

FORM 4.7. Information for Patients about Generalized Anxiety Disorder

WHAT IS GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER?

People with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) have persistent and disturbing worries on a daily basis. They also experience physical symptoms, such as restlessness, shortness of breath, palpitations, muscle aches, sweating, and insomnia. Often people with GAD will have another anxiety disorder; for example, many people with GAD also have social anxiety and worry about other people seeing them as anxious. If untreated, GAD often leads to depression.

WHAT CAUSES GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDERS?

There are many factors that may account for GAD. Between 30% and 50% of the cause may be genetic, but early childhood experiences (such as loss of a parent, feeling the need to comfort and protect a parent, parental separation/divorce of parents, parental overprotection, or parental statements that the world is a dangerous place), recent stresses in life, unrealistic expectations about yourself and others, relationship conflicts, alcohol or caffeine use, poor coping skills, and other factors all contribute to the experience of anxiety. Studies indicate that the level of anxiety in the general population has been increasing over the last 50 years—perhaps due to a decrease in social connectedness and community, unrealistic expectations about what life should be, an overfocus on bad news in the media, and other social and cultural factors.

HOW DOES THINKING AFFECT GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER?

Anxious persons are plagued with a stream of irrational thoughts that further increase their anxiety: “People can see I’m anxious. They think less of me. I’m the only one with this problem. I can’t stand to be disapproved of. It’s awful that this could happen.” Many people with GAD have an endless stream of worries that begin with “What if?” Typical thoughts of this type are “What if I’m losing control/going crazy/making a fool out of myself?” They may also worry about their worrying—for example, “I need to get rid of this anxiety [obsession, behavior, etc.] immediately. I am going to fail. My worrying is out of control and I’ll go crazy. I should never worry.” Chronic worriers often have mixed feelings and beliefs about their worry. On the one hand, they believe that their worry prepares and protects them. But, on the other hand, they believe that their worry will make them sick and that they need to stop worrying completely. Worriers are also often highly intolerant of uncertainty, often believing that if they don’t know something for sure, then it will turn out badly. People who are anxious tend to predict the worst, expect that they will not be able to handle stress, and demand certainty in an uncertain world. If you are a worrier, you may have difficulty living in the present moment and enjoying your life. You are constantly seeking answers that you may never get.

HOW DOES PERSONALITY AFFECT GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER?

People with GAD are anxious about things that are personally relevant to their concerns. Depending on your personality, you may worry about being rejected, making mistakes, not achieving success, getting sick, or being abandoned. Furthermore, you may avoid or leave situations that make you anxious, or you may try to compensate for your anxiety by trying to be overly controlling, by being overly concerned about approval, or by

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trying to be perfect. Your individual concerns and your style of coping with anxiety may thus actually make you more vulnerable to anxiety.

HOW CAN TREATMENT BE HELPFUL?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and/or medication are especially useful in treating GAD. Both during therapy sessions and as part of the your self-help homework, you may be instructed in a number of techniques to decrease anxiety. Let's take a look at some of these techniques.

- **Decrease your arousal.** You are more likely to feel anxious when you are physically aroused. You should examine how much caffeine (coffee, teas, sodas) and alcohol you use. Your therapist may teach you breathing and relaxation exercises that can help you moderate your general arousal. Meditation and yoga are often very helpful to calm your body and mind. In addition, regular exercise may be helpful. Medications can also help reduce your arousal.
- **Identify and confront your fears.** Your therapist will assist you in recognizing the specific situations, sensations, or thoughts that are disturbing to you. You may be asked to rank these fears from least to most feared and to identify exactly what you are afraid will happen. Through gradual and guided exposure to these fears, with the help of your therapist, you may begin to modify the way you experience these situations.
- **Modify your thinking.** Your therapist may help you to identify and modify your negative thinking. You may be taking things too personally, engaging in fortunetelling about events that never happen, or predicting catastrophes that turn out to be mere inconveniences. Many worriers have a set of rules about life, such as "If I'm not perfect, I'm a failure" or "If someone doesn't like me, it's a disaster." Other rules might be "I need to know for sure" or "I should never feel anxious." You can learn to use cognitive therapy techniques to identify and modify your thinking in ways that are more realistic and fairer to yourself.
- **Learn how to deal with worry.** Like many worriers, you may believe that your worry prepares and protects you. You can learn how to distinguish between productive and unproductive worry, how to accept limitations and live with reasonable uncertainty, how to enjoy the present moment in a nonjudgmental way, and how to view your worries as "background noise" that does not need to control you. You can learn how to turn off the sense of urgency that makes you feel constantly under pressure.
- **Develop "emotional intelligence."** Many worriers have a hard time coping with their emotions. They often believe that their emotions will overwhelm them, will last indefinitely, or don't make sense. Life is not about eliminating emotions; it entails learning to live meaningfully with your emotions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy can help you come to terms with the emotions that give richness and meaning to your life.
- **Improve your relationships.** Your anxiety may often be related to conflicts and misunderstandings in your relationships. Therapy can assist you in identifying these problematic issues, developing more effective ways of thinking about your relationships, and actively coping to make things better. Communication, listening, assertion, mutual problem solving, and increasing positive experiences can be important parts of your therapy.
- **Become a problem solver.** Worriers often generate a lot of problems that don't exist, but often avoid solving problems that they can address. This is because a lot of their anxiety is based on avoiding

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experiences that make them anxious. Your therapist can help you become a practical and productive problem solver, which will make you more confident about “potential” problems.

MEDICATION

Depending on how severe your GAD is, and on whether depression is also part of the problem, your doctor may prescribe any number of medications that have proven effective for these disorders. Cognitive-behavioral therapy may be augmented with medication for anxiety disorders. Benzodiazepines and some antidepressants have been found useful for GAD. Your doctor can assist you with medication. You should never self-medicate.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS TREATMENT?

Until about 10 years ago, treatments for GAD had limited success. However, today the outcome is very promising for GAD and most other anxiety disorders. The newer forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy have proven quite effective for chronic worriers.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU AS A PATIENT?

The treatment of GAD requires your regular attendance in therapy and your willingness to carry out self-help homework assignments that can be very effective in helping you cope with your anxiety. Many patients also benefit from medication, which should only be taken as prescribed by your doctor.