

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD): When Worry Gets Out of Control

Introduction

Are you extremely worried about everything in your life, even if there is little or no reason to worry? Are you very anxious about just getting through the day? Are you afraid that everything will always go badly?

If so, you may have an anxiety disorder called generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).

What is GAD?

All of us worry about things like health, money, or family problems. But people with GAD are extremely worried about these and many other things, even when there is little or no reason to worry about them. They are very anxious about just getting through the day. They think things will always go badly. At times, worrying keeps people with GAD from doing everyday tasks.

GAD develops slowly. It often starts during the teen years or young adulthood. Symptoms may get better or worse at different times, and often are worse during times of stress.

People with GAD may visit a doctor many times before they find out they have this disorder. They ask their doctors to help them with headaches or trouble falling asleep, which can be symptoms of GAD but they don't always get the help they need right away. It may take doctors some time to be sure that a person has GAD instead of something else.

What are the signs and symptoms of GAD?

A person with GAD may:

- Worry very much about everyday things
- Have trouble controlling their constant worries
- Know that they worry much more than they should
- Not be able to relax
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Be easily startled
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feel tired all the time
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains
- Have a hard time swallowing
- Tremble or twitch
- Be irritable, sweat a lot, and feel light-headed or out of breath
- Have to go to the bathroom a lot.

What causes GAD?

GAD sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some people have it, while others don't. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain are involved in fear and anxiety. By learning more about fear and anxiety in the brain, scientists may be able to create better treatments. Researchers are also looking for ways in which stress and environmental factors may play a role.

How is GAD treated?

First, talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Your doctor should do an exam to make sure that another physical problem isn't causing the symptoms. The doctor may refer you to a mental health specialist.

GAD is generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both.

Psychotherapy. A type of psychotherapy called cognitive behavior therapy is especially useful for treating GAD. It teaches a person different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations that help him or her feel less anxious and worried.

Medication. Doctors also may prescribe medication to help treat GAD. Two types of medications are commonly used to treat GAD—anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants. Anti-anxiety medications are powerful and there are different types. Many types begin working right away, but they generally should not be taken for long periods.

Antidepressants are used to treat depression, but they also are helpful for GAD. They may take several weeks to start working. These medications may cause side effects such as headache, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not a problem for most people, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. **Talk to your doctor about any side effects you may have.**

It's important to know that although antidepressants can be safe and effective for many people, they may be risky for some, especially children, teens, and young adults. A "black box"—the most serious type of warning that a prescription drug can have—has been added to the labels of antidepressant medications. These labels warn people that antidepressants may cause some people to have suicidal thoughts or make suicide attempts. Anyone taking antidepressants should be monitored closely, especially when they first start treatment with medications.

Some people do better with cognitive behavior therapy, while others do better with medication. Still others do best with a combination of the two. Talk with your doctor about the best treatment for you.

What is it like to have GAD?

"I was worried all the time about everything. It didn't matter that there were no signs of problems, I just got upset. I was having trouble falling asleep at night, and I couldn't keep my mind focused at work. I felt angry at my family all the time.

"I saw my doctor and explained my constant worries. My doctor sent me to someone who knows about GAD. Now I am taking medicine and working with a counselor to cope better with my worries. I had to work hard, but I feel better. I'm glad I made that first call to my doctor."

Depression

Do you feel very tired, helpless, and hopeless? Are you sad most of the time and take no pleasure in your family, friends, or hobbies? Are you having trouble working, sleeping, eating, and functioning? Have you felt this way for a long time?

If so, you may have depression.

What is depression?

Everyone feels sad sometimes, but these feelings usually pass after a few days. When you have depression, you have trouble with daily life for weeks at a time. Depression is a serious illness that needs treatment.

What are the different forms of depression?

There are several forms of depression.

Major depression—severe symptoms that interfere with your ability to work, sleep, study, eat, and enjoy life. An episode can occur only once in a person's lifetime, but more often, a person has several episodes.

Dysthymic disorder, or dysthymia—depressive symptoms that last a long time (2 years or longer) but are less severe than those of major depression.

Minor depression—similar to major depression and dysthymia, but symptoms are less severe and may not last as long.

