An Introduction to Anosognosia

WHAT IS ANOSOGNOSIA?

Anosognosia ("Ah-no-sug-NOH-zee-uh") is a common symptom among people experiencing serious mental health problems, and involves the individual being unaware of their illness. The term comes from the Greek: a (without), noso (disease) and gnosia (knowledge)—thus, "lack of knowledge of a disease." Your loved one may say "There's nothing wrong with me...stop pushing me to get help when I don't have a problem...leave me alone." Although this symptom can also occur among individuals with dementia or other neurological conditions, we focus here on mental illness.

Importantly, anosognosia is not stubbornness or "being in denial." Therefore, efforts such as an intervention to convince the individual to "accept" their condition and seek professional help are likely to not only fail – but may harm relationships and exacerbate symptoms.

What are common consequences and effects?

Anosognosia is the leading predictor of people declining or dropping out of treatment; to them, treatment is not necessary as they don't believe they have a problem. It's also related to:

- more frequent hospitalizations
- refusal to take medications
- a more difficult course of illness
- increased aggression
- contentious interactions with law enforcement
- higher risk of being isolated, homeless, or incarcerated
- problems in relationships with family/friends who don't know how to help and feel powerless

How to communicate with someone with anosognosia?

The LEAP method, developed by psychologist Dr. Xavier Amador, offers helpful skills in communicating with someone experiencing anosognosia. Dr. Amador emphasizes that strengthening your relationship with your loved one is the most important and impactful skill. Instead of arguing, it can be helpful to:

- Listen: Patiently hear the other person's thoughts and opinions without interrupting or disagreeing.
- Empathize: Try to understand the other person's experience and show that you care.
- Agree: Find areas of common ground and focus on the other person's perspective.
- Partner: Develop trust and a therapeutic alliance.

What is the current status in the field?

There's widespread lack of understanding of anosognosia among patients, families, mental health professionals and other health providers, police/first-responders and the media.

Sadly, there has been considerable neglect in medical training about this symptom, much to the detriment of consumers and families. There has not been large-scale research (which can be challenging given the nature of the symptom). Similarly, there has not been rigorous, systematic development and evaluation of treatments focused on this symptom. Opportunities abound for not only high-quality research and intervention development, but also efforts to increase awareness among the general public, the healthcare field, and law enforcement.

How common is it?

Large scale research is limited and findings vary, but conservative estimates indicate that about 50-60% of people with schizophrenia and 40% of those with bipolar disorder experience anosognosia.

Understanding anosognosia involves a shift:

FROM	TO
Judgment and annoyance	Understanding and empathy
Pushing and convincing to accept a diagnosis and get treatment	Accepting where they are and connecting around what matters to them to encourage help-seeking
Seeing anosognosia as a choice, so declining treatment is viewed as being stubborn, willful, or in denial	Seeing anosognosia as a legitimate, complex symptom
Communicating in a way that harms the relationship and may trigger symptoms	Expressing respect which can strengthen the relationship
Loved one feeling not understood, defensive, shamed	Loved one feeling seen and cared about

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Learn More!

1. Rachel A. Streiff, B.S. "Institutional Neglect of Anosognosia Is a Critical Barrier in the Treatment of Psychosis Related Disorders", Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology (Vol. 43, No. 3, May/June 2023) (https://journals.lww.com/psychopharmacology/citation/2023/05000/institutional_neglect_of_anosognosia_is_a_critical.2.aspx

2. Shanti Silver &; Elizabeth Sinclair Hancq "Anosognosia", Research Summary, Treatment Advocacy Center Office of Research and Public Affairs, Oct 2023. www.tac.org/reports_publications/anosognosia/ Videos and other resources on this topic may be found at: https://www.tac.org/anosognosia/

3. Xavier Amador, Ph.D. "I AM NOT SICK, I Don't Need Help!" 20 th Anniversary Edition, Vida Press, 2020. https://leapinstitute.org/ Videos and other resources on the LEAP method are also found on this site.

4. Douglas S. Lehrer, MD and Jennifer Lorenz, MD "Anosognosia in Schizophrenia: Hidden in Plain Sight", Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience, 2014 May/June.

Land Acknowledgment

As part of our mission to learn about and work towards reducing systemic inequities, the NAMI Ramsey County board honors and acknowledges that this county is part of the ancestral homeland of the Dakota people. As part of our work to advocate for equitable mental health services for everyone, NAMI Ramsey County is committed to ongoing learning and understanding of the harm caused to Indigenous communities, both past and present, and will continue to work towards providing information on culturally appropriate mental health services provided by Indigenous healers and mental health practitioners. Full statement may be found at: https://namiramseycounty.org/land-acknowledgement/