

Anxiety and Stress in Parkinson's Disease

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Patients with PD often ask whether stress affects their PD symptoms. The answer is a definite "Yes!" While we don't know the exact mechanism for this, it does appear that many patients describe worsening of symptoms, including tremor, slowness and difficulty walking when in stressful situations.

Frequently patients describe stressful events that seemed to be associated with the initial onset of their PD symptoms. For example, many noted a tremor that appeared or was noticed following a major operation, a head injury or the diagnosis of another condition, such as thyroid disease. In other instances, symptoms were noted after a particularly stressful event, such as the death of a spouse or other family member.

Once the diagnosis of PD is established, stress remains a common cause of worsening symptoms. For example, having houseguests for the holiday may be a happy occasion but it may also be stressful, and patients frequently describe worsening of their symptoms during these times. Patients describe the stress of suddenly needing to go to the bathroom as another source of anxiety that can increase their symptoms and slow them down, making it difficult to get there in time. Even going to see the doctor may be a stressful event that can temporarily worsen symptoms.

Managing stress can be challenging but can often be done by keeping some simple ideas in mind: Plan ahead! Ask for help! Build in extra time!

During holidays, for example, it might be a good idea to enlist the help of family members to help with guests; perhaps they can house some of the visitors or help with food preparation and clean-up. Just because the person with PD has always been the main 'do-er' when it comes time to entertain doesn't mean that they can't begin to accept some help. Perhaps you can entertain one or two people at a time, instead of a whole houseful of visitors. Also, most guests are happy to help out when asked...so ask!

With regard to bathroom visits, it is sometimes helpful to schedule them at regular intervals so that getting there does not become such an emergency. For instance, use the restroom every 2-3 hours whether you feel the urge or not.

Doctor visits can be less stressful if you plan to arrive early and bring an updated list of medications and a list of questions to ask the doctor. Think about changes made at your last visit....did they help? Did they cause or lessen any side-effects?

Another good strategy for stress reduction is to practice a discipline such as yoga or meditation in which controlled breathing is taught. The breathing techniques learned in either program can be an excellent way to get stress under control in many situations.

Anxiety is another frequent symptom of PD and often goes hand-in-hand with stress. Anxiety or even panic attacks, often accompanied by depression, may occur because of changes in serotonin and norepinephrine in PD. Family members will say things like "She worries about everything!"

Anxiety may also respond to some of the stress reduction ideas listed above. Finally, it is often helpful to treat anxiety with a low-dose SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) such as Lexapro or Paxil. While a benzodiazapine medication such as Xanax may be OK to take once in a while, frequent use may affect balance or thinking and are best avoided if possible.

In summary, stress and anxiety can be significant factors in PD and quality of life for some patients. Discuss these issues with your PD doctor and work together to find the best coping strategies for you.