

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)



FACT SHEET 35

WHAT IS GENERALISED ANXIETY DISORDER?

Most people feel anxious and worried from time to time when faced with certain situations. For example, it is common to feel tense or worried before exams, speaking in public or going for a job interview. At times, a certain level of anxiety can help people feel alert and focused.

People with Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) feel anxious and have worries most of the time. These worries interfere with their normal lives. Their worries may relate to any aspect of everyday life, including work, health, family and/or financial issues, even when they have no particular reason to worry about such issues. Even minor matters, such as household chores, can become the focus of anxiety and lead to uncontrollable worries and a feeling that something terrible will happen.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF GAD

A person may have GAD if, for **six months or more** and on more days than not, they have:

- felt excessive worry or anxiety
- found it difficult to gain control or calm down during a period of anxiety
- found that the anxiety made it difficult to carry out everyday activities such as working, studying or socialising with friends and family.

In addition to the above, people with GAD also will have experienced **three or more** of the following:

- felt restless or on edge
- tired easily
- had difficulty concentrating
- felt irritable
- had muscle tension (for example, a sore jaw or back)
- had problems sleeping (for example, difficulty falling asleep, or restless sleep).

People with GAD may also experience *derealisation*; a sense that you or the world around you is not real. This symptom is thought to be associated with the physiological changes that occur in the body during the anxiety response.

Please note that this checklist is only a rough guide as to whether someone has GAD. For a diagnosis, it is important to see a health professional.



People with GAD may have related disorders, most commonly depression, Social Phobia (characterised by avoidance of social situations) and Panic Disorder. They may also misuse alcohol or drugs and may experience a range of physical health problems such as headaches, irritable bowel syndrome or heart disease.

HOW COMMON IS GAD AND WHO EXPERIENCES IT?

In Australia, approximately 14 per cent of the population experiences an anxiety disorder and 2.7 per cent experiences GAD in a 12 month period. Nearly 6 per cent of the population will experience GAD in their lifetime.¹

The condition appears to affect more women than men. It can occur at any time in life and is common in all age groups, including children and older people.

Many people with GAD are not able to identify the precise cause of their concerns. Most people with GAD are aware that having a tendency to worry has existed for a long time; often describing themselves as always having been 'a worrier'.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007* (4326.0). Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

FACT SHEET 35

Worries often found in children with GAD typically revolve around school, sporting events, punctuality, natural disasters or war. Behaviour that sometimes accompanies these worries include:

- being over-conforming
- being a perfectionist
- being unsure of oneself
- needing to re-do tasks
- seeking regular and frequent approval and assurance from parents, teachers, siblings or friends
- asking “Yes but, what if...?”

Adolescents who experience GAD have a tendency to see small problems as catastrophes. Despite some symptoms typically presenting in childhood, the disorder appears to develop more fully in adolescence.

WHAT CAUSES GAD?

A number of factors may play a part in the development of GAD. Biological, genetic and environmental factors, or a combination of any of these, may be involved.

- **Biological factors:** Some changes in brain functioning have been associated with GAD.
- **Family history:** There is thought to be some genetic component to the development of GAD.
- **Stressful life events:** People may be more at risk if they experience a major life change that causes stress, such as the birth of a child, the breakdown/loss of a close relationship, or moving house/job. Physical, sexual or emotional abuse also increase the risk of developing GAD, as do other traumatic experiences in childhood, such as the death of or separation from a parent.
- **Psychological factors:** Some personality traits may put a person at greater risk of GAD, including:
 - being sensitive
 - being emotional or experiencing general nervousness
 - inability to tolerate frustration
 - feeling inhibited
 - having perfectionistic tendencies.²

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR GAD?

GAD is treatable and seeking professional help is the first step towards recovery. There are two main types of effective treatments for GAD: psychological therapy and medication.

Psychological therapy

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the most commonly used therapy for people with GAD.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapists may use a range of techniques, for example:

- encouraging people to recognise the difference between productive and unproductive worries, teaching people how to let go of worries and problem solve
- confronting avoidance through exposure therapy; where behavioural tasks are set to assist the person in overcoming their fears by beginning to confront the situations or thoughts that have previously been avoided
- teaching **relaxation and breathing techniques**, with muscle relaxation in particular, to control anxiety and the physical symptoms of tension.

Another effective part of CBT treatment is **Psycho education**. This relates to education regarding the symptoms of anxiety and why they occur. For example, people tend to be less fearful of symptoms if they are informed of the human physiological response to fear. People react to the threat of imminent danger with an acute stress response, commonly known as the *fight-*



² Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria (ADAVIC). ADAVIC Information Sheets: Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Melbourne: ADAVIC. Available at: <http://www.adavic.org.au>

or-flight response, during which the brain releases hormones such as adrenaline that prepare the body for action. Education regarding the symptoms of anxiety and why they occur may assist the person in becoming less fearful of the symptoms themselves. Understanding this process may assist the person in understanding the importance of breathing, relaxation and aerobic exercise. Often, **breathing and relaxation strategies** are also taught to minimise physical symptoms of anxiety and manage stress in general.

