



Generalized Anxiety Disorder

What Is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Between 3 and 4 percent of people experience generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) at some time during their lives. GAD is an anxiety disorder that is characterized by excessive worry or concern over everyday events. Concerns about health, money, family, work, or the potential for disaster are most common. People with GAD are unable to alleviate their concerns even though they realize the concerns are unwarranted. This excessive level of worry must occur for at least six months for a diagnosis of GAD.

What Generalized Anxiety Disorder Is Not

GAD is not simply worries about specific concerns that pass in a matter of days or weeks. In addition, if a person has significant worries that are warranted by particularly challenging circumstances—such as having a legal problem—the person does not have GAD. If people have been actively using alcohol or other drugs, they may have symptoms of GAD caused by craving, using, or withdrawing from substance use. However, this is not GAD.

What Are the Primary Symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

People with GAD worry excessively about everyday events. They are unable to let go of their concerns, even though they realize that those concerns are unwarranted. Concerns about health, money, work, or the potential for disaster are most common. When an exaggerated level of worry occurs for at least six months, a diagnosis of GAD might be made. Symptoms of GAD may include

- restlessness
- feeling “keyed up” or “on edge”
- feeling a lump in the throat
- difficulty concentrating
- fatigue
- irritability
- muscle tension
- trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

What Is the Cause of Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Many people with GAD have experienced symptoms since childhood, but people also develop it later in adulthood. Certain factors, such as childhood adversity, illness, stress, personality, and genetics, may increase the risk of developing GAD. The causes are therefore complex and not yet fully understood by scientists.

What Are the Usual Treatments for Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Medications and therapy are the two main treatment options for GAD. Effective medications include benzodiazepines, buspirone, and antidepressants.* In some cases, more than one medication may be used at the same time. It may take several weeks for medications to be effective.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective type of therapy used to treat GAD. CBT for GAD involves teaching people strategies for relaxing, coping with anxiety, challenging negative thoughts, and replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones.

How Does the Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs Affect Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Many people try to use alcohol or other drugs to reduce the symptoms of anxiety. Although these substances may provide short-term relief, they ultimately make the symptoms of anxiety worse. Drug use hinders the development of coping skills, and it may also result in the development of a substance use disorder. Also, because benzodiazepines—one type of medication often used to treat GAD—are addictive, they can further complicate recovery from co-occurring GAD and a substance use disorder.

How Does Generalized Anxiety Disorder Affect Addiction Treatment and Recovery?

Once people with GAD stop using drugs or alcohol, their anxiety symptoms sometimes reappear or get worse. These anxiety symptoms may place them at increased risk for a relapse to substance use. Addiction treatment helps manage these symptoms, but people may still be highly distressed by their anxiety and impatient with the pace of their recovery, which may tempt them to return to substance use. If medications are used, antidepressants are probably the best choice because they are not addictive. Benzodiazepines tend to reduce anxiety more quickly, but they also lead to “rebound anxiety” when the medication

* More information on benzodiazepines and buspirone can be found in Handout 4, Antianxiety and Sedative Medications. More information on antidepressants can be found in Handout 1, Antidepressant Medications.

wears off after a few hours, which can contribute to developing an addiction. CBT, a therapy that does not use medication, may be the most risk-free approach to treating GAD for people with a substance use disorder.

Treatment for Co-occurring Generalized Anxiety and Substance Use Disorders

People who have a substance use disorder and GAD must get treatment for both. Treating the substance use disorder without addressing the GAD increases the risk of relapse. Treatment for GAD is less effective when people are actively using substances. The best treatment is integrated; that is, it focuses on both disorders at the same time. Antidepressants or other nonaddictive medications should be used. CBT is the most effective approach for developing coping skills to manage and reduce anxiety. People with GAD can benefit from attending peer support groups, and they can also benefit from connecting with others who have these co-occurring disorders and are in recovery.

Resources

- Bourne, E., and L. Garano. 2003. *Coping with anxiety: Ten simple ways to relieve anxiety, fear, and worry*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Forsyth, J. P., and G. H. Eifert. 2007. *The mindfulness and acceptance workbook for anxiety: A guide to breaking free from anxiety, phobias, and worry using acceptance and commitment therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Jeffers, S. 1992. *Feel the fear and do it anyway*. New York: Fawcett Books.
- MayoClinic.com. "Generalized anxiety disorder." Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/generalized-anxiety-disorder/DS00502.
- National Institute of Mental Health. "Generalized anxiety disorder." Available at www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/generalized-anxiety-disorder.shtml.
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. "FAQ for the general public." Available at www.niaaa.nih.gov/FAQs/General-English/default.htm.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Drugs of abuse information." Available at www.nida.nih.gov/drugpages.html.

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