

### **Epidemiology of anxiety disorders: insights on pathophysiology and course**

**Introduction:** Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders. A recent Dutch large-scale epidemiological study has yielded important information on the prevalence and comorbidity patterns, the pathophysiology and the longitudinal course trajectories of anxiety disorders. These results will be summarized in this talk.

**Methods:** Data will be used from the Netherlands Study of Depression and Anxiety (NESDA). This study examined pathophysiology and course trajectories among 2981 persons aged 18-65 years, including healthy controls as well as a large group of subjects with panic disorder, social phobia and/or general anxiety disorder. Pathophysiology investigation included e.g. assessment of the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, autonomic dysregulation, inflammation, brain growth hormones.

**Results:** Anxiety patients showed an elevated cortisol awakening response, indicating higher HPA-axis activity. Examination of inflammation markers and brain growth hormones, however, did not reveal much evidence for involvement of these systems in anxiety disorders. Regarding the 2-year natural course, various intriguing observations were made. Persons with a pure anxiety disorder (without depression) had a median episode duration of 16 months, and 41.9% of all patients reported a chronic trajectory. Worst course was observed in the comorbid depression-anxiety group (median duration >24 months, 56.8% chronic). Independent predictors of poor diagnostic and symptom trajectory outcomes were severity and duration of index episode, comorbid depression, earlier onset age and older age. With only these factors a reasonable discriminative ability (C-statistic 0.72-0.77) was reached in predicting 2-year prognosis.

In these above observations, some similarities but also quite some differences between anxiety and depressive disorders were found. These will be highlighted in the presentation.

**Conclusion:** Large-scale epidemiological studies can teach us new aspects on pathophysiology and course of anxiety disorders.

### **Headshot:**

Similarities but also quite some differences in pathophysiology and course trajectories between anxiety and depressive disorders are found. The course of anxiety disorders is worse than that of depressive disorders. Immune and brain growth hormone dysregulation was not found in anxiety disorder, but HPA-axis dysregulation is observed in anxiety disorder.