

what is generalised anxiety?

Feeling tense, stressed, and worried at certain times when under pressure is a normal human response. In fact 2 out of every 5 people report that they worry at least once every day. However, for some people their worry, feelings of anxiety and tension persists to the point that they significantly interfere with their daily life. If this sounds like you, then you may find the information in this sheet very helpful in understanding what generalised anxiety is and its relevance to you.

What is Worry?

Before you can understand generalised anxiety, you need to have an understanding of worry. Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. It can be triggered by a variety of external events, or from thoughts that just pop into your head. Worry is characterised by a lot of “what if” statements such as:



- “What if I fail my exam?”
- “What if I can’t do the job?”
- “What if I can’t provide for my family?”
- “What if I get anxious during my interview?”

Normal worry is relatively short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss. People may think this type of worry is useful, that it helps with problem solving and planning, or prevents future negative outcomes. However, this is not the case, as prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

What are the key symptoms?

Generalised anxiety involves:

- **Anxiety or worry about several things** has occurred for at least the past 6-months
- The worry is experienced as excessive and uncontrollable, is present most days, and interferes with the ability to focus on tasks.

At least 3 of the following symptoms also need to be present for the past 6-months or longer:

- **Feeling restless**, keyed up, on edge & unable to relax
- **Physical tension**.
- **Sleep disturbance**. Having trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, or experiencing unsettled sleep.
- **Problems concentrating** and focusing on a task.
- **Feeling irritable**.
- **Feeling tired** or exhausted easily.

What are the causes?

The causes of generalised anxiety are not clearly understood. However, a number of vulnerabilities are considered to increase the chance of developing generalised anxiety:



- An inherited general biological disposition to experience negative emotions.
- Prolonged stress, and past experiences of uncontrollable or traumatic events.
- Direct or indirect messages from the people around you that the world is threatening or that worry is useful.
- A coping style that involves avoiding challenges or situations where there is the chance of experiencing negative emotions.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Generalised anxiety is not always easy to diagnose as some of its symptoms overlap with depression and other anxiety problems. It is thus important to see a mental health practitioner for a definite diagnosis.

The recommended psychological treatment for generalised anxiety is cognitive-behaviour therapy. This usually includes: relaxation to reduce chronic tension; techniques for dealing with unhelpful beliefs about worry; learning to challenge and let go of worries; learning more helpful coping and problem solving strategies; and learning to be less focused on uncertainty, and more present focused.



Mindfulness training and meditation may also be helpful for some individuals to reduce worry and increase present moment focus. However more research is required to determine if it is as effective as cognitive-behaviour therapy.