

What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

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Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is much more than the normal anxiety people experience day to day. It's chronic and exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to provoke it. Having this disorder means always anticipating disaster, often worrying excessively about health, money, family, or work. Sometimes, though, the source of the worry is hard to pinpoint. Simply the thought of getting through the day provokes anxiety.

People with GAD can't seem to shake their concerns, even though they usually realize that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants. People with GAD also seem unable to relax. They often have trouble falling or staying asleep. Their worries are accompanied by physical symptoms, especially trembling, twitching, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, sweating, or hot flashes. They may feel lightheaded or out of breath. They may feel nauseated or have to go to the bathroom frequently. Or they might feel as though they have a lump in the throat.

Many individuals with GAD startle more easily than other people. They tend to feel tired, have trouble concentrating, and sometimes suffer depression, too.

Usually the impairment associated with GAD is mild and people with the disorder don't feel too restricted in social settings or on the job. Unlike many other anxiety disorders, people with GAD don't characteristically avoid certain situations as a result of their disorder. However, if severe, GAD can be very debilitating, making it difficult to carry out even the most ordinary daily activities.

GAD comes on gradually and most often hits people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood, too. It's more common in women than in men and often occurs in relatives of affected persons. It's diagnosed when someone spends at least 6 months worrying excessively about a number of everyday problems.

In general, the symptoms of GAD seem to diminish with age. Successful treatment may include a medication called buspirone. Research into the effectiveness of other medications, such as benzodiazepines and antidepressants, is ongoing. Also useful are cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, and biofeedback to control muscle tension.

Like other complex medical illnesses, such as heart disease and diabetes, the exact causes of generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD, are difficult to explain. Research suggests that environmental and genetic factors (a family history of GAD) may predispose a person to developing the disorder. Experts also agree that GAD may be caused by an imbalance of certain chemicals in the brain—in particular, two neurotransmitters (chemical message carriers) called dopamine and serotonin, which are believed to regulate mood and behavior. A diagnosis of depression, or other anxiety disorders, may make you more likely to develop GAD.

GAD may also be caused by a highly stressful event in your life, such as:

- A childhood psychological trauma
- The death of a loved one
- Divorce
- Losing your job, or changing jobs