

- **Headaches**
- **Muscle Aches** – pain and/or decreased range of motion
- **Bodily Damage**, both internal and external
  - Stomach issues
  - Changes in vision
  - Loss of our ability to breathe naturally
  - Damage to our hearts
  - Damage to our nervous system
  - Damage to our reproductive system
  - Increased risk of certain cancers

# Patient Stories



## William

Patient is a 30 year old 278lb male with falling GFR and rising Creatinine. His physician group has told him to get ready for dialysis. He is not eligible for transplant listing since he is over weight. He has lost 25 pounds since January but still needs to lose another 28 pounds before he can be tested. His medical team put him on steroids nine months ago and he gained over seventy five pounds! The team finally took him off of Prednisone on Monday. This will help him lose the needed weight.

He is frightened and scared about everything that is happening to him. To make matters worse he can not get information from the physician group about his blood type. He has a very large family and many people want to donate. This refusal by the team is causing even more anxiety. He wants to be proactive in finding a donor blood type match.

## James

James was depressed from the time of his diagnosis of ESRD. He continued in a downward spiral for months causing friction within his family of four. He became bitter and mean. His wife and daughters had to leave the family home and find other living arrangements which were difficult because of financial problems caused by ESRD.

James's wife reached out for help for him. He would not talk with us for two months. Finally he reached out to us and we were able to convince him to go to his primary care physician for help. He was prescribed an anti-depression med and received counseling and advocacy from NKF. I am sad to report that it was too late to save the marriage but he now has a wonderful relationship with his ex-wife and children.