

GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

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What is generalized anxiety disorder?

People who suffer from generalized anxiety disorder worry constantly and excessively about a number of everyday issues that are not necessarily related to each other, such as health, work, and relationships. Their worries are hard to control and out of proportion, and often focus on minor events. People who suffer from this disorder tend to imagine future catastrophes that are very unlikely to occur.

Although we don't yet know the exact causes of generalized anxiety disorder, there appears to be a genetic predisposition, along with certain biological risk factors (three neurotransmitters may play a particular role: GABA, serotonin, and norepinephrine). Environmental stressors can also play an important role.

Generalized anxiety disorder affects approximately 5% of the population. It is diagnosed more often in women (55% to 60%) than in men. The disorder often appears in adolescence or early adulthood, but many people say that they have lived with anxiety their whole lives, or can't remember when it started. People who suffer from generalized anxiety disorder often have other anxiety disorders or depression as well.

Warning signs

When worries are chronic, or in other words, when they last at least 6 months, and when they relate to several life events, are excessive and uncontrollable, cause significant distress, and interfere with normal functioning (at work, in social settings, or in some other important area), this may indicate generalized anxiety disorder.

Symptoms

In order for a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder to be made, excessive anxiety must be accompanied by at least three of the following symptoms (only one for children):

- Restlessness;
- Being easily fatigued;
- Difficulty concentrating;
- Irritability;
- Muscle tension;
- Sleep disturbance.

Treatment

There are two forms of treatment that are generally recognized as being effective for generalized anxiety disorder: medication and psychotherapy.

Antidepressants are often the treatment of choice. However, it takes several weeks for them to reach their full effect. Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines, can temporarily relieve the symptoms. Benzodiazepines can provide temporary relief, and can be used as needed when an anxiety-causing situation arises, but antidepressants are often prescribed as a more long-term treatment, because they cause fewer dependency and addiction problems than benzodiazepines.

In terms of psychotherapy, there are a number of different approaches, each of which can produce results. Research supports the value of the cognitive-behavioural approach in particular for treatment of this disorder. This type of psychotherapy can help people to become aware of the thoughts and beliefs associated with their anxiety, and teach them to replace them with more realistic thoughts. It can also help to change certain behaviours in order to promote better anxiety management.

Self-help groups – such as those at Revivre – can help to break the isolation by bringing people who are going through similar situations together. They provide a place where you can talk about your feelings without being judged. It can also be helpful to hear the stories of other people who have learned to live with the disorder.

Where to go for help

If you think you have generalized anxiety disorder and you want to know for sure, a doctor can help you evaluate the situation and prescribe appropriate treatment, if necessary. For psychotherapy, you can consult a mental health specialist who is recognized by a professional association, such as a psychologist or a social worker, for support and help in dealing with this disorder.

SUPPORT, INFORMATION, REFERRAL

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