

# Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (or GAD) is exactly what it sounds like: anxiety that has generalized (or attached) itself to anything or everything. Those who suffer from GAD are sometimes characterized as “worriers” or “Nervous Nellies.” It’s important to know that those with GAD cannot just turn off the worry or stop thinking anxious thoughts – if they could switch it off, they would have already.

Since Generalized Anxiety Disorder often starts in childhood, many of those with this problem have never really experienced not being anxious or not seeing the world as a dangerous place. As a result, they are more likely than not to anticipate things going poorly, worry about unlikely catastrophes and accidents, and experience physical and mental unease most of the time.

## What are the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder?

- Excessive anxiety and worry about a number of different activities or events
- Rumination (sticky thoughts) and other uncontrollable worrisome thoughts
- Physical tension, restlessness, fatigue, or poor or disturbed sleep
- Irritability, difficulty concentrating, dulling, or the mind going blank
- Gastrointestinal difficulties, such as stomachaches, nausea, and/or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Avoidance of people, places, and things that cause anxiety
- Cognitive distortions: Thinking patterns that distort our interpretation of things that have happened, our experience of what is happening right now, and our expectations about what may happen in the future.
- Reassurance seeking: Anxiety can lead us to ask repeated questions, reach out for others’ opinions when second-guessing our own, and other ways of seeking safety.

## What is the impact of generalized anxiety disorder?

*GAD impacts about 3% of the population. In a classroom of 35 kids, at least one child could be expected to have GAD.*

**Distress:** GAD tells us to prepare for catastrophe, so we might be in low level stress all the time. (As kids get older, they may express their worries less to others, particularly if they believe that their worries are abnormal. Others may not even be aware of how much worry is in their heads.)

**Duration:** GAD is a chronic condition that doesn’t go away on its own.

How much does it get in the way of school, friendships, and family functioning?

**Interference:** Many sufferers of GAD are good at hiding it. However, GAD often prevents people from fully enjoying their lives – it can keep them from trying new things, meeting new people, going

**Impairment:** places. Often GAD sufferers live life “waiting for the other shoe to drop” – stuck in anticipation of things taking a turn for the worse at any moment. Given the burdens of dealing with chronic anxiety, many individual with GAD, especially adults, also experience periods of depression.

## How is generalized anxiety disorder treated?

Like other forms of anxiety, GAD may be treated with a cognitive behavioral approach. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) targets our thoughts, feelings/sensations, and actions. Typically, our anxiety creates automatic thoughts, feelings, and actions that we are not even aware are driven by anxiety. CBT helps us recognize the signs of anxiety, and empowers us with the tools to best face our fears and manage them.