



Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

ADAA

Anxiety & Depression
Association of America
Triumphing Through Science, Treatment, and Education

www.adaa.org

General Anxiety



Relationships, health, money, deadlines, world affairs—you name it. We all have plenty to worry about. But people who have **generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD** (aka the “worry” disorder), experience excessive and unrelenting worry that goes on almost every day.

People with GAD worry a disproportionate amount about realistic concerns. They don’t know how to stop the worry cycle, which they feel is beyond their control, and it interferes with daily living. They often jump to the worst-case scenario, anticipate the potential bad things that can happen, and spend a lot of time worrying about or ruminating on the future. They feel a need to plan for all possible outcomes and have difficulty turning off the worry or letting it go.

People with GAD worry a disproportionate amount about realistic concerns.

GAD is diagnosed if:

- You’ve **worried chronically** on more days than not about a variety of everyday or future events for at least six months.
- Chronic worrying **interferes with daily living** and leads to **avoidance of situations** (e.g. miss work or school) or causes significant mental distress.
- You experience a very difficult **struggle to regain control, relax, or manage anxiety and worry.**
- Worry and the accompanying anxiety can make it **difficult to sleep or relax.**



In addition to excessive worry, GAD can be characterized by physical ailments like muscle tension, fatigue, irritability, gastrointestinal symptoms, and headaches.



The symptoms outlined below can interfere with daily living and cause significant mental distress.

Signs and Symptoms

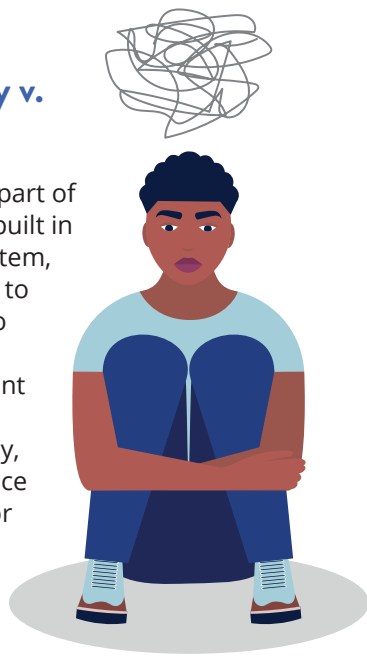


GAD is diagnosed if you have worried excessively about a variety of topics or everyday problems or future events more days than not for at least six months. In addition to worry, you must experience three or more of these symptoms that cause clinically significant distress:

- Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless, unsatisfying sleep)

Normal Anxiety v. GAD

Anxiety is a natural part of life. It is our body's built in threat detection system, designed to alert us to potential dangers so we can stay safe or prepare for important events. It is normal to worry occasionally, particularly in the face of stressful events or circumstances.



Normal anxiety crosses into disordered anxiety, however, when the anxiety is:



- Higher than the situation calls for.
- Excessive, overwhelming, or seemingly uncontrollable.
- Persists despite reassurances that everything is ok.
- Interferes with daily activities or negatively impacts quality of life.

“Is it normal anxiety or GAD?”

Normal Anxiety

Muscle aches or tiredness related to overexertion at the gym, a stressful day at work, or sitting too long at the computer.

Worry about a work deadline, school exam, or upcoming medical appointment.

Difficulty relaxing, sleeping, or concentrating when faced with an illness, job loss, or relationship difficulties.

These examples of normal anxiety are short-term.

GAD

Restlessness, muscle tension, and fatigue that persist for six months or more not related to a specific physical or emotional problem.

Constant and chronic worry that disrupts social activities and interferes with work, school, family, and relationships.

Irritability, sleep disturbance, or difficulty concentrating on more days than not for at least six months.

Causes

Although the precise cause of GAD is unknown, scientific studies show that a **combination of biological, genetic, cognitive, and environmental factors (stress, negative life events) plays a role in GAD**. Even the stress of positive events, such as buying a new house, starting or looking for a new job, school transitions, or getting married, can trigger symptoms in those who are predisposed to this disorder.



Effects

When worrying goes on for most days, possibly all day, **generalized anxiety disorder can disrupt social activities and interfere with work, school, family, relationships, and your general sense of well-being**. GAD is also a risk factor for depression; these two disorders frequently occur together.

