



# Importance Of Addressing Depression And Anxiety In Obese Patients

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## Abstract

- The article highlights the increased likelihood of adverse mental health effects of depression and anxiety that typically accompany uncomplicated obesity, the importance of addressing these mental health effects, findings that can indicate a mental health screening necessity, and ways to effectively treat obesity-accompanied mental health disorders.
- The early diagnosis of these adverse mental health effects of obesity ensures proper care and treatment for the holistic well-being of the patient.
- Depression and anxiety in an individual can be multifactorial and can be caused and aggravated by several different factors in a patient's life. The article focuses on the role of obesity and the increased likelihood of depression and anxiety in obese patients.

## Introduction

- A BMI greater than 25 is considered 'Overweight', and a BMI greater than 30 is considered 'Obese'.<sup>4</sup>
- Obesity is linked to leading causes of death in the United States, including conditions like diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer.<sup>5</sup> Along with causing new metabolic dysfunctions, obesity also hastens and aggravates pre-existing physical conditions such as good heart and lung functioning and the risk of cancer, and is considered a life-threatening disease.<sup>1</sup>
- Physical effects are taken seriously, mental health adversities that typically accompany obesity are overlooked: which could be due to a multitude of reasons including the lack of awareness of mental health issues accompanying obesity, provider time constraints, and a larger concern with only the physiology of obesity, among other possible reasons.

## Why depression & anxiety in obese patients?

- While considering the connection between obesity and depression,
- it is seen that uncomplicated obesity often results from the lack of physical exercise and an excess of caloric intake much greater than that being expended by a patient.
  - An increased risk of depression is linked to the decreased physical activity and increased caloric intake, which can consequently result in an increase in the occurrence of obesity.<sup>19</sup>
  - Obesity also has a direct consequence on the brain, and evidence shows that obesity is associated with poor cognitive functioning.<sup>20</sup>
  - Another possible reasoning for the connection between obesity and depression and anxiety is that an individual can continue eating not out of need or hunger but to feel a sense of happiness or gratification.

## Effects of depression and anxiety in obese patients

- Depression is defined as "serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think & how you act"<sup>7</sup>.
- Anxiety is defined as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry."<sup>8</sup>
- Obesity could be one of the leading causes of depression.
- Being obese could lead to lower energy levels and increased physical and mental fatigue.
- One study concluded that obesity was associated with general fatigue.
- Another study inferred that obese individuals who were emotionally fatigued showed more positive symptoms on the spectrum of depressive symptoms.
- General fatigue could, in-turn, lead to a decreased need to do activities and can also lead to a lack of mental stimulation and a lack of brain endorphin release, contributing to a depressed state of mind.
- Associated stress, negative emotions of sadness and emotional drain, pressure to lose weight, lack of support from friends and family, lack of guidance on dealing with obesity, can also trigger feelings of sadness and lack of self-worth, which can also contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety.

## Early diagnosis through screening

- Given the strong correlation of depression and anxiety in patients with obesity, it would be beneficial to the patient's well-being to address them more thoroughly.
- Patient should be encouraged and given the space to accept and seek help for mental health.
- A targeted conversation with the patient could be a good starting point to find out about a patient's general mental health, and to also introduce the screening questionnaires to the patient.
- A more accurate screening for depression involves starting with the commonly used screening tools- Patient Health Questionnaire PHQ-2<sup>22</sup> and PHQ-9<sup>23</sup>. PHQ-2 is the first step in screening for depression and entails answering 2 questions regarding the patient's mental state in the past 2 weeks.

## Early diagnosis through screening (contd.)

- A positive screen on the PHQ-2 involves getting a score of 3 or higher. Patients who get a score of 3 or higher on the PHQ-2 should be further evaluated with the PHQ-9, along with a direct interview.
- The screening for anxiety can also start with a clear conversation with the patient with diagnosed obesity about the patient's mental well-being, and by using open-ended questions like "how are you doing?", "how are things with school/work/at home?", etc. A more accurate screening is done through the GAD-7 questionnaire<sup>24</sup>
- An assessment and a diagnosis of depression or anxiety warrants addressing & treating the patient appropriately for the same.

## Management and treatment options

- Behavioral modifications to address their mental health.
- SSRIs (Eg: Fluoxetine, Sertraline)
- "...the FDA approved anti-depressant Bupropion should be encouraged as the first-line treatment for obese patients due to its association with long-term weight loss.<sup>15"</sup>
- Weight-loss

## Conclusion

- For an obese patient who might not even recognize that they have a mental health issue, the PA can be the person who offers the resources and guidance for better health management.
- Any patient, and especially ones with an established diagnosis of obesity must be monitored and offered resources to get mental health help if and when they need it.
- While obesity may be just one of the many factors influencing the mental health conditions in discussion, but given the correlation of obesity to an increased likelihood of depression and anxiety, the need to screen for mental health, especially during routine medical visits addressing obesity, is crucial to the patient's overall well-being.

## References

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\*Other references available upon request