Young People's Anxiety Disorders Tend to Persist Despite Treatment

More durable treatments and a better mental health wellness model are needed to help youth with common psychiatric illnesses.

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Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders among children and young adults. Now, new findings published in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry suggest that a majority of youths who receive evidence-based treatment for these disorders are more likely to remain chronically ill, reports Elsevier.

In an initial study of 488 young people, researchers found that 12 weeks of treatment with the antidepressant sertraline and/or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was effective in reducing anxiety and improving functioning. For the follow-up study nearly six years later, researchers reassessed 319 youths and young adults (average age 17) for an additional four years.

Findings showed that 22 percent of participants who received 12 weeks of treatment stayed in remission; 30 percent met the guidelines for an anxiety diagnosis, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, at each annual assessment; and 48 percent relapsed.

In addition, scientists determined that factors corresponding with an increased likelihood of sustaining long-term remission included showing clinical improvement after 12 weeks of treatment, being male, not having a social phobia diagnosis, living in a well-functioning family and experiencing fewer negative life events.

"When you see so few kids stay non-symptomatic after receiving the best treatments we have, that's discouraging," said Golda Ginsburg, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and one of the study's principal investigators. "However, we found no difference in outcomes by treatment type. Children were just as likely to stay in remission after treatment with medication as they were after treatment with CBT."

Researchers concluded that although three months of therapy may seem like enough time for kids to achieve lifelong recovery, youngsters need more durable treatments and a better model for mental health to further assist youth with anxiety issues.

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