



Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

A certain amount of anxiety is inevitable these days in most people's lives. However, when this anxiety and worry is persistent and excessive, lasts for six months or longer, and is accompanied by physical symptoms, it can be due to a condition known as Generalised Anxiety Disorder, or GAD for short.

The type of anxiety experienced by GAD sufferers is different to that of panic attack sufferers. The latter experience sudden attacks of intense and disabling anxiety while GAD sufferers wake up anxious and worried, and go to bed feeling much the same. In other words, GAD is anxiety which is present most, if not all of the time. Sufferers frequently describe their anxiety as 'feeling on edge for no apparent reason' or as if the anxiety is 'lurking in the background'.

GAD causes people to worry excessively and unrealistically about nearly everything all of the time. For example, it is not uncommon for a GAD sufferer who has just been promoted to worry that he/she might lose their job. Despite feeling terribly anxious all the time, the GAD sufferer just can't seem to 'shake off' their feelings of anxiety. Naturally, 24-hour excessive worrying over long periods takes both a physical and mental toll on the body. It is not uncommon for GAD sufferers to also develop headaches, heart palpitations, sleeping difficulties, low mood and drink/drug problems.

Despite the fact that these symptoms and the GAD itself create havoc in a person's life, GAD sufferers usually do not seek professional help until their problems become very severe and/or have become complicated by a disorder such as depression.

How can I tell if I have GAD?

The following are the most common symptoms of GAD and may help you to self-diagnose:

- Worrying excessively about a number of situations or activities in your life.
- Spending most days worrying about how you will cope with events such as job responsibilities, health and welfare of family members and yourself, etc.
- Experiencing difficulty in controlling your worries.
- Experiencing any of the following physical symptoms:
 - Feeling restless and on edge
 - Feeling fatigued
 - Difficulty concentrating/mind goes blank
 - Irritability and becoming startled by things like unexpected noises
 - Muscle tension
 - Headaches
 - Difficulty in falling or staying asleep
 - Your anxiety is affecting your ability to cope with work, household chores and social situations.

In order to be diagnosed with GAD by a clinician, they must be satisfied that the symptoms you are experiencing are not as a result of fearing having a panic attack, as this would constitute panic disorder. GAD can itself be quite hard to diagnose as it lacks the dramatic and obvious symptoms of other anxiety disorders such as panic attacks, but can also mimic other conditions such as panic disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and depression.

Likewise, the physical symptoms of GAD are typical of other anxiety disorders. GAD sufferers often suffer from additional problems relating to substance/alcohol misuse, depression and panic disorder.

How many people suffer with GAD?

It is estimated that approximately 3% of the general population experience GAD at any one time. When GAD sufferers seek help, they often tell their GP that they have 'been a worrier all their life' or that anxiety began after a particularly stressful event in their lives.

Children may also develop GAD. When this occurs, they will often over-conform and try to have perfect performances in everything they do.

What causes GAD and who suffers with it?

Researchers have not yet identified the cause of GAD. To date, the best evidence suggests biological factors, family background and life experiences are important contributors to this disorder. It also seems that some individuals are genetically predisposed to develop GAD. There is also some evidence to suggest that people who grew up around anxious role models may have been socially conditioned to view the world as a dangerous and uncontrollable place, increasing the risk they will develop GAD. GAD tends to appear in adult life but, as mentioned earlier, it can also appear in childhood.

A common trigger for GAD is stress. Most GAD sufferers, when asked to look back to the months or years before the development of their GAD, report an increase in stressful events, such as bereavement, divorce, illness or the loss of job. While these events are all negative, GAD can also be triggered by stressful 'positive' events, such as having a baby, getting married, moving house or changing job.



Treatment of GAD

There are many ways of tackling anxiety and phobias. To find out the latest recommendations for the treatment of anxiety from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), visit www.nice.org.uk or ring **0845 003 7780**.

It is best, if possible, to try non-drug treatments for GAD before trying medication. Often GAD responds to psychological interventions and other things such as aerobic exercise or relaxation.

