Dr. Tim Jennings, a psychiatrist at TMS Chattanooga, explains the link between anxiety and depression as a kind of reinforcing loop. He explains that anxiety causes stress and inflammation in the body, both of which cause changes in the brain that may contribute to depression. “Then when someone is depressed, the higher circuits of the brain that calm the fear circuitry become inactive, and that can reinforce the anxiety,” he says.

This seemingly vicious cycle of reinforcement does not tell the whole story about anxiety and depression. Each disorder carries its own symptoms and unique causes. Understanding these symptoms and causes may give you the information you need to begin the process of a diagnosis.

Recognizing Symptoms

Although there are many types of anxiety disorders, general anxiety disorder (GAD) is the disorder most often joined by depression. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), the symptoms of GAD may include:

- unrealistic worry - everyday tasks become unmanageable and cause intense fear and worry
- bodily fatigue - tense muscles, and overall general fatigue
- living on edge - an inability to get to sleep at night or an edginess at work or home
- trouble managing day-to-day living - when simple tasks like tidying a bathroom or running to the supermarket seem insurmountable

Are you living on edge—never feeling peaceful, never calm? Do you agonize over your fear and worry about everyday tasks and events? It may be time to schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist to determine if you are suffering from an anxiety disorder.

Those who suffer from depression often exhibit similar symptoms, as documented by the ADAA. These symptoms often include:

- the blues – feeling down and out for more than two weeks at a time
- fatalistic outlook - seeing the glass as permanently half-empty and an inability to see the bright side of a situation
- neglecting old loves - when something you enjoyed or loved becomes uninteresting
- fatigue - energy loss and that on-edge feeling also associated with anxiety
- despair - contemplation of suicide or death
- unusual sleep patterns - inability to get a good night’s sleep or getting too much sleep
- low self-worth - feeling like you are not good enough and not worth anything
- feelings of indecision - inability to make clear-cut decisions or concentrate on a task at hand

If day-to-day activities feel too difficult to manage, if you’ve had to get out of bed or hard to get your brain to shut off, if your outlook on the world has turned very dark and there seems to be no hope wherever you turn, these feelings may indicate major depressive disorder.

Dr. Jennings agrees. “It’s a common misconception that ‘depression is due to a lack of serotonin’ when it’s actually a complex brain-body disease,” he says. “It affects the endocrine system and the immune system, which ultimately affects the body as a whole.”

Dr. Osborne explains that truly effective treatment involves identifying someone’s unique set of contributing factors — and then addressing those factors. “I will talk to people about what risk factors they may have,” says Dr. Osborne. “We see familial patterns suggesting genetic risks, childhood trauma or chaotic family environments, medical problems like thyroid abnormalities or heart disease, and stressful life events. Frequently, the cause of depression is all of this coming together. How much each one contributes is dependent on the individual case.”

In agreement with Dr. Osborne and Dr. Jennings’ assessments, the NIMH points to a “combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors” as causes of depression.

General anxiety disorder is similarly caused by a combination of factors that range from genetic to environmental. Like

“First Cousins”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), around 40 million American adults have an anxiety disorder, while approximately 14.8 million Americans struggle with major depressive disorder. The NIMH describes anxiety disorders as multifaceted, because there are many different types, and each one manifests itself uniquely depending on the person. Anxiety disorders can include panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias. On the other hand, major depressive disorder manifests itself in feelings of hopelessness or a lack of motivation and disinterest in everyday life. If these feelings last longer than two weeks or if they interfere with day-to-day living, they may be signs of major depressive disorder according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

“One thing I think is important to clarify is that the terms ‘depression’ and ‘anxiety’ are extremely non-specific,” says Dr. Michael Osborne, a psychiatrist at Parkridge Valley’s Adult & Senior Campus. “There are many types of mood and anxiety disorders and we have to try to determine which one a person is suffering from in order to recommend the best treatment.”

Often coupled together, depression and anxiety are referred to as “first cousins.” In spite of their close link, it’s important to distinguish between the two. Neither causes the other directly, as is often mistakenly assumed — it’s usually far more complicated than that. But they may occur simultaneously and often reinforce one another.

Examining the Causes

The close relationship between anxiety and depression can be traced back to the causes of both disorders. The disorders may arise out of similar causes and risk factors.

We often hear depression and anxiety referred to as issues of ‘chemical imbalance.” Dr. Osborne asks us to consider a more nuanced approach to the cause of these disorders. “In my own practice, I don’t use the term ‘chemical imbalance’ because it’s not very accurate,” he says. “It’s easy to think that because antidepressants elevate levels of certain neurotransmitters, that means the person has a deficiency of one of those chemicals—but this is faulty logic.”

Dr. Jennings agrees. “It’s a common misconception that ‘depression is due to a lack of serotonin’ when it’s actually a complex brain-body disease,” he says. “It affects the endocrine system and the immune system, which ultimately affects the body as a whole.”

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- Dr. Tim Jennings
depression, anxiety is a disorder of the brain, and brain imaging has revealed some physi-
cal factors that are involved when a person is 
suffering from an anxiety disorder. Accord-
ing to the NIMH, the part of the brain that 
processes and interprets sensory information 
and the part of the brain that creates memo-
ries are both involved in the increase of fears 
and anxiety.

“The body’s anxiety circuits fire when 
something is upsetting to us,” says Dr. Jen-
nings. “That alert signal is sent to the part 
where we reason and think. There is a direct 
relationship between fear circuitry and the 
reasoning part of the brain. But with anxiety, 
this gets disrupted.”

Getting Treated

Many experts believe the two disorders 
ought to be treated together, but all treat-
ment ought to be determined and moni-
tored by a licensed psychiatrist who un-
derstands you or your loved one’s specific 
experience with anxiety, depression, or both. 
According to the Mayo Clinic, treatment 
for anxiety and depression will often include 
one or more of the following:
• medication
• psychotherapy
• lifestyle changes: sleep, exercise, nutrition

Although the treatments may include 
some or all of these resources, their imple-
mentation will look different in every case 
and situation. “I think it’s important to 
emphasize that psychotherapy can be very 
helpful,” says Dr. Osborne. “There is very 
good evidence that mild to moderate depres-
sion can be effectively treated by counseling 
alone.”

FDA Approved, Drug-Free Depression Treatment

TMS therapy is for individuals who have not received 
adequate results from other depression treatments.

Indications for the treatment may include:
• Little or no benefit from taking antidepressant medication
• Side effects from your medication outweigh the benefit
• Depression has increased your doctor visits for other healthcare conditions
• Depression is affecting your ability to make a living
• Depression has too much control over your life

If any of these apply to you, please 
contact us for a free consultation 
to see if TMS therapy is right for you.

TMSchattanooga.com
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