

Emotional health involves being aware of your feelings, mood, and behavior. The terms mental health and behavioral health are often used too. Positive emotional health means being able to accept feelings and to find ways to enjoy life despite challenges. Emotional health, just like physical health and the other dimensions of wellness, is an important part of overall well-being.



Emotional health is important for all of us—people with epilepsy, family members, caregivers, and friends. Stress, depression, and anxiety can have a direct impact on our emotional health. These problems can also affect how we feel physically.

What are common reactions that people with epilepsy may feel?

Epilepsy can affect your emotional health in many ways and at different times. Changes may happen with the first seizure, when someone is told they have epilepsy, and later if seizures are not controlled.

- ▶ Seizures can result in a loss of predictability in a person's life. If, or when, seizures may occur cannot be predicted.
- ▶ The loss of predictability may make people living with epilepsy and their caregivers feel insecure. If these feelings are not addressed, symptoms of depression and anxiety may develop. Family or friends may become overprotective and family conflicts may occur.



- ▶ People living with epilepsy may not recognize their reactions at first. It's important to talk openly with the healthcare provider about the diagnosis and how you feel at the first visit or as early as possible.
- ▶ People may also worry that others will treat them differently because of their epilepsy. This can affect one's self-confidence and how they feel about themselves.

People may feel scared, worried, or angry later, especially if seizures are not controlled or other challenges happen. In short, coping with the emotional impact of epilepsy can feel like a roller coaster, with many ups and downs.

Below are some examples of how epilepsy may impact your emotional health.

- ▶ Fear, sadness, or shock after being diagnosed with epilepsy
- ▶ Worry about when or where the next seizure may happen
- ▶ Anger if epilepsy prevents you from driving or doing activities independently
- ▶ Being afraid or embarrassed to tell others about your epilepsy
- ▶ Feeling stressed

Sometimes the feelings can be overwhelming and affect all aspects of a person's life. Symptoms of depression and anxiety may develop. It's important to tell your healthcare provider if these feelings last or if you are unable to enjoy your usual activities.

Does epilepsy and seizure medicines affect emotional health and behavior?

Certain areas of the brain that are commonly affected by epilepsy play an important role in our emotions. People with seizures in these areas may have an increased risk of depression or anxiety compared to the general population. Here are some other examples:

- ▶ Fear could be part of a seizure if it happens suddenly and the same way each time.
- ▶ Some people may notice changes between seizures or after a seizure, such as mood swings, irritability, or feeling more emotionally sensitive.
- ▶ Some seizure medicines may make a person more irritable, down, or depressed. This happens more often in people who have a mood disorder or had problems in the past. A family history of mood problems may also increase the risk of medicines affecting mood.
- ▶ Some medicines used to treat seizures may also help mood and anxiety disorders.
- ▶ Occasionally, some seizure medicines can cause suicidal thoughts. This is more likely to happen in people with a personal or family history of mental health problems.



Can having epilepsy make a person more likely to have depression or anxiety?

Anxiety and depression happen more often in people with epilepsy than in people without epilepsy. About 1 in 3 people with epilepsy may have difficulties with anxiety or depression at some point in their life. These problems happen more often in people with uncontrolled epilepsy. Yet the relation between depression, anxiety, and epilepsy is complex. People with anxiety or depression also have an increased risk of developing epilepsy. We still don't know why this

happens, but we know that epilepsy and these mental health problems affect the brain in similar ways.

It's important to recognize and treat changes in mood and anxiety quickly, as they can affect quality of life (and that of the family) more than the seizures alone. Also, failure to treat mood problems can worsen seizure control.

- ▶ People may be more prone to side effects of medicines.
- ▶ People may have more trouble remembering or taking medicines regularly.
- ▶ Certain seizure medications may make mood worse.
- ▶ People may have more trouble coping with stress, which can worsen seizures in some people.

Talk to your healthcare team as soon as any problems begin and if changes arise.

Why is emotional health important for caregivers?

Loved ones and caregivers should pay attention to their own emotional health too. Caring for others and living with epilepsy can be stressful. Often family and friends need to take time away from work, school, or other family commitments. Meeting competing needs causes added stress and challenges. Unhealthy caregivers cannot give their best care to their loved ones.

- ▶ Talk to your own primary care provider about your feelings and stressors
- ▶ Seek a support group or mental health professional for help

What can I do to manage or improve my emotional health?

The first step is being aware of your emotional health and seeking help from a healthcare professional when you have questions or concerns. Some people believe that there is a stigma associated with seeking help for your mood or stress. However, just as you should get a physical check-up for your body, you should also get an emotional check-up by talking to your provider about any emotional health concerns. There are several activities and behaviors you can build into your routine too:

- ▶ **Build a social network.** Positive social and family relationships may help you find support during difficult times. Also, engaging in enjoyable activities with others may help lift your mood.
- ▶ **Exercise regularly.** It doesn't matter what form of physical activity you choose—just move.
- ▶ **Eat a healthy diet.** Nourishing your body with healthy food choices has added benefits for your mental health and well-being.
- ▶ **Reduce your stress.** Many stress management techniques, such as mindfulness, meditation, creating art, or journaling, can lessen your feelings of depression.
- ▶ **Practice new thinking strategies.** Are there other ways you can look at your problems and find a silver lining? Problems are real, as are the feelings we associate with them. But how we think about our problems can make them worse, or better than they first appear. The Managing Epilepsy Well (MEW) Network (epilepsy.com/learn/managing-your-epilepsy/self-management-programs) has programs that can help.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

- ▶ **Volunteer and help others.** Consider helping someone who is less fortunate or volunteering for an organization that is of interest to you. Devoting time to help others will give you the chance to interact with them and may give you a feeling of accomplishment. Find out how to get involved with the Epilepsy Foundation (epilepsy.com/make-difference/get-involved) nationally or in your community (epilepsy.com/affiliates).
- ▶ **Practice gratitude.** It isn't easy to be objective when life and its problems are overwhelming. But, if you pause and reflect, there are people and things that you can be grateful for in your life. These can give you a sense of perspective as well as hope for the future.
- ▶ **Ask for help.** We would all love to be self-sufficient, but sometimes trying to deal with your problems on your own can be too difficult. Everyone needs a helping hand.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- ▶ Emotional Health: epilepsy.com/emotional-health
- ▶ Mood and Behavior: epilepsy.com/moods-behavior
- ▶ Epilepsy & Seizures 24/7 Helpline: 1-800-332-1000, en Español 1-866-748-8008, epilepsy.com/helpline
- ▶ National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255