

THE SHADOW OF BLINDNESS: THE IMPACT OF BLINDNESS ANXIETY ON QUALITY OF LIFE AND ADHERENCE IN GLAUCOMA PATIENTS

Luiza Cintra Dantas

<https://lattes.cnpq.br/3575769840530770>

Layssa Paiva de Castro

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1988588036521998>

Eder Felipe Rosado Malheiros

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/2979326287415579>

Jéssica Leiko Okumura Tioda

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/7860230569333582>

Rebeca Maida Sabbag Barbosa

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/3699079180938167>

Felipe Silva Teixeira

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/7530552868233205>

Lícia Wênia Santos Pimenta Torres

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/6329306989275649>

Izabelle Lopes quintino

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/7388914014216811>

Maria Paula Silvestre Moura Cavalcante

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1258020532222659>

Lívia Hastenreiter e Melo Batalha

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/2379352068022625>

Letícia Beatriz Freire Quintino

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5912857070361347>

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Abstract: **INTRODUCTION:** Glaucoma, known as the “silent thief of sight,” leads to irreversible blindness if undetected or untreated early, impacting millions worldwide, notably in regions like Brazil with high prevalence rates due to specific healthcare challenges. The disease, mainly asymptomatic until advanced stages, exacerbates the widespread fear of blindness, profoundly affecting individuals’ mental and emotional well-being. This fear, intensified among glaucoma patients, can lead to anxiety disorders and significantly hinder treatment adherence, underscoring the importance of early detection, effective communication, and psychological support to manage the condition and mitigate its impacts on life and mental health.

OBJETIVE Analyze and describe the main aspects of the impact of blindness anxiety on quality of life and adherence in glaucoma patients the last years.

METHODS This is a narrative review, included studies in the MEDLINE – PubMed (National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health), COCHRANE, EMBASE and Google Scholar databases, using the following databases: PubMed, sciELO and Medline, using as descriptors: “glaucoma” AND “anxiety” AND “blindness” in the last years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: Blindness anxiety significantly influences the psychological and physical well-being of individuals with glaucoma, contributing to decreased quality of life and treatment adherence. Research highlights that a considerable portion of these patients suffer from anxiety and depression levels comparable to those with other chronic diseases, with variance depending on demographic factors like age and disease severity. This anxiety can lead to social withdrawal, impacting daily activities and independence. Addressing this

through clear communication, personalized interventions, and support systems like cognitive-behavioral therapy and education programs can improve engagement and overall mental health. It is crucial for healthcare providers to recognize and address these concerns, enhancing the quality of life for those living with glaucoma.

CONCLUSION: Blindness anxiety significantly impacts the well-being of glaucoma patients, affecting their quality of life, social interactions, and adherence to treatment regimens. This anxiety is comparable to that experienced in other chronic conditions and is influenced by various demographic and psychological factors. Addressing this anxiety through regular screenings, effective communication, and therapeutic interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy and support groups can markedly improve patients' mental health and overall quality of life. Hence, a comprehensive approach encompassing psychological support and patient education is vital in the management of glaucoma.

Keywords: Psychiatry; Glaucoma; Anxiety; Blindness.

INTRODUCTION

Glaucoma, often referred to as the “silent thief of sight,” is a group of eye conditions that can lead to irreversible blindness¹. The disease is characterized by the progressive damage of the optic nerve, often associated with increased intraocular pressure¹. Although some forms of glaucoma can present with noticeable symptoms, many patients remain asymptomatic until significant vision loss has occurred². Early detection and treatment are critical to slowing the progression of the disease and preserving visual function. Glaucoma is a leading cause of blindness worldwide, impacting the lives of millions of individuals².

Globally, glaucoma affects over 60 million individuals, with projections suggesting a rise to approximately 80 million by 2020 due to the aging population³. In Brazil, the prevalence of glaucoma is estimated to be particularly high, reflecting broader trends observed in Latin American countries⁴. The Brazilian population faces unique healthcare challenges that contribute to the disease's epidemiology, including limited access to early screening and diagnostic services^{4,5}. This has significant implications for the detection, management, and prevention of glaucoma within the country, underscoring the need for targeted public health interventions⁵.

The fear of blindness is a profound concern among the general population, often ranked as one of the most feared health-related outcomes⁶. This fear, known as blindness anxiety, can significantly impact individuals' quality of life and psychological well-being⁷. The anticipation of losing one's sight can lead to a range of emotional responses, including anxiety, depression, and stress, which, in turn, can affect daily functioning and overall health^{6,7}.

