

Reference document

Generalized anxiety disorder



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Introduction

Stress is an integral part of everyday life. For some, it will be experienced when travelling by car, for others, stress will come from juggling multiple roles—while dividing their time between work and family. Stress is therefore normal and necessary for everyday life and for our ability to take action. It becomes problematic when it is too intense and constant over a long period. The term "anxiety" is used when this emotion becomes too difficult to manage and seems to seep into several areas of one's life, in addition to causing other physical and psychological symptoms.

This document describes anxiety disorders as well as their symptoms and treatments. Anxiety disorders affect 1 in 4 people. They can affect both children and adults, and they present in a number of ways.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorder	Specific fear	Associated types of thoughts
Panic disorder (with or without agoraphobia)	<p>Fear of having a panic attack (intense physical reactions that are sudden, unpredictable and short-lived).</p> <p>During a panic attack, the person may experience an accelerated heartbeat, chest pressure, dizziness, difficulty breathing, trembling, faintness, etc.</p> <p>The sensations are so intense that the person might also avoid places where they have had attacks, or places where it would be difficult to get help or escape from in the event of another attack.</p>	"I don't know what's happening. It's so intense. I'm afraid it's a sign of something serious."
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	<p>Presence of obsessions or compulsions that generate a lot of stress.</p> <p>For example: an obsession with being contaminated leads to compulsive hand washing.</p>	"The environment is harmful and dangerous for me. It's filled with germs and bacteria. I might get sick."
Social phobia	<p>Fear of being in social situations. Unreasonable fear of being observed, humiliated or judged negatively in public. The fear goes well beyond shyness.</p>	"When I am in front of people I don't know well, I freeze up and don't know how to react."
Specific phobia	<p>Fear of something specific that causes much anxiety.</p> <p>For example: air travel, heights, enclosed spaces.</p>	"I have a pathological fear of dogs; I can't go near them."
Post-traumatic stress disorder	<p>Fear of stimuli that remind the person of the trauma they experienced or witnessed.</p>	"I can't get back into the car without replaying the scene of the accident in my head."
Generalized anxiety disorder	<p>Excessive and uncontrollable worry about several things such as family, work, finances and illness.</p>	"The hamster wheel in my head never stops spinning; I have trouble sleeping, because I worry about anything and everything."

Costs of anxiety

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 1 in 4 employees are affected by a mental health problem. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders in workplaces, affecting 12% of the population. There are many repercussions.

For employers

- Major absenteeism problems
- Presenteeism* problems
- Employee resignations
- Productivity and performance problems
- Increased risk of employment injury (negligence)
- Increase in workplace conflicts

According to the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal, taking into account indirect costs, the Canadian economy loses \$30 billion per year as a result of mental health and addiction problems.

For employees

- Physical and psychological distress
- Personal, professional, family and social functioning problems
- Decreased quality of life
- Fear of being judged: the person sometimes avoids asking for help and suffers in silence
- In the long term: increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cancer or immune system disorders

* The constant presence of an employee at work, regardless of their health status.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by chronic anxiety or worry that hinders functioning and causes distress. In general, a person suffering from generalized anxiety spends a lot of time worrying about a situation, even if there is little chance of that situation arising. For example, they worry that their kids might get into an accident **every time** they take the car, they are afraid of having a disease one day, or they are scared of being late to work tomorrow.

Generalized anxiety disorder affects about 5% of the population and is more common among women (66%). Persons with GAD believe that they have always been worried and anxious, and that it's part of their personality. That is why they will first seek medical attention for the physical symptoms accompanying GAD rather than their worrying, which they wrongly view as normal.

Normal versus excessive worrying

So, what is the difference between normal and excessive worrying?

Normal worrying	Excessive worrying
Occasional worrying.	Constant worrying.
Relatives understand why the person might have these worries.	Relatives notice that the person's worries are out of proportion.
Few physical symptoms are felt.	Many disruptive physical symptoms are felt, such as muscle tension, sleep disturbances, nausea and diarrhea.
Worrying is controllable.	Worrying is very difficult to control.

GAD diagnosis

People with generalized anxiety disorder feel a **high level of anxiety and worry constantly for at least 6 months about various things** (work, family, house, finances, illness). **Excessive and uncontrollable** worrying manifests **almost every day** and **interferes with the person's normal ability to function**. People with this disorder say that they have always been worriers by nature.

