



Stress, Anxiety, and Depression: What's the Difference?

Most people feel stressed, anxious or down from time to time. These feelings can come up during challenging seasons in life—when family responsibilities begin to pile up, when money is tight, when someone is grieving, when caregiving becomes a heavy load, or when our own health concerns affect daily life. However, they can also show up during seasons that are supposed to be enjoyable, such as summer, when there may be changes in routines, social gatherings, increased family travel or plans and changes in weather and time. While stress, anxiety and depression are a common experience for many, they are not exactly the same. Being able to understand the difference can help you better understand your own experience with these feelings and when it may be time to seek support from your care team.

What is Stress?

Stress is your body and mind's reaction to life pressure, change or challenges. It can often occur when you are carrying too many demands at once or when something difficult is happening in your life. Stress can be related to work, school, parenting, caregiving, finances, relationships, grief, health concerns, or major life changes.

Stress is not always a “bad” or harmful thing. In small amounts, it can help you stay alert and respond to challenges. But when stress lasts a long time or feels constant, it can begin to affect one's sleep, mood, physical health, and relationships.

Common signs of stress:

- Feeling tense, overwhelmed, or easily irritated
- Headaches, muscle tension, or stomach upset
- Feeling mentally or physically drained
- Feeling like you can't slow down
- Trouble sleeping
- Difficulty focusing
- Changes in appetite

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is more than everyday worry. It often feels like constant fear, nervousness, or dread that is hard to control—even when there is no immediate danger. Some people with anxiety feel like their body is stuck in “high alert.”

Anxiety can affect daily life, relationships, work, school, and physical health. It can also show up as irritability, panic, trouble concentrating, or feeling exhausted from always being “on.”

Common signs of anxiety:

- Constant worry or overthinking
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling restless, shaky, or on edge
- Fast heartbeat or tightness in the chest
- Trouble relaxing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling like something bad might happen
- Avoiding situations because of fear or worry

What Is Depression?

Depression is more than having a bad day or feeling sad after something physically or emotionally painful happens. Depression affects mood, energy, motivation, thinking, and interest in daily life. It's a lasting low mood that can make even simple tasks feel too much to bear.

A person with depression may feel down, numb, hopeless, or unlike themselves most of the day for two weeks or longer. In some cases, depression doesn't always look like straight sadness; it can also look like being irritable, angry, isolated or disconnected.

Common signs of depression:

- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless
- Low energy or constant fatigue
- Sleeping too much or not enough
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Losing interest in things you usually enjoy
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or like a burden
- Pulling away from family, friends, or activities
- Feeling like life is harder than it should be

How are they Different?

Stress, anxiety, and depression can feel similar because they can all affect your mood, energy, sleep, concentration, and overall sense of well-being. A person may feel overwhelmed, tired, irritable, withdrawn, or unlike themselves with any of the three. At the same time, they are different in important ways.

- Stress is often connected to pressure or life demands,
- Anxiety usually feels like ongoing worry or fear that is hard to turn off
- Depression often shows up as persistent sadness, hopelessness, low motivation, or loss of interest in daily life.

How Can My Behavioral Health Integration Team Help?

Your Behavioral Health Integration (BH2I) team is here to support your physical health and emotional health. Together they can help you manage stress, anxiety, depression or other life concerns that may affect your sleep, energy, relationships and overall well-being.

- Listening and helping to make sense of what you're feeling
- Providing support in clinic with brief visits or follow up plans
- Connecting you with resources and support
- Identifying cultural supports important to healing

A Reminder

Stress, anxiety, and depression are common, and they are treatable. You don't need to handle them alone, and you do not need to be in crisis to ask for help. Asking for help is not a weakness. It is a step toward caring for your health.

Bibliography

Depression - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). (n.d.).
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>

Anxiety - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). (n.d.).
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>

Konstantopoulou, G., Iliou, T., Karaivazoglou, K. et al. (2020), Associations between (sub) clinical stress- and anxiety symptoms in mentally healthy individuals and in major depression: a cross-sectional clinical study. BMC Psychiatry 20, 428 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02836-1>