

More people on antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications during pandemic

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To cope with mental health conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, people are increasingly turning to prescription drugs like antidepressants and benzodiazepines, which are commonly used as anti-anxiety medications.

A report released this month by Express Scripts, a pharmacy benefit management program, found that the use of [prescription drugs](#) to treat mental health conditions increased more than 20% between mid-February and mid-March, peaking the week of March 15, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a [pandemic](#). During that same time frame, [prescriptions](#) for anti-anxiety medications rose 34%, while prescriptions for antidepressants increased by 18%. Of the prescriptions filled during that time, more than three-quarters were new prescriptions.

Prior to the pandemic, prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications decreased 12% between 2015 and 2019, the report found.

"We're using antidepressants more and more to treat both anxiety and depression," said Michael Liebowitz, a professor of clinical psychiatry at

Columbia University. But he said the recent spike in anti-anxiety medications is likely due to the fact that "traditional anxiety medications have the advantage of being quick-acting, unlike antidepressants, which can take six to 10 weeks to begin working."

Liebowitz, like many mental health experts, anticipated the pandemic would have a significant impact on mental health. He called the pandemic "a huge added stress factor," saying that it has made coping incredibly difficult for people vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

"The two things human beings crave are control and certainty," said Ann Rosen Spector, a psychologist based in Philadelphia. "Whenever you have a loss of control or a great deal of uncertainty, anxiety is likely to increase. The pandemic is like that on steroids. No one knows where it is, no one knows who's going to get it next, no one knows how to keep everyone in their world safe, and no one knows how long it's going to last."

Spector said her practice has "never been busier." Many of her patients have increased the number of therapy sessions a week, and a handful of new patients have contacted her. Some of her patients who had stopped therapy because they were doing better have returned.

"Clearly people are taking more substances to control their anxiety," she said. "We know that alcohol usage is up, marijuana usage is up. But I'm trying to tell patients to try a variety of other things to see if they can get their anxiety in control before taking a pill for it."

Liebowitz expects this increase in anxiety and depression to last awhile, due to the uncertainty that people have to live with. But the rising number of prescriptions for anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants doesn't worry him.

"I'd much rather have people get treated than they

don't," he said. "And this is going to go on for a couple years. It's not going to disappear in a month."

Liebowitz hopes the pandemic will spur better treatments for [mental health conditions](#).

"In the last few years, there's been a renewed interest in mental health treatments," Liebowitz said. "I hope that this will accelerate all of that, because there is going to be a huge need for mental health treatments."

For those experiencing anxiety, Spector recommended trying meditation or deep breathing, and taking breaks from the news throughout the day. She also said seeing friends over video chat or exercising for 20 minutes may help people relax. If anxious feelings persist, therapists are professionally trained to equip people with tools that can help them control their anxiety.

"If you've done all of that, then I tell people, "Take the pill if you're still anxious," " Spector said. "But doing something to distract from your [anxiety](#) will cause it to reduce at some point."

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