



High Anxiety

A closer look at Colorado's rising angst. BY JAYME MOYE

LONG, WINDY BIKE RIDES ARE NORMAL FOR ME IN THE spring. It's how I train for a summer full of road bike races. But this ride was different. As I hummed along familiar streets, I suddenly became afraid the wind was going to cause me to have an accident. Each time it blew, I hyperventilated. I eventually had to pull over. This episode, I would later learn, was my first panic attack.

Eighteen percent of Americans—and 110,000 Denverites—have some level of anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Anxiety manifests in different forms, from worry, to obsessive-compulsiveness, to discomfort in social settings, to full-blown panic attacks. The problem becomes clinical when it adversely affects your ability to engage in everyday situations.

The fact that I'm not alone in my anxiety, despite living in an area touted for its laid-back attitude, is cause for concern. "I have noticed a significant increase, particularly in the last five years," says Shea Kamlet, Psy.D., a Denver-based therapist who treats anxiety.

Kamlet says rising rates are partially a result of our high-tech culture. Technology has made us more vulnerable to intrusions by phone, text, email, and chat. Social media bombards us, and we end up posting our lives rather than being present in them. This is not limited to Coloradans. Most Americans are having to learn how to escape the ping of the next text.

Additionally, our culture has shifted from intrinsic

goals toward extrinsic goals, says Neil Weiner, M.D., of the University of Colorado Depression Center. "Extrinsic goals have to do with material rewards and other people's judgments," Weiner says. It can be anxiety-producing, he says, when you think you have to make a certain amount of money or look a certain way to be socially accepted.

The combination of being overly plugged in and striving toward external goals can turn an activity that's supposed to be a stress reliever, like exercise, into an angst-producing nightmare. Consider the highly structured training for many of the activities Coloradans love—triathlons, marathons, and in my case, cycling. Exercise can be taken to a mentally unhealthy extreme when we fixate on tracking our heart rate, mileage, and calories burned, and then documenting it on Facebook: *Ran 10 miles at a 7:34 pace...heart rate was in zone two...winning!*

But not all of us are winning. Those of us with a predisposition for anxiety could be creating more of the same stress that exercise is supposed to alleviate. Experts advise slowing down and unplugging as the first steps in combating the unease. (Therapy and medication can, of course, be considered too.) Thankfully, just one hour west of the Front Range lies a vast wilderness where there is no cell phone signal. A long, steady, quiet hike may be the ideal antidote. But take it from me, leave your heart rate monitor behind—you may end up mentally stronger for it.

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DUE TO YEARS OF underfunding as well as some recent state budget cuts, parents of children and teens with acute psychiatric illness now have only one place to go in the city and county of Denver: **the 16 inpatient beds at Denver Health's Pavilion M**, an expansion that opened in November 2011. In the past several years, the safety-net hospital has watched nearly a dozen other Colorado hospitals eliminate all inpatient beds for child psychiatric care, even though they were often full of patients. The decrease means Colorado now ranks 50th in the country for the number of pediatric beds per capita. Dr. Megan Twomey, a psychologist in Denver Health's adolescent inpatient unit, says she and her colleagues have been combating this alarming statistic with a two-pronged approach: increasing the number of beds in their hospital—up from eight in 2009—and ramping up research. "We feel this is the best balance to strike," Twomey says, "in terms of dedicating resources to care for patients as well as prevention."

—SARAH PROTZMAN HOWLETT

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