

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?



Description

It is common to worry sometimes, but people who worry too much often find it exhausting, and it may affect their health. Psychologists call this generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and they think that between 2 and 6 people out of every 100 experience GAD every year. The good news is that there are effective psychological treatments for GAD.

The *What Is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?* information handout is designed to help clients with GAD understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of GAD.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have GAD.
- A description of why GAD might not get better by itself, derived from Dugas' and Wells' cognitive models of GAD.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for GAD.

Instructions

Our '*What Is ... ?*' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** These handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

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What Is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?

You feel worried, and unable to control your worries.

You feel anxious, nervous, or restless.

You feel unable to relax or sleep.

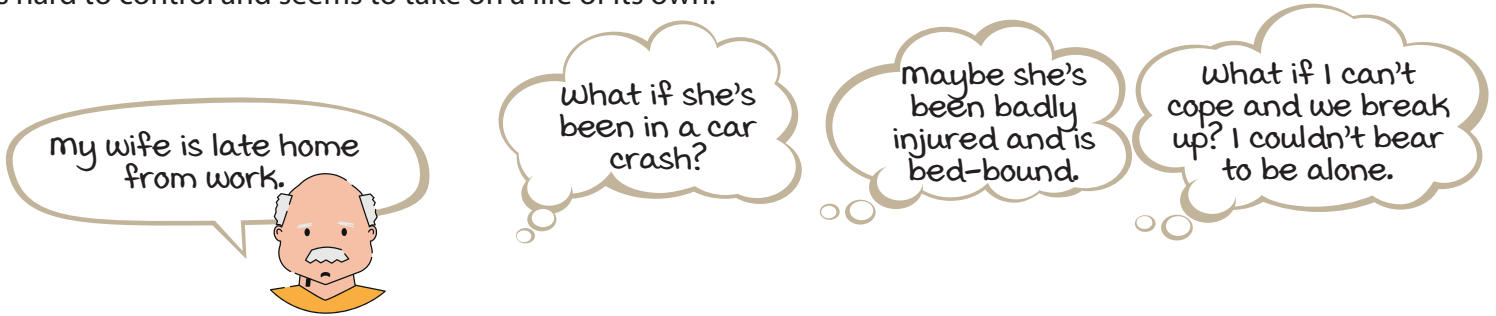
Your muscles feel tense, ache, or are painful.

It's common to worry sometimes, but if you worry too much it can feel exhausting and may affect your health.

Psychologists call this generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and they think that between 2 and 6 people out of every 100 experience GAD every year.

The core of generalized anxiety: worry

When you worry, you think about problems that might happen in a way that leaves you feeling anxious or nervous. Worry is a chain of thoughts and images that can progress in ever more catastrophic and unlikely directions. It often feels hard to control and seems to take on a life of its own.



Worry can get stuck in place for a few reasons:

Intolerance of uncertainty

If you find uncertainty unpleasant, you might do more:

- Worrying, in an attempt to anticipate problems.
- Planning in advance, how you might deal with difficulties
- Checking and researching, to find out as much as you can.

Strategies designed to help you to 'feel certain' such as worrying and planning can backfire: for every "what if ...?" question there are many uncertain answers, which leaves you feeling even less certain.

Positive beliefs about worry

Positive beliefs about worry include:

- "Worrying helps me to find solutions to problems."
- "Worrying increases my motivation to get things done."
- "Worrying in advance helps me cope if something bad happens."
- "Worrying can prevent bad things from happening."

Unsurprisingly, people who hold positive beliefs about worry tend to do more worrying.

Avoidance

Anxiety doesn't feel good, and so you might try to avoid particular thoughts and feelings by:

- Suppressing worrisome thoughts.
- Using distractions to interrupt worry.
- Avoiding situations that cause worry.

Avoidance strategies are physically and mentally tiring. Avoiding or suppressing your thoughts can actually result in experiencing even more of the things that you are trying to suppress.

Treatment for generalized anxiety

Two psychological treatments for GAD, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and applied relaxation are well supported by evidence.

The UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that if you have GAD and choose drug treatment, you should be offered a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) at first, or a serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI) if SSRIs are ineffective.

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

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Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



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