In addition to chronic worrying, at least 3 of the following physical symptoms must be present, over the past 6 months:

- Agitation, overexcitement or weariness
- Muscle tension
- Fatigability
- Concentration problems or memory lapses
- Irritability
- Disturbed sleep (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, agitated and non-restful sleep)

More than 2/3 of people with GAD also have another psychological disorder. Specific phobia, panic disorder, social anxiety and depression are the disorders most frequently concomitant with GAD.

In addition, drug or alcohol abuse can also be present. Drugs and alcohol are used to self-medicate for anxiety, which can create an addiction problem and even worsen anxiety symptoms.

Caution

Anxiety can sometimes be caused by certain diseases like anemia and hyperthyroidism, or by other factors, like caffeine and certain medications. That is why a complete medical examination should be conducted first to distinguish an anxiety disorder from any other anxiety-provoking illness.

Characteristics of a person with GAD

- The person lives in the future, and the future is always threatening.

For example, they have trouble unwinding on the weekend, because they're worried about what might happen at work on Monday.

- The person sees a use in worrying.

For example, they believe that worrying helps solve their problems and protects them from negative emotions like sadness, disappointment or guilt, or that their worrying prevents the feared situation from occurring.

- The person has a hard time living with uncertainty.

When faced with an uncertain situation, a person who worries excessively asks themselves more "What if" questions. The person imagines various catastrophic scenarios and worries more.

- The person feels like they are constantly stressed and under pressure but doesn't know why.
- The person sees problems as a threat rather than a challenge.
- The person considers themselves more vulnerable and less able to face negative situations.
- The person shows perfectionistic traits, high standards, vulnerability to errors, a need for excessive preparation, a constant need for reassurance and procrastination behaviours.

Treatments and strategies

In order to properly manage generalized anxiety disorder, it is important to implement recognized treatments and strategies.

Treatments

Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy is the most effective psychotherapy treatment for GAD and also seems effective for reducing concomitant disorders. Treatment duration varies between 10 and 15 sessions. It aims to:

- Intervene through psychoeducation

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- Understand the useless beliefs about worrying
 - Change the behaviours that keep the disorder in place, such as avoidance and reassurance
 - Address intolerance and uncertainty
 - Teach problem-solving skills
 - Enable exposure through imagination
 - Teach relaxation and meditation techniques
 - Prevent relapse

Medication

- Antidepressants are prescribed as first-line treatments and can be used long term. However, they can take a few weeks to reach their full effectiveness.
- Anxiolytics, such as benzodiazepines, temporarily relieve symptoms and are used as needed. Considering their side effects and the potential for addiction and withdrawal problems, they are generally recommended for short-term use.

Promising treatments

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

ACT is the newest cognitive behavioural psychology approach. It emphasizes accepting one's emotions and thoughts rather than changing them. It helps clients focus on the present moment and adjust their behaviours according to their fundamental values.

Neurofeedback

Neurofeedback is a non-invasive technique that helps regulate brain waves using an electroencephalogram (EEG). It reduces the level of excitability in the brain, which is higher in anxious people, thereby reducing anxiety. It is important to consult a qualified and recognized professional.

Strategies

For employees

- Do regular moderate-intensity physical activity, 3 to 5 times a week for 30 minutes.
- Eat healthily while avoiding alcohol abuse and stimulants such as caffeine, tobacco and energy drinks.
- Be mindful of breathing slowly and deeply. Several websites and smartphone applications can help improve breathing techniques.
- Identify stress factors and apply concrete solutions to reduce them.
- Set aside time to do activities alone, as a couple, and with family and friends.
- Focus on the present moment. Many resources are available online, such as digital audio files, books and CDs.
- Let go of things beyond one's control.
- Review personal standards.
- Consult a resource to better understand one's anxiety and make lasting changes.

For employers

- Encourage employees to take the time allowed for breaks and meals.
- Favour the clear communication of expectations and regularly check in on how the employee is managing their share of responsibilities.
- Pay attention to warning signs (the employee seems more stressed, turns in assignments late, eats lunch at their desk, isolates themselves, takes time off, complains of various physical ailments, shows decreased performance, has difficulty concentrating, has a perfectionist profile and reviews their works excessively).
- Implement a wellness program and encourage employees to adopt healthy lifestyles.
- Train managers so that they are sensitive to mental health problems and can quickly detect an employee in distress.
- Invite managers to use management support services to guide them in their approach.
- Tell employees about the assistance services available.

Conclusion

Chronic anxiety has devastating effects on the physical and psychological health of the individual. These effects can also impact the workplace. Nevertheless, chronic anxiety should not be tolerated, as a result of its devastating impact. It is therefore important for both parties to implement effective strategies to ensure the problem is resolved.

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