Medication

While psychological treatment is usually the first choice for the treatment of anxiety disorders, medication may also be helpful for some people.

Antidepressant medication: Antidepressants are the type most often prescribed when this disorder is severe and associated with depression.

For more details see **beyondblue Fact sheet 11 – Antidepressant medication** and talk to your doctor.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (Australia's regulatory agency for medical drugs) and manufacturers of antidepressants do not recommend antidepressant use for treatment of depression in young people under the age of 18. For more information see **beyondblue Fact sheet – Antidepressants for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents.**

Benzodiazepines relieve anxiety and aid sleep in the short term but are addictive. In this long-term condition they are only to be used for a short period of time (two or three weeks), or intermittently. Benzodiazepines can be difficult to stop taking, and, if a person has become dependent, withdrawal symptoms may be quite severe. A common withdrawal symptom is high anxiety, which paradoxically can worsen the problem and make it difficult to assess whether current anxiety is related to the GAD or a result of long-term use of the Benzodiazepines. (See www.reconnexion.org.au for more information and talk to your doctor.)

If you decide that you wish to stop taking your medication, it is crucial that you discuss this with a health professional before taking any action.



HELPING YOURSELF TO RECOVER FROM GAD

Once a person with GAD is receiving treatment, the process of recovery can be different for each individual. Recovery can involve ups and downs; some days are easier than others. For more information see **beyondblue Fact Sheet 15 – Recovery.**

Useful tips

- Talk to your doctor about referral to a mental health professional who specialises in treating GAD.
- Take control of your symptoms. Learn and then practise relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing, muscle relaxation and meditation. Relaxation techniques can provide quick relief from anxiety and, if practiced regularly, can also have a general effect by reducing anxiety. For more information on relaxation techniques see **beyondblue Fact Sheet 6 – Reducing stress.**
- Notice the thought patterns that contribute to your anxiety. Write these down and discuss them with a mental health professional who will be able to teach you techniques to challenge and change the way you think.
- Set some realistic and small goals for yourself to manage stress better, for example, walking three times a week, joining a yoga class and eating regular meals.
- Develop some self statements that you find reassuring. For example, "This is not my responsibility", "Maybe it's time to take a breath", "Good enough is sometimes good enough".

- Recognise triggers: consider which situations or circumstances make you feel anxious or increase your stress levels (for example, too much caffeine, workload, going to staff meetings or to the shops). Then try to develop strategies to confront situations, rather than avoiding them in order to manage and minimise general stress and anxiety.
- Practise letting go and putting things into perspective – don't feel you must relentlessly meet unrealistic standards. Focus on successes rather than failures; don't be too hard on yourself.
- Set aside 'worry time' during the day to assist in the containment of worries to a certain time, rather than worrying right throughout the day. If a worry enters your mind write it down so you'll remember or simply tell yourself to worry about that during 'worry time'.
- Establish a routine: put aside time to work and do things that bring you pleasure, for example, listening to music or spending time with people whose company you enjoy. For more information see **beyondblue Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active** and **beyondblue Fact sheet 15 – Recovery**.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: get regular exercise, have adequate sleep, eat a balanced diet, and limit your intake of alcohol and other stimulants, such as caffeine, to reduce anxiety. For more information, see **beyondblue Fact sheet 7 – Sleeping well, Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active, Fact sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs, and Fact sheet 30 – Healthy eating for people with depression, anxiety and related disorders**.
- If appropriate, offer practical support. A person with GAD may find it useful to be encouraged to challenge unrealistic or anxious thoughts, or to explore problem-solving solutions.
- Acknowledge any gains the person makes, no matter how small.
- Work with the person to re-establish a daily routine that includes enjoyable and/or relaxing activities.
- Parents of children or adolescents with GAD may need to:
 - put limits on revision of homework to deter perfectionist behaviour
 - remember to be a positive role model for the child by accepting that life isn't perfect and predictable all the time and don't get too frustrated or upset by life's minor irritations
 - avoid giving constant reassurance and encourage independent problem solving
 - allow time for enjoyable activities.
- Don't expect too much too soon; recovery can take a while and there may be some ups and downs.
- Find emotional support for *yourself* – dealing with and caring for a person with GAD can be difficult at times. You may need support too. This may involve attending a support group, individual, couple or family therapy, or educational sessions. For more information see **beyondblue's free booklet *A Guide for Carers*** available from the website or call 1300 22 4636 (local call cost).

