

## Anxiety and Trauma Disorders Cluster

This cluster includes some of the most common and pervasive disorders (the anxiety disorders) along with, sadly, those disorders which arise as a result of accident, injury, trauma and abuse. The greatest challenge of these disorders is just how difficult it is to assess the true severity of each individual presentation. Assessment is complicated by the fact that the manner in which these illnesses present varies, largely in response to the subjective experience of the individual. Two family members may be raised in essentially the same environment or may experience the same traumatic event yet each may present with a different degree of disability and illness.

It is important to bear in mind that persons with a disorder in this cluster often suffer from co-occurring disorders, not only within this cluster but also in others. For example, it is not uncommon to see persons with generalized anxiety and panic disorders. Similarly, anxiety disorders frequently co-occur with depression.

Further, many of the medications used to treat these illnesses are “controlled substances,” which have the potential for abuse and dependence. Although evidence and thinking are evolving, many thought leaders and clinicians assert that only the most severe cases of anxiety (and trauma-related anxiety) should be treated with medication.

Like any mental disorder, a thorough assessment and initial treatment with psychotherapy is indicated for the vast majority of people presenting with these symptoms. Only after initial interventions are undertaken (and response(s) assessed) should you consider medication. Even in the most severe cases, the best evidence supports the use of medications **and** psychotherapeutic interventions. Bear in mind that medications should be used only in combination with psychotherapy or supportive care (i.e., support groups or other forms of community/family support). Finally, these disorders may even require significant life changes (e.g. moving, changing jobs or relationships, changing careers) in order to resolve.