# Improving Mental Health and Migraines

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

## Migraines and Mental Health

Let’s get personal, shall we?

If you’re reading, there is a high likelihood that you suffer from migraines. There is also a possibility that you have some type of mental health diagnosis.

And, dear readers, I am right there with you. I have suffered from migraines since I was 12 (and I’ll be 32 in two short months – so that is 20 years of my life). I was also diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) about three years ago, shortly after my son was born - but let’s get real here. My anxiety got bad enough that I finally was *ready* to talk about it. I suspect if I had been honest with my doctor, I would have been diagnosed with GAD several years before.

However, I know I’m not alone. I have long believed that my migraines have been a contributing factor in the development of my anxiety. Of course, I can’t prove this, but it seems logical; I can remember times during high school when a migraine would strike during a stressful time at school. On the flip side, I would have a migraine and would get anxious, thinking about everything I was missing out on – school, work, friends, *life.*

While a whole lot has not changed. On the verge of 32, I still have migraines and anxiety.

### Migraines and Mental Health by the Numbers

In a 2009 study, researchers found that 11% of participants had both migraines and at least one mental health disorder (major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, dysthymia, bipolar disorder, panic attacks, panic disorder, substance abuse disorders, agoraphobia, and simple phobias). In addition, many studies have found a link between migraines and generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder.

According to the *Anxiety & Depression Association of America*, 40% of migraineurs also have depression.

According to the *American Migraine Prevalence and Prevention Study*, which was published in 2011, about half of the people in the “severe” category met *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision* criteria for major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and/or panic disorder.

What does this mean for you, fellow migraineurs? It is time to time to treat your *both* your migraines and mental health.

### Managing Migraines

For individuals suffering from migraines, there is hope. As the mechanism that creates the link between mental health and migraines is bidirectional, the treatment is also; treatments that help manage migraines will also

improve mental health.

Here are some professional treatments for migraines:

- **Psychotherapy.** Experts now recommend that migraine patients seek screening for mental health conditions. Try therapy! A therapist will help monitor your symptoms and develop effective coping skills. Therapy can also help you understand how your thoughts and feelings are contributing to your migraines. This information can change your response to pain. Try to maintain reasonable expectations; therapy will not end your migraines, but it can improve your symptoms and overall mental health. Studies have shown cognitive behavioral therapy works best in conjunction with some of the interventions below.
- **Biofeedback.** In biofeedback, an individual is connected to equipment that monitors the physical state. The health care professional will teach you how to recognize and modify your response signals, including heart rate, muscle tension and breathing pace. Researchers have found that this technique lowers migraine frequency.
- **Relaxation.** Finding a relaxation technique or a series of techniques that works for you can provide great mental benefits. Relaxation helps prevent migraines by lowering your overall stress. Migraine patients also report that relaxation, along with a cold compress, reduces the intensity and duration of attacks. Deep breathing, guided imagery, autogenic training and progressive muscle relaxation are some of the many useful techniques. Experiment with several to find the one that works best for you and your symptoms.

Beyond professional treatments, changing some the following habits and behaviors may lead to symptom relief:

- **Get adequate sleep.** The American Migraine Foundation notes that migraineurs are at risk for sleep disorders – in fact, this risk is two to eight times greater than people who do not suffer from migraines. It is also estimated that over half of the people who visit specialty headache clinics have chronic sleep problems. And chronic sleep problems can trigger migraines. There is also a link between adequate sleep and mood; according to the American Migraine Foundation, “Common brain regions control sleep, headache and mood. They also share chemical brain messengers. Therefore, not enough or poor quality sleep increases the odds for headache and mood change.”
- **Promote relationships.** Whether it is your husband, your sister, your best friend, or a beloved coworker, you have relationships with people who are there for you when you have a migraine. Nurture your relationships – *especially when you’re feeling well.* These people are likely the ones who care for you (and about you!) when you’re not feeling well – whether it is from your migraines or your mental health disorder, or both. It is important to have good communication – convey to them when you’re not feeling well, but also understand that it is also difficult for them.

- **Limit medications with estrogen.** Women are more likely than men to experience migraines and some believe this difference is hormonal. Consult your doctor about the impact of any medications you're taking on migraines.
- **Eat well.** This not only means eating better quality food but eating more regularly as well. You know that avoiding certain foods can help you avoid an attack. You may not know, though, that eating regularly helps avoid low blood sugar, which triggers migraines. Know your food triggers and what you are putting into your body.
- **Exercise.** As mentioned above, interventions that help your physical health also improve your mental health. Exercise is the best example. You won’t be able to jog during a migraine, but an exercise routine will improve your symptoms in the long-term.

**Conclusion**

Migraines and mental illness exist together in a very dependent way; improving one’s mental health will subsequently improve migraines. Seek treatment for both migraines and the mental health disorder, identify food triggers (and then avoid those foods!), eat more regularly, get better sleep, and spend more quality time with loved ones and you may be feeling better soon!

**Resources:**

Headache, Migraine In-Depth Report

Migraine and Mental Health