

Worrying about your heart increases risk for mental health disorders

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For coffee drinkers, a common scenario might involve drinking an extra cup only to end up with a racing heart and a subtle reminder to themselves to cut down the caffeine. But for those who have a different

thinking pattern, one that includes heart-focused anxiety, the racing heart might conclude with the fear of a heart attack and a trip to the emergency room.

It turns out young Latinx adults who experience heart-focused anxiety could be at greater risk for [mental health disorders](#).

"We have [empirical evidence](#) that individual differences in heart-focused anxiety are related to more severe co-occurring anxiety and depressive symptomatology among a particularly at-risk segment of the Latinx population," reports Michael Zvolensky, Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished University Professor of psychology at the University of Houston, in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. The population segment to which Zvolensky refers is Latinx young adults with previous trauma who were born in the United States. Their trauma might include racism related and transgenerational stress.

This is only the second study on heart-related anxiety in the Latinx community, both conducted by Zvolensky.

"In our first study, we assessed middle aged adults, presumably more concerned about their [health](#). This study is unique, however, because even among a group generally too young to experience mounting [health concerns](#), we are seeing a similar pattern, which tells us it's probably relevant to the whole Latinx population," said Zvolensky.

According to previous research, the Latinx population can somaticize mental health problems, meaning they don't view them as mental health issues, but rather turn them into [physical symptoms](#) and report them as such. As examples, anxiety might be reported as a headache or a problem with breathing.

"This population also struggles with a lot of chronic physical health co-

morbidities including heart disease and obesity, so this research is a good fit for a population who tends to blame [mental health issues](#) on physical ailments, which generates greater mental health risk," said Zvolensky, who is also director of the Anxiety and Health Research Laboratory/Substance Use Treatment Clinic at UH.

To make matters worse, treatment for mental health conditions among Latinx populations is often limited or nonexistent.

"Latinx persons underutilize [mental health services](#) compared to non-Latinx whites and are more likely to use primary care for the delivery of mental health services which are often inadequate for successfully addressing mental health problems," said Zvolensky, who created and assessed reports from 169 college-aged, Latinx college students who had been exposed to trauma.

"Results indicated that heart-focused anxiety was a statistically significant predictor for general depression and overall anxiety," said Zvolensky.

Clinically, the results of the study could ultimately guide the development of specialized intervention strategies.

"We can screen for heart-focused anxiety and that's much more efficient and precise than screening for a whole range of mental health problems," said Zvolensky. "If you reduce heart-focused anxiety, you do that person a great service because you're likely decreasing their risk for a whole range of [mental health problems](#). And that's called precision medicine."

More information: Nubia A. Mayorga et al, Heart-Focused Anxiety Among Trauma-Exposed Latinx Young Adults: Relations to General Depression, Suicidality, Anxious Arousal, and Social Anxiety, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2021). [DOI:](#)

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