People experiencing GAD often feel that chronic anxiety has an impact on their relationships with spouses and significant others and many state that GAD has a negative effect on their friendships.

GAD and Other Disorders

People with GAD often **experience symptoms of other anxiety disorders** such as panic disorder, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, selective mutism, separation anxiety, and specific phobias. Frequently, individuals with GAD develop symptoms of depression as well.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are closely related to anxiety disorders; anxiety is one of the symptoms. Some people may experience either of these disorders along with depression and other related disorders at the same time.

Each disorder has specific symptoms. For more details, visit the ADAA website at www.adaa.org.



Treatments

A number of treatment options are scientifically proven to be effective. **There is no single “right” treatment for GAD**. Some treatments work better for some people, and sometimes a combination of treatments is most helpful.

Talk to your primary care provider about the various options on the next page.

Ask for an explanation for why a particular type of treatment is recommended, when to consider other available options, and what you must do to fully participate in your recovery.



Most people who seek treatment for GAD see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life.

Some evidence-based treatments include **psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle practices**. Success of treatment varies; you may respond to treatment after a few months, while others may need longer. Treatment may be complicated for those with more than one anxiety disorder or those suffering from co-occurring conditions such as depression or diabetes. This is why treatment must be tailored to each person.



Psychotherapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a well-established, highly effective, short-term yet lasting treatment that involves **learning skills to help change problematic thinking and behavior patterns**. CBT teaches you how to control your worry, decrease the impact of anxiety on your life, and learn new responses to stressful events. While CBT is not a cure for GAD, many people experience noticeable improvement within 12 to 16 weeks.

Relaxation training and breathing techniques, meditation, yoga, and exercise may also become part of your treatment plan.



Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Related to CBT, **ACT** focuses on learning how to keep unwanted or negative thoughts or feelings from controlling or affecting you so you can focus on being present, behaving in effective ways, and doing the things that truly matter to you.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness is being able to pay attention to the present moment without judging it. It is a powerful skill for combatting worry and is often helpful for reducing anxiety, stress, and depression.

Integrative medicine combines conventional and complimentary alternative medicine (CAM) treatments and has shown evidence of effectiveness and safety.



Medications

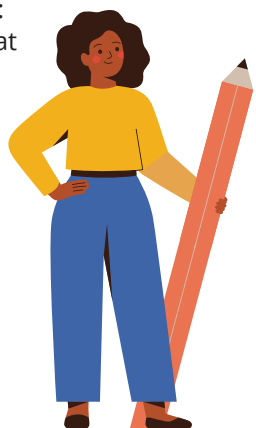
Medications called **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** and **serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)** have proven to be effective in the treatment of GAD, and they are often used along with psychological therapies. Also called antidepressants, these prescribed medications should be taken under the supervision of a licensed medical health provider.



Lifestyle Factors That Can Help

Whether you have normal anxiety, GAD, or another anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

- **Talk to someone:** spouse, significant other, friend, child, or doctor.
- **Start a mindfulness practice:** You can use apps like Headspace or Calm. You can YouTube or Google “Mindful meditation,” or you can simply focus on paying attention to what you are doing in the moment.
- **Exercise regularly:** Go for a walk, jog, do yoga, dance, or just get moving!
- **Keep a daily journal:** Become aware of what triggers your anxiety and how you respond when you feel anxious.
- **Eat a balanced diet,** focusing on minimally processed foods when possible. Avoid caffeine, which can trigger anxiety symptoms.
- **Give yourself time for adequate sleep:** Try for 8 hours a night.
- **Limit screen time** (and stop at least one hour before bed).



GAD in Children and Teens

Anxiety is a normal part of childhood. Every child and teen goes through phases and will be anxious some of the time, and like adults, they can suffer from anxiety disorders.

Children with anxiety disorders experience fear and worry that persist despite helpful efforts of parents and teachers.

Starting school, moving, the loss of a parent or grandparent, being away from their parents, and other stressful events can trigger the onset of an anxiety disorder. However, an anxiety disorder does not necessarily stem from a major event.

Every parent wants to help their child feel less anxious. **The best way to help an anxious child is by encouraging them to cope rather than avoid.** Be supportive! Acknowledge the child's fear and express acceptance. Don't accommodate! Accommodation is when parents change their behavior because their child is anxious. Helping a child avoid the things they fear helps in the short-term but maintains anxiety over time.

