What most people mean when they refer to ‘mental illness’ is anxiety and depression. Anxiety is the [most common mental health problem in the US](https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/facts-statistics), affecting nearly 20% of the population each year. We often hear the terms ‘anxiety and depression’ together and again this is based on fact, as according to the same website nearly half of those with anxiety will also have depression. Depression separately only affects around 7% of the US population.

Figures in other countries are similar. In the UK it is estimated that around 1 in 4 people will suffer from a mental illness at some point in their lifetime (McManus al., 2009). These figures are very much estimates, as being exact about the prevalence of mental illness is difficult due to underreporting and differing recording techniques. However, it is clear that anxiety followed by depression are the most commonly experienced mental health problems and that the two disorders often go hand-in-hand.

When someone experiences two or more different diagnoses at once these are considered ‘comorbid’. It is common for individuals with one mental health diagnosis to also have a second, a third and even a fourth. Even if these aren’t official diagnoses it is common to experience a range of difficulties that fall into different diagnostic criteria, such as anxiety and depression.

Anxiety is a very unpleasant illness to experience; it has physical as well as psychological symptoms and usually impacts on an individual’s ability to enjoy their lives. Therefore, it is easy to see how this might lead to low mood which is the precursor to depression. While anxiety is highly treatable, only about 40% of sufferers ever seek treatment due to the nature of the symptoms themselves. Anxiety that remains untreated tends to lead to a feeling of hopelessness, which again has the potential to contribute to low mood and depression.

While we don’t know for sure why depression and anxiety so often come together, there is some evidence of a biological connection with one study claiming to identify the connecting mechanism in the brain (Magalhaes et al., 2010). We also know that they have overlapping symptoms, for example reduced desire, problems with sleep, and issues with social interaction.

However, they have many differences; anxiety is rooted in concerns for the future and worries about unknown and uncontrollable aspects of our lives. Depression in contrast is often focused on ruminations about the past. While their comorbid presentation makes diagnosis and treatment more complicated, both of these disrupted psychological patterns can be managed and improved through a combination of medication and therapeutic interventions.

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