For patients living with glaucoma, the fear of going blind is particularly acute and is compounded by the chronic nature of the disease⁸. This anxiety can lead to or exacerbate existing mental health disorders, creating a complex interplay between physical and psychological health. Studies have shown that individuals with glaucoma are at an increased risk of developing anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder⁹. Furthermore, this heightened state of anxiety can negatively influence treatment adherence, as patients may avoid medical appointments or neglect medication regimens due to fear of receiving bad news or misunderstanding the nature of their treatment^{10,11}.

OBJETIVES

Analyze and describe the main aspects of the impact of blindness anxiety on quality of life and adherence in glaucoma patients the last years.

SECUNDARY OBJETIVES

1. To explore the concept of blindness anxiety;
2. To examine the relationship between blindness anxiety and quality of life;
3. To assess the impact of blindness anxiety on treatment adherence recommended treatments.
4. To identify demographic, psychological, and social factors;
5. To review existing interventions and support mechanisms;
6. To highlight gaps in the current literature;
7. To provide recommendations for healthcare professionals;
8. To examine the role of patient education and communication

METHODS

This is a narrative review, in which the main aspects impact of blindness anxiety on quality of life and adherence in glaucoma patients in recent years were analyzed. The beginning of the study was carried out with theoretical training using the following databases: PubMed, sciELO and Medline, using as descriptors: “glaucoma” AND “anxiety” AND “blindness” in the last years. As it is a narrative review, this study does not have any risks.

Databases: This review included studies in the MEDLINE – PubMed (National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health), COCHRANE, EMBASE and Google Scholar databases.

The inclusion criteria applied in the analytical review were human intervention studies, experimental studies, cohort studies, case-control studies, cross-sectional studies and

literature reviews, editorials, case reports, and poster presentations. Also, only studies writing in English and Portuguese were included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of blindness anxiety, particularly emphasized in its severity and specificity, significantly impacts patients diagnosed with glaucoma. Studies have shown that a considerable portion of glaucoma patients experience some level of anxiety related to blindness¹². This can vary according to different demographic factors like age and severity of the disease¹³. Additionally, Mitsonis et al. found that anxiety and depression levels in patients with glaucoma were significantly higher than in healthy controls, and interestingly, these levels were not significantly different from patients suffering from another chronic illness, such as coronary heart disease¹⁴.

The influence of blindness anxiety on the quality of life is evident, with patients experiencing significant declines in physical and emotional well-being¹⁵. The impact extends to various aspects of life, including social interaction, independence, and daily functioning. The condition exacerbates feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, and a diminished sense of independence, as highlighted by the Glaucoma Research Foundation¹⁶. This can lead to social isolation, with patients withdrawing from activities and interactions they previously enjoyed¹⁷.

Non-adherence to treatment regimens among glaucoma patients has been strongly associated with increased levels of blindness anxiety¹⁷. Fear and misunderstanding are often cited as underlying reasons for this phenomenon¹⁷. Addressing these fears and providing clear, accurate information can be crucial in improving patient engagement with treatment plans and adherence to medication schedules¹⁸.

Moreover, several demographic, psychological, and social factors have been identified as influencing the level of blindness anxiety¹⁹. These include age, gender, socioeconomic status, and the presence of a support system. Understanding these factors can aid in tailoring interventions to individual patient needs and circumstances²⁰.

Interventions targeting blindness anxiety, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and patient education programs, have shown promise in reducing anxiety levels and improving quality of life¹⁷. Support groups, in particular, provide a platform for glaucoma patients to share experiences and coping techniques, offering reassurance and reducing feelings of isolation^{21,22}.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the prevalence and impact of blindness anxiety among glaucoma patients are significant and multifaceted. Research underscores the importance of addressing this anxiety, as it profoundly affects patients' quality of life, social interactions, and treatment compliance. The findings from studies suggest that a notable percentage of glaucoma patients experience considerable anxiety related to the

prospect of losing their vision, which parallels the anxiety levels seen in chronic diseases like coronary heart disease.

The repercussions of blindness anxiety extend beyond mere psychological distress, impacting physical health, emotional well-being, and daily functioning, thereby leading to a potential withdrawal from social engagements and a reduced sense of autonomy. This underscores the critical need for healthcare providers to implement strategies aimed at mitigating these fears, which include regular anxiety assessments and clear, empathetic communication about the disease and its management.

Furthermore, acknowledging the role of demographic, psychological, and social factors in shaping an individual's experience of blindness anxiety can facilitate more personalized and effective interventions. By addressing the unique needs and circumstances of each patient, healthcare professionals can enhance the effectiveness of treatment and support systems. It is clear that a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to patient care, which includes addressing the psychological impacts of glaucoma, is essential for improving outcomes for those living with this challenging condition.

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