

What Is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Defining Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

In this program, we discuss evidence-based treatment planning for Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Let's begin by looking at the criteria for the disorder according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by *excessive anxiety and worry*, occurring more days than not, for a period of at least six months, and about several different events or activities. Note that this duration criteria may be shortened in the next edition of the *DSM*.

Adults with GAD often worry about everyday things, such as daily responsibilities, the health of family members, the safety of children, finances, job security, and relationship issues. Children with the disorder tend to worry about the quality or competence of their actions at home and in school. The focus of the worry in GAD may shift from one concern to another. Although the particular content of a worry may not be that different from the worry of those without GAD, *its frequency, intensity, or duration is far out of proportion to the actual likelihood or impact of the feared event*.

Although individuals with GAD may not believe that all of their worries are excessive, they do find it difficult to control them. In addition, the worry in GAD is accompanied by *at least three additional symptoms reflecting increased arousal*. These include:

- Restlessness
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbances such as difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless, unsatisfying sleep

In diagnosing GAD, it is important to rule out that the worry does not represent the feature of another psychiatric disorder (e.g., worry about having the next panic attack in panic disorder). Worry that is confined to the features of another mental disorder is not considered GAD, but rather a feature of those syndromes.

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As with all mental disorders, the anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms of GAD must cause clinically significant distress or functional impairment, such as in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning that are important to the individual. In GAD, this functional impairment may result from avoidance of situations in which a negative outcome could occur. There may be excessive time and effort preparing for situations in which a negative outcome could occur. Procrastination and repeatedly seeking reassurance because of worries are also commonly seen in GAD.

As with all mental disorders, it should first be ruled out that the GAD symptoms are not caused by the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a stimulant) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

Diagnostic Criteria for GAD

A summary of the *DSM* criteria for GAD can be found in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Generalized Anxiety Disorder DSM-IV Diagnostic Criteria

- A. Excessive anxiety and worry, occurring more days than not, for a period of at least six months, and is focused on a number of events or activities
Examples of adult worries in GAD:
 - Daily responsibilities
 - Health of family members
 - Safety of children
 - Finances
 - Job security
 - RelationshipsTheme of childhood worries in GAD:
 - Quality or competence of behavioral performance at home or in school
- B. Difficulty controlling the worry
- C. Three or more additional symptoms, including:
 - Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
 - Being easily fatigued
 - Difficulty concentrating or going blank
 - Irritability
 - Muscle tension
 - Sleep disturbance
- D. The worry in GAD should not represent the feature of another psychiatric disorder.
- E. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms of GAD must cause clinically significant distress or functional impairment.
- F. Symptoms of GAD are not caused by the direct physiological effects of a substance or a general medical condition.

Epidemiology

GAD is a common anxiety disorder. In any one year, approximately 2% of the population meets the criteria for this disorder. Approximately 5% to 8% of those presenting to primary care settings meet these criteria as well. Two-thirds of those with GAD are women. Selective epidemiological information related to GAD is summarized in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Epidemiology

- 12-month prevalence rate: 2.1%
- Primary care prevalence rate: 5% to 8%
- Gender distribution: females, 66%; males, 33%

Key Points

- Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive worry that is difficult to control and is accompanied by symptoms of overarousal.
- Worries are about everyday concerns, such as daily responsibilities, finances, and relationships.
- Overarousal may manifest in any of several ways, including irritability, fatigue, and sleep disturbances.
- GAD is twice as prevalent in females as in males.

Chapter Review

1. What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Chapter Review Test Questions

1. Which of the following best describes the primary diagnostic feature of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?
 - A. Excessive worry specifically about being humiliated in public
 - B. Excessive worry about several everyday or real-life problems
 - C. Excessive worry about having a specific disease
 - D. Excessive worry specifically about having an unexpected panic attack

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2. True or false? According to the *DSM*, you can diagnose Generalized Anxiety Disorder when only the excessive worry criteria are met; that is, without any evidence of physiological overarousal.

Reference

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text revised; DSM-IV-TR). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.