

Living with Generalized Anxiety Disorder

“Extreme stress. For me it resulted in a complete inability to sleep.”

Jim Hill has generalized anxiety disorder, a mental illness marked by excessive worry that, untreated, just won't go away.

“It's like a runaway train and the runaway train is already off the tracks and it's still running away.”

Generalized Anxiety Disorder, or GAD, can affect anyone, but it is the most common anxiety disorder among older people. At times, a person might be anxiety-free, but it never stays away for long. Symptoms include constant worry most days about bad things that might happen for at least 6 months. People with GAD may have trouble sleeping or focusing. They might find their muscles tensing up, become irritable or even feel sick to their stomachs.

“Anxiety spikes where you feel like you can't breathe and you're and something, you know, something catastrophic is going to happen over an issue that is really probably quite manageable.”

“I turn red. I shake. I get uneasy. I get stomach problems, feel nauseous.”

Sarah Reed has dealt with Generalized Anxiety Disorder since she was little. She knew she needed help when her symptoms got so bad, they got in the way of important things like work and family time.

“Being able to go out to see friends and even just being emotionally and physically present with family instead of, you know, kind of having my head somewhere else all the time worrying about things.”

“A lot of recycling the same concerns over and over and over in my mind about anything and everything, large and small, even trivial matters to the point where it's hard to even look forward to some of the best things because I'm convinced it won't pan out.”

One of Sarah's constant worries is whether her family members who live out of state, are safe.

“These individuals unfortunately get caught in patterns of trying to, you know, call family members and seek reassurance, for example, or to try to in any way shape or form get as certain as they can that bad things aren't going to happen.”

All of this endless “certainty-seeking” can be a major disruption to a person's lifestyle. So it's important to seek professional help.

“What's the difference between say General Anxiety Disorder and Diabetes? Well, they're both medical conditions and they both can really negatively impact your life. And thankfully they're both treatable.”

Treatment for GAD can include medications, often together with therapy. The most common type of therapy is something called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT. CBT teaches you specific skills to directly manage your worries so that you can gradually return to the activities you've avoided because of anxiety. CBT has been a big help to Claudine Jackson, who, like many with generalized anxiety disorder, also lives with depression.

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“I had to learn sometimes I'm not going to have the best days. Sometimes it's okay to not be okay. So, I just do breathing exercises and learn to relax myself mentally. Get a grip of what's going on and then regroup and challenge the world again.”

Relaxation techniques are one of many lifestyle changes that can help someone with anxiety. Other steps you can take to help with your anxiety include: Getting a good night's sleep; Avoiding alcohol, Smoking and recreational drugs; Exercise, and Healthy eating.

“I just try to put all good stuff into my system because when I put good stuff into my system, good things come out. And I feel better.”

Like most mental illness, there is no cure for generalized anxiety disorder. A personalized treatment plan, created with the help of your mental health provider, can help you manage GAD and enjoy life again.