AnxietyBC
RESOURCES.RESULTS.RELIEF

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Key Points

- approximately 3 to 4 out of every 100 people meet criteria for GAD
- rates of GAD to be higher among the elderly, with as many as 7 out of every 100 elderly individuals suffering from symptoms
- GAD seems to affect more women than men
- GAD seems to affect lower socioeconomic groups, as they may be subject to more stressors
- because the elderly segment of our population is increasing, the number of people living with this disorder may also increase

What is GAD?

Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive worry and anxiety about daily life events (e.g. car repairs, community events).

From time to time all of us will find ourselves worrying about ourselves, someone we care about or some kind of experience or event in our lives. Worry usually involves thinking about the future. Sometimes we may worry about something from the past but our concern is usually about the negative impact of the past event upon our future. Either way worry involves fear that something bad may happen and/or fear that we may be unable to cope with stressful life events. Sometimes worries can be about real or current problems and how they are going to turn out.

Sometimes they can be about future or potential problems that may never actually happen. It is important to keep in mind that most of us will experience an increase in worrying frequency and intensity when we are coping with stress in our lives. During these times worry thoughts or images may pop into our mind when we are reminded of something related to the area of concern. However, normal worry is manageable and it doesn't interfere with daily functioning or quality of life. Normal worry also tends to go away when things in our lives are going well.

For some people it becomes very difficult to control their worries even when their life is going relatively well. The frequency and intensity of worry thoughts and images is high, and the person worries about a variety of different areas rather than just one thing. Often the excessive worrying is associated with other disruptive and uncomfortable symptoms including sleep disturbance, muscle tension, restlessness/being on edge, being easily fatigued, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Mental health professionals refer to excessive uncontrollable worry that interferes with daily functioning and is associated with these types of symptoms as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Some individuals with GAD experience panic attacks due to extreme anxiety associated with excessive worry or worry triggers. Other individuals complain of feeling shaky or twitchy, muscle soreness, cold clammy hands, sweating, dry mouth, nausea, diarrhea, urinary frequency, an exaggerated startle response, trouble swallowing or a "lump in the throat".

In general, people with GAD worry about the same things as people with normal worry. Common areas of worry include relationships, work or school, family or friends, pets, health issues, finances, community or world affairs, and daily hassles (e.g., being late for appointments, getting tasks completed, car breaking down, and losing personal possessions). Examples of some of the specific worries that have been reported by people with GAD include "Is my husband late home from work because he has been in a terrible car accident?" "What if my work this week wasn't good enough and my boss gets angry with me tomorrow?" "What if everyone hates the meal I make at my dinner party? What if I've lost something important?" For people with GAD one worry can often spiral downwards into other worries that are increasingly frightening. For example, "what if I have made my boss angry? What if he fires me? What if I can't pay the mortgage? What if my family ends up homeless? What if my wife and children leave me and I end up alone?"

As a result of excessive and extreme worrying most people with GAD feel high levels of anxiety (sometimes chronically). In an attempt to reduce their anxiety some individuals with GAD begin to engage in a variety of behaviours such as excessive checking (e.g., work or school material, personal belongings, appearance), excessive reassurance seeking (e.g. from co-workers, family or friends), distraction (e.g. overworking, watching excessive TV, keeping busy at all times) or self-medicating (e.g. abusing alcohol or drugs). These behaviours can create further problems and they don't tend to be very effective ways of managing worry. Some people with GAD have positive beliefs about their worrying which make it difficult to give up (e.g. worrying helps me solve problems, worrying helps protect me from bad things, worrying helps prepare me emotionally for when bad things happens, worrying motivates me, worrying makes me a caring person).

Some people with GAD have negative beliefs about their worry (e.g. worrying could give me cancer, worrying could make me lose my mind, my worrying may cause the bad thing to happen).

When does GAD Develop?

Most people with GAD report that their worrying led to significant problems during their late teens or early twenties. However many people with GAD also say they have been

a "worrier" as long as they can remember, including their childhood. Approximately 3 to 4 out of every 100 people meet criteria for GAD, which makes it just as common as other anxiety disorders such as panic disorder. Studies have also shown the rates of GAD to be higher among the elderly, with as many as 7 out of every 100 elderly individuals suffering from symptoms. Because the elderly segment of our population is increasing, the number of people living with this disorder may also increase over time. We also know that GAD seems to affect more women than men. Studies have shown that people with lower socioeconomic status (e.g., lower incomes, poor housing, etc.) are more likely to have GAD, possibly due to a higher rate of life stressors that can make a person more vulnerable to uncontrollable worry. Researchers are focusing upon these different patterns to learn more about GAD and why certain individuals seem more vulnerable than others. Researchers have found that as many as 75 to 90% of individuals with GAD have at least one other disorder such as social phobia, major depression (or symptoms of depression), panic disorder or substance abuse disorder. Some people with GAD also have physical conditions associated with stress such as recurrent headaches or irritable bowel syndrome while others struggle with substance use problems as they try to reduce the excessive worrying and related symptoms with alcohol and/or drugs.

Although GAD can be a chronic condition, several treatments have been demonstrated to be effective. These include both medication treatments and psychological treatments.