

CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS · 5.2

ADHD and Anxiety: Why They Travel Together

Anxiety and ADHD co-occur far above chance. Around half of adults with ADHD will meet criteria for an anxiety disorder at some point. This is why they travel together, and what to do about it.

FOR

Adults with ADHD, anxiety, or both

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

ADHD and Anxiety: Why They Travel Together

The link in plain terms

- **Around 47 percent of adults with ADHD also meet anxiety criteria.** That figure comes from the US National Comorbidity Survey Replication, with similar rates in UK and European cohorts. Generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety and panic disorder are all over-represented in ADHD samples.
- **Several mechanisms contribute.** Shared underlying biology in prefrontal-subcortical circuits and noradrenaline signalling. Anxiety as a downstream consequence of the difficulty of living with unmanaged ADHD. Anxiety as a coping mechanism for ADHD forgetfulness. Misdiagnosis of one as the other. And sometimes genuine independent co-occurrence.
- **The two often need disentangling.** ADHD inattention is context-dependent and worse on boring tasks. Anxiety-driven inattention is more uniform and worse when threat or worry is salient. The childhood pattern matters: ADHD requires onset before age twelve.

How it shows up

- **Anxiety treatment that helps but does not finish the job.** A common adult pattern. Anxiety responds to SSRIs or CBT, but attention, task initiation and emotional regulation still feel difficult. The underlying ADHD has not been addressed.
- **Hypervigilance as a workaround.** Many adults describe relying on anxiety to remember things, prepare for events, or stay on task. The mechanism works in the short term and is exhausting in the long term.
- **Stimulants amplify anxiety for some, improve it for others.** Individual response varies. Where stimulants worsen anxiety despite formulation and timing adjustment, atomoxetine is sometimes the better choice; it can improve both ADHD and co-occurring anxiety in the same patient.
- **Women are particularly likely to be diagnosed with anxiety first.** Female ADHD presentation is more inattentive and less hyperactive, often labelled as anxiety or depression before ADHD is considered. Many women reach an ADHD assessment in their thirties or forties after years of anxiety treatment.
- **Treatment usually addresses both.** NICE NG87 recognises the co-occurrence. CBT for anxiety is more effective when the ADHD picture is taken into account. ADHD medication choice can be informed by the anxiety picture.

What helps and where to start

- **Treat the most impairing condition first.** If anxiety is severely disabling, anxiety treatment usually starts first. If ADHD difficulties dominate, ADHD treatment may produce useful improvement in both.
- **ADHD-informed therapy where possible.** Standard CBT for anxiety can struggle with ADHD-related follow-through between sessions. Therapy that takes ADHD into account is increasingly available and often fits this picture better.
- **NeuroFX offers private ADHD assessment with anxiety considered.** Where anxiety has been treated without full resolution and ADHD-type difficulties have been present since childhood, an ADHD assessment is a sensible next step. We consider the anxiety picture from the start and prescribe accordingly.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if anxiety has been treated without full resolution and ADHD-type difficulties have been present since childhood. NHS routes for both exist; Right to Choose in England applies to ADHD. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis.

SOURCES

NICE NG87; NICE CG113; Faraone et al. 2021 (Neurosci Biobehav Rev); Kessler et al. 2006 (Am J Psychiatry); Katzman et al. 2017 (BMC Psychiatry)

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

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