

Depression and Anxiety: The Impact of Spinal Cord Injury on Mental Health

Summary

- > This fact sheet highlights why mental health matters for people with spinal cord injury (SCI).
- > The information came from surveys completed from 2022 to 2026 by 1,149 participants. Participants were 59 years old, on average.
- > Most participants did not report moderate-to-severe depression or anxiety symptoms. However, some participants did report depression, anxiety, or mental distress.
- > Rates of depressive, anxiety and mental distress symptoms within the past 30 days were relatively low.
- > Most participants reported little or no interference with daily activities due to depressive or anxiety symptoms, while a small number reported significant difficulty.
- > Critical resources and protective factors can be found on page 3. It is crucial to support and raise awareness for those with SCI and all individuals in crisis.



Mental health matters!

What is depression?

A mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest, affecting how you feel, think and behave and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems (Sawchuk, 2022).

What is anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are a group of mental health conditions that cause fear, dread and other symptoms that are out of proportion to the situation (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

Causes & Risk Factors

- Inherited traits
- Brain chemistry
- Traumatic experiences
- Brain damage as a result of a serious injury
- Stressful life situations
- An ongoing (chronic) medical conditions

Note: these factors may increase your likelihood of enduring mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

Why check mental health after SCI?

- SCI is a life-changing event that can affect many aspects of a person's life.
- These changes add to a substantial amount of elements that impact mental health.

SCI factors that influence mental health

Pain



Immobility



Social Isolation



SCI population: moderate-to-severe depression prevalence

Around 80% of participants with SCI (about 4 out of 5) did not report moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms.

Still, about 1 in 5 (20%) reported experiencing more significant depressive symptoms.



SCI population: moderate-to-severe anxiety prevalence

Similarly, about 9 out of 10 (89%) participants reported no moderate-to-severe anxiety symptoms. However, about 1 in 10 (11%) still reported moderate-to-severe anxiety symptoms.



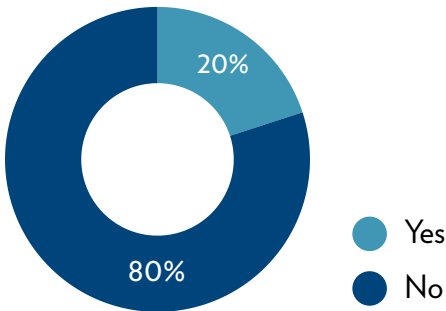
Make a difference, **today!**

Frequent Depressive Symptoms

Around 4 out of 5 (80%) reported not experiencing frequent depressive symptoms within the last 30 days.



While about 1 out of 5 (20%) participants reported experiencing frequent depressive symptoms within the last 30 days.



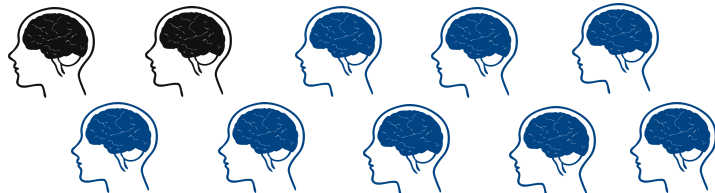
Reported frequent anxiety symptoms

Approximately 4 out of 5 (80%) reported not experiencing frequent anxiety symptoms within the last 30 days.



Around 1 out of 5 (20%) participants reported experiencing frequent anxiety symptoms within the last 30 days.

Reported frequent mental distress



Approximately 8 out of 10 participants did not report experiencing frequent mental distress within the last 30 days.

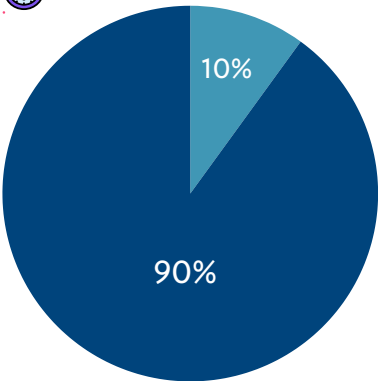
While about 2 out of 10 participants reported experiencing frequent mental distress within the last 30 days.

Struggling with mental health happens more than you think

Though you may feel alone, many struggle with their mental health. It is important to recognize that everyone deserves support and access to resources. Recognizing how common these challenges can help reduce the stigma associated with these issues and encourage individuals to reach out for help.



How do anxiety and depressive symptoms affect everyday life?



Very/extremely difficult No major difficulty

About 90% did not report anxiety symptoms making daily activities difficult while around 10% of participants reported anxiety symptoms made daily activities very/extremely difficult.

About 4 out of 5 (80%) did not report that depressive symptoms made daily activities very/extremely difficult.

While almost 1 out of 5 (20%) reported that depression symptoms made daily activities very/extremely difficult



Symptoms impact life satisfaction



These reports emphasize the severity of how symptoms interfere with daily life for those with SCI-related disability. Understanding these challenges can help guide treatment strategies and resources to help these individuals cope with everyday life.

Be informed!

How can you help?

If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out to these resources and be aware of these potential warning signs

Signs and symptoms of poor mental health:
(Mayo Clinic, 2022)

- Feeling down or sad
- Excessive worries or fears, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Inability to cope with daily stress or problems
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Suicidal thinking

Mental health resources:

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988
Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
Veterans Crisis Line: Call 988 and dial 1
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration: Call 1-800-662-
HELP

Peer support groups:
[United Spinal Association](#)

[Resource Center for Brain & Spinal Cord Injuries](#)

Mental health informational links:
[Managing Depression with SCI](#)

[Managing Anxiety with SCI](#)

References

Cleveland Clinic. (2024, July 3). Anxiety disorders. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders>

Mayo Clinic. (2022). Mental illness - Symptoms and causes.. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/symptoms-causes/syc-20374968>

Sawchuk, C. (2022, October 14). Depression (major depressive disorder). Mayo Clinic; Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>

About This Fact Sheet

This fact sheet was created using data from the Health, Employment, and Longevity Project (HELP) aging 50 database at the Center for Rehabilitation Research in Neurological Conditions (CRRNC). It is supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) grant 90DPCP0009. This fact sheet is not meant to replace the advice of your physician or other healthcare provider. You should always consult your physician or healthcare provider before making changes to behavior, treatment, or use of medicine.

Director of the Center for Rehabilitation Research in Neurological Conditions (CRRNC): James S. Krause, PhD

Authorship: Depression and Anxiety Factsheet was developed by Emma Ross with analytic support from Ana Zeledon, MPH, and published by the CRRNC at Medical University of South Carolina.

Document Citation: Center for Rehabilitation Research in Neurological Conditions, Facts and Figures at a Glance. Charleston, SC: Medical University of South Carolina, 2026.

Contact: aust@musc.edu