Other recommendations

Over the years, our members have recommended ways to manage their anxiety, including the following:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

CBT currently has the largest amount of research carried out on its effectiveness. CBT focuses on what people think, how those thoughts affect them emotionally and how they ultimately behave. When someone is distressed or anxious, the way they see and evaluate themselves can become negative. CBT therapists work alongside the person to help them begin to see the link between negative thoughts and mood. This empowers people to assert control over negative emotions and to change the way they behave. CBT has grown in popularity following recommendations from the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) for the treatment of anxiety disorders.

CBT can be delivered at a number of levels of intensity, meaning it can be useful to those who have only just started feeling anxious as well as those with longstanding anxiety problems. CBT is delivered by a trained therapist, usually in a clinical setting. This form of therapy focuses on the 'here and now' and is not overly concerned with finding the initial cause of anxiety. Once the problem has been

explored, the therapist will help you examine your thought and behaviour patterns and help you to work on ways of changing these.

Anxiety UK offers a CBT service to its members face-to-face, over the phone or via webcam. In the unlikely event that Anxiety UK is unable to help you, we would recommend accessing therapy through referral to an NHS service via your GP. You can also find a CBT therapist via the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) at www.babcp.com.

Counselling

Counselling is often used to explore issues in-depth and to allow for a focus on feelings associated with anxiety. Often, the cause of your anxiety can also be explored through counselling sessions.

The most common form of counselling is known as Person Centred Counselling. This type of therapy seeks to explore the main issues from your unique perspective.

Counselling is available through Anxiety UK face-to-face, via the telephone or via webcam. In the unlikely event that Anxiety UK is unable to help you, we would recommend accessing therapy through referral to an NHS service via your GP. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy can also advise on how to find a counsellor in your area at www.bacp.co.uk.

Clinical Hypnotherapy

Although clinical hypnotherapy is not a NICE approved therapy, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence available to suggest that this type of therapy is very beneficial to people experiencing anxiety. Indeed, over the years that Anxiety UK has been running its therapy services, we have consistently had positive feedback from members about hypnotherapy.

Hypnotherapy aims to provide people with results fairly quickly. Hypnotherapists will use a variety of techniques such as visualisation, which is aimed at producing quite deep levels of relaxation. Visualisation involves asking you to imagine a feared situation or object while you are in a deep state of relaxation. You are then asked to use positive visualisation to manage how you are feeling and to imagine the experience in a positive way.

Anxiety UK offers clinical hypnotherapy to members. To find out if we have a clinical hypnotherapist in your area, ring our helpline on **08444 775 774**. You can also find a clinical hypnotherapist in your area by visiting the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) at www.cnhc.org.uk.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

NLP is based on the idea that we create our experiences from how we see, hear and feel things in our mind and body. It is based on the idea that our mind and body are interlinked, with our thoughts having a direct effect on our bodies and vice versa. NLP can help people change any unwanted behaviours through the use of language patterns which challenge outdated beliefs and tap into the unconscious thoughts that we hold. An NLP therapist helps individuals to use positive language and thought processes to manage their anxiety in a more positive way.

Anxiety UK offers NLP nationally. Ring our helpline on **08444 775 774** to find out if we have an NLP therapist in your area.

Relaxation

If you suffer from panic attacks due to your anxiety or fear, it may help to learn some relaxation techniques. These can be used as a way of enduring the thoughts for longer and longer periods and thus overcoming your anxiety by discovering that nothing bad happens even if you think



about your anxiety or fear. Anxiety UK has a number of relaxation resources and products at www.anxietyuk.org.uk. You could also find out more from your GP or a stress management class at your local Adult Education Centre.

Medication

Anxiety medication may be prescribed if the fear is accompanied by frequent panic attacks and loss of sleep. It is important to note that medication will only help to alleviate symptoms and will not resolve any underlying issues. NICE recommends that if medication is taken, you also undertake other forms of treatment.

Further reading

Some of the books listed below are available at the Anxiety UK shop at www.anxietyuk.org.uk/shop or over the telephone on **08444 775 774**.

By purchasing through Anxiety UK, you are also helping to support the charity.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder: an Anxiety UK guide Available at the Anxiety UK shop at www.anxietyuk.org.uk/shop or **08444 775 774**.

Overcoming Worry

Mark Freeston and Kevin Meares

Overcoming Anxiety

Dr Chris Williams

The information contained in this factsheet was reviewed by Dr David Baldwin.

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