What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

Different people have different symptoms. Some symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad or "empty"
- Feeling hopeless, irritable, anxious, or guilty
- Loss of interest in favorite activities
- Feeling very tired
- Not being able to concentrate or remember details
- Not being able to sleep, or sleeping too much
- Overeating, or not wanting to eat at all
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems.

What causes depression?

Several factors, or a combination of factors, may contribute to depression.

Genes—people with a family history of depression may be more likely to develop it than those whose families do not have the illness.

Brain chemistry—people with depression have different brain chemistry than those without the illness.

Stress—loss of a loved one, a difficult relationship, or any stressful situation may trigger depression.

Does depression look the same in everyone?

No. Depression affects different people in different ways.

Women experience depression more often than men. Biological, life cycle, and hormonal factors that are unique to women may be linked to women's higher depression rate. Women with depression typically have symptoms of sadness, worthlessness, and guilt.

Men with depression are more likely to be very tired, irritable, and sometimes even angry. They may lose interest in work or activities they once enjoyed, and have sleep problems.

Older adults with depression may have less obvious symptoms, or they may be less likely to admit to feelings of sadness or grief. They also are more likely to have medical conditions like heart disease or stroke, which may cause or contribute to depression. Certain medications also can have side effects that contribute to depression.

Children with depression may pretend to be sick, refuse to go to school, cling to a parent, or worry that a parent may die. Older children or teens may get into trouble at school and be irritable. Because these signs can also be part of normal mood swings associated with certain childhood stages, it may be difficult to accurately diagnose a young person with depression.

How is depression treated?

The first step to getting the right treatment is to visit a doctor or mental health professional. He or she can do an exam or lab tests to rule out other conditions that may have the same symptoms as depression. He or she can also tell if certain medications you are taking may be affecting your mood.

The doctor should get a complete history of symptoms, including when they started, how long they have lasted, and how bad they are. He or she should also know whether they have occurred before, and if so, how they were treated. He or she should also ask if there is a history of depression in your family.

Medications called antidepressants can work well to treat depression. They can take several weeks to work.

Antidepressants can have side effects including:

- Headache
- Nausea—feeling sick to your stomach
- Difficulty sleeping or nervousness
- Agitation or restlessness
- Sexual problems.

Most side effects lessen over time. **Talk to your doctor about any side effects you have.**

It's important to know that although antidepressants can be safe and effective for many people, they may present serious risks to some, especially children, teens, and young adults. A "black box"—the most serious type of warning that a prescription drug can have—has been added to the labels of antidepressant medications. These labels warn people that antidepressants may cause some people, especially those who become agitated when they first start taking the medication and before it begins to work, to have suicidal thoughts or make suicide

attempts. Anyone taking antidepressants should be monitored closely, especially when they first start taking them. For most people, though, the risks of untreated depression far outweigh those of antidepressant medications when they are used under a doctor's careful supervision.

Psychotherapy can also help treat depression. Psychotherapy helps by teaching new ways of thinking and behaving, and changing habits that may be contributing to the depression. Therapy can help you understand and work through difficult relationships or situations that may be causing your depression or making it worse.

Electroconvulsive therapy. For severe depression that is very difficult to treat and does not respond to medication or therapy, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is sometimes used. Although ECT once had a bad reputation, it has greatly improved and can provide relief for people for whom other treatments have not worked. ECT may cause side effects such as confusion and memory loss. Although these effects are usually short-term, they can sometimes linger.

How can I help a loved one who is depressed?

If you know someone who has depression, first help him or her see a doctor or mental health professional.

- Offer support, understanding, patience, and encouragement.
- Talk to him or her, and listen carefully.
- Never ignore comments about suicide, and report them to your loved one's therapist or doctor.
- Invite him or her out for walks, outings, and other activities.
- Remind him or her that with time and treatment, the depression will lift.

How can I help myself if I am depressed?

As you continue treatment, gradually you will start to feel better. Remember that if you are taking an antidepressant, it may take several weeks for it to start working. Try to do things that you used to enjoy before you had depression. Go easy on yourself. Other things that may help include:

- Breaking up large tasks into small ones, and doing what you can as you can. Try not to do too many things at once.
- Spending time with other people and talking to a friend or relative about your feelings.
- Once you have a treatment plan, try to stick to it. It will take time for treatment to work.
- Do not make important life decisions until you feel better. Discuss decisions with others who know you well.