Taking your child to a primary care physician or therapist for anxiety is as important as visiting the doctor for an ear infection or broken arm.

New treatments—medications and therapies—for anxiety and anxiety-related disorders are being researched and tested all the time. Check www.adaa.org for updated information.



Common Signs of GAD in Children



Anxiety looks different in different children. Some common signs of GAD can include:

- Frequent repeated questions, especially ones that start with "What if?"
- Frequent complaints of headaches and stomachaches
- Irritability
- Meltdowns or tantrums
- Difficulty sleeping or distress at bedtime



Helping Anxious Children

GAD in children and teens is highly treatable. The same treatment options available for adults have been shown to be effective for youth as well.

In addition, parents can help their children with GAD by adopting a supportive stance. A supportive stance is one that:

- Acknowledges and validates the child's fear and anxiety:
 - » While encouraging them to be brave, resilient, and cope adaptively
 - » Without accommodating the anxiety (meaning don't change family plans because of the anxiety)



Finding the Right Mental Health Provider

Many kinds of health care professionals are trained to diagnose and treat anxiety disorders:

- Physicians: including psychiatrists, internists, OB-GYNs, and family practice
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Behavioral health specialists
- Marriage and family therapists
- Nurses and nurse practitioners
- Physician assistants

Ask about a provider's training and credentials before beginning treatment.

Clergy and school counselors may also be able to help.

Other Places to Find a Treatment Provider

- Health insurance provider
- Psychiatry department at a local medical school
- University psychology department
- Local hospital mental health clinics or staff psychiatrists
- State or local mental health agency
- Counseling services on a local college campus



Consider the following questions and issues when deciding on a mental health professional and type of treatment.

Training and credentials. Consider the training of the professional and inquire about experience or expertise with the disorder. If the professional is licensed in your state or a preferred provider for your health insurer, make sure they have the appropriate training and experience.

Family involvement. Find out the role family members play in treatment. Make sure you understand how loved ones are involved.

Type and format of treatment. Make sure you understand the course of treatment, including length, procedures, frequency and duration of the sessions, and expected length of time any medication will be necessary.

Cost and insurance. Know your health insurance coverage for mental health and ask if your insurance is accepted. Find out if the fee schedule is on a sliding scale based on income.

Comfort and confidence. It is important to feel comfortable with a mental health professional. Having confidence in the person is essential for establishing a positive working relationship.

Communication. Ask how the mental health professional will communicate with your family doctor.

Visit www.adaa.org to find qualified mental health professionals using the **Find Your Therapist** directory.



ADAA Can Help

ADAA serves as a **comprehensive resource for education about the causes, symptoms, and treatments of anxiety, depression, and co-occurring disorders.** We are here to help you find answers and make the best decisions for your health care so you can move forward with your life.

Visit adaa.org to:

- Search our **Find Your Therapist directory**
- Sign up for **Triumph**, ADAA's free monthly e-newsletter
- Learn more about GAD, other anxiety disorders, depression, and related conditions, including treatment options
- Read blogs and listen to informative free **webinars**, podcast episodes, and videos
- Read self-help **books** by ADAA professional members
- Learn about **clinical trial**, or **support groups** (virtual and in your area)
- Join ADAA's free English or Spanish speaking **peer to peer online support communities**
- Read **personal stories** (and contribute your own!) from individuals who have triumphed over anxiety and depression
- Review questions to ask your mental health provider



"That's why I wanted to share my story with ADAA, because I feel that when people are battling things, sometimes other people's stories and journeys will give them the willpower and drive to keep going. ADAA's website has helped me to continue to be strong, and when I feel that I am starting to spiral downward, I find the power to pick myself back up and keep going!"

– APRIL DAVIS

Personal Story of Triumph

About ADAA

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) works to prevent, treat, and one day cure anxiety disorders and depression.

ADAA is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD, and co-occurring disorders through the alignment of science, treatment, and education.

For information visit
www.adaa.org or contact:

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The logo for the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) features the letters "ADAA" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The letters are set against a dark blue rectangular background that has a slight 3D effect, appearing to be layered on top of a lighter blue background. The top of the dark blue rectangle is slightly irregular, with a small notch on the right side.

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