



GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

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.

THE SYMPTOMS OF GAD

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 light-headed 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.

LIVING WITH GAD

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.

WHAT CAUSES GAD?

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.

Medical researchers have not pinpointed the exact cause of generalized anxiety disorder. Many suspect that people with GAD may have an imbalance in the chemicals in the brain that regulate the body's "alarm" system. These chemicals—called neurotransmitters—allow cells to communicate with one another. They regulate a person's alertness, sleepiness, moods and perceptions. When these

neurotransmitters are not in proper balance, they affect how a person feels physically and mentally. Researchers think neurotransmitter imbalances may cause people suffering from GAD to always feel ready to respond to an emergency, even when none exists.

Environmental stress may also make a person more vulnerable to developing GAD. When a person faces serious or ongoing stress, his or her body may not be able to stop the physical responses that develop during real danger or stress.

Others believe that GAD is a learned response to stress. According to this theory, people “generalize” their response to specific stresses or experiences to a larger part of their lives. So, for example, if a person must deal with the loss of a loved one, he or she may begin worrying about the safety and financial well-being of other family members.

TREATMENT HELPS

Individuals with GAD often experience relief from their symptoms within a few weeks of treatment. Successful treatment may include medications, such as benzodiazepines and antidepressants. Also useful are cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, and biofeedback to control muscle tension. During therapy, people learn to identify unrealistic or unhelpful patterns in their thinking and substitute more helpful thoughts in their place.

Throughout therapy, the mental health professional helps patients understand the disorder and its effects on family, social and work relationships. The goal is to help the patient cope with the disorder in ways that prevent it from controlling his or her life.

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE GAD . . .

Remember, this problem is not your fault and it can be effectively treated. There is no reason to suffer in silence. Contact us for help. We provide private assessments for individuals and families. During this appointment, you’ll learn more about the signs, symptoms and treatments for your illness. Take the next step. Reach out for help. Relief and recovery are the rewards.

CALL 1-800-556-6249.



DARTMOUTH-HITCHCOCK PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATES

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