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE RECOVER FROM GAD

Family members and friends can play an important role in helping people recover from GAD, as well as helping themselves to cope with the person's condition. Some ways in which you can do this include:

- Encourage the person to seek help. Assist the person to find out about available services and offer to accompany the person to the consultation.
- Acknowledge that the person has a disorder and is not just being difficult; the anxiety is a very real and distressing experience.
- Don't involve yourself in the person's avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations and avoid giving reassurance constantly.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

Many types of help are available, but sometimes it can be difficult to know where to go to get the help you need. Below is a guide to the different types of help offered by health professionals:

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good person with whom to discuss your concerns in the first instance. A GP can conduct or arrange any medical tests deemed necessary and provide you with a referral to a mental health professional. It is recommended that you go to your regular local GP or another GP in the same clinic as they have access to your medical records. However, if you don't have a regular GP or clinic, a list of GPs with expertise in treating common mental health problems is available at www.beyondblue.org.au by clicking on **Find a Doctor or Other Mental Health Practitioner** or call the **beyondblue** info line on **1300 22 4636** (local call cost).

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Some psychiatrists use **psychological treatments** such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). IPT is a structured program with a specific focus on improving relationships.

Psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists with mental health training specialise in providing non-medical (psychological) treatment for depression, anxiety and related disorders.

A rebate can be claimed through Medicare for psychological treatments if the person has a mental health problem and is referred by a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician to a psychiatrist, registered psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist in mental health. This rebate can be claimed for part of the cost of up to 12 individual consultations and 12 group sessions in a calendar year. To find a list of professionals who provide psychological treatment for which a Medicare rebate can be claimed go to www.beyondblue.org.au and click on Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner.

MORE INFORMATION

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

To find out more about depression, anxiety and related disorders call the **beyondblue info line: 1300 22 4636 (local call cost)** or visit the website www.beyondblue.org.au

Youthbeyondblue

www.youthbeyondblue.com

beyondblue's website for young people – information about depression and anxiety and how to help a friend

Lifeline

13 11 14

24-hour counselling, information and referral (local call cost)

MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78

Support for men with family and relationship problems

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

24-hour telephone counselling for people at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

www.relationships.com.au

Support for people with relationship problems

Anxiety Online

www.anxietyonline.org.au

Information and 'virtual' treatment clinic for people with anxiety disorders

Anxiety Network Australia

www.anxietynetwork.com.au

Information on anxiety disorders, related programs, workshops, courses and stories from people living with these disorders

Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

www.arcvic.com.au

Information about anxiety disorders, their management and links to other services

Virtual Clinic

www.virtualclinic.org.au

Internet-based education and treatment programs for people with anxiety and depression

CRUFAD Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression

www.crufad.org

Information about anxiety and its management

e-couch

www.ecouch.anu.edu.au

Evidence-based information about emotional problems (including anxiety) and strategies to help you prevent problems and understand yourself better

headspace: National Youth Mental Health Foundation

www.headspace.org.au

Mental health information for young people

MoodGYM

www.moodgym.anu.edu.au

Online psychological therapy

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)



FACT SHEET 35

Multicultural Mental Health Australia

(02) 9840 3333

www.mmha.org.au

Provides mental health support for Australians from culturally-diverse backgrounds

Reconnexion

www.reconnexion.org.au

1300 273 266

Psychology services for people experiencing anxiety and depression and tranquilliser (benzodiazepine) dependency

STATE-SPECIFIC SERVICES

ACT

Mental Health Foundation

(02) 6282 6658

www.mhf.org.au

Information about anxiety, depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in the Australian Capital Territory

New South Wales

Mental Health Association (NSW)

1300 794 992

www.mentalhealth.asn.au

Northern Territory

Top End Association for Mental Health

1300 780 081

www.teamhealth.asn.au

Queensland

Panic Anxiety Disorder Association QLD

(07) 3353 4851

www.anxiety.websyte.com.au

South Australia

ACEDA – panic and Anxiety, obsessive Compulsive and Eating Disorders Associations

(08) 8297 4011

www.aceda.org.au

Tasmania

Mental Health Council of Tasmania

1800 808 890

www.mhct.org

Victoria

ADAVIC (Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria)

www.adavic.org.au

Information on GAD, depression and other anxiety-related disorders, and support services

Western Australia

Anxiety Self Help Association

(08) 9346 7262

www.cnswa.com/asha

Other *beyondblue* anxiety information material available:

beyondblue Fact sheet 21 – Anxiety Disorders

beyondblue Fact sheet 31 – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

beyondblue Fact sheet 36 – Panic Disorder

beyondblue Fact sheet 37 – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

beyondblue Fact sheet 38 – Specific Phobias

beyondblue Fact sheet 39 – Social Phobia

beyondblue wallet-size information card – Anxiety Disorders

beyondblue envelope-size information card – Anxiety Disorders

beyondblue gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Reconnexion in the development of this fact sheet.

© *beyondblue*: the national depression initiative, 2010.

PO Box 6100, Hawthorn West VIC 3122

T: (03) 9810 6100

beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636

F: (03) 9810 6111

E: bb@beyondblue.org.au

W: www.beyondblue.org.au