

STOP

FAMILY ANXIETY

A guide for
anxiety disorders in
parents, grandparents,
teenagers and
children of all ages

JOAN ZAWATZKY

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PREFACE

Welcome,

If you are reading this book, in all probability you or members of your family are suffering from anxiety. Perhaps a child of school going age or younger, a teenager, parents or grandparents are anxious. Currently, anxiety is the number one emotional health problem facing us all. The rising statistics are staggering, but fortunately anxiety is a treatable condition.

My aim in writing this book is to provide you with a guide to managing anxiety in your home and to prevent it from spreading to other family members. Anxiety tends to travel from person to person like a virus without anyone realising it is even happening. An entire family can be affected so that loved ones who were not anxious before, can develop anxiety disorders for the first time. Family life can begin to deteriorate and break down. Understanding more about the anxiety cycle in your own family can help you to prevent this happening.

Let's look at an example of how anxiety can affect an entire family.

Cliff, a teenage son comes home after school upset about failing an exam. He doesn't stop in the kitchen for something to eat as usual, or tell his mother what's worrying him. Instead, he brushes past her, rushes upstairs to his room and bangs the door. His mother shakes her head in dismay and sighs loudly. Mia, a toddler hears the banging door. When she notices her mother's distress she begins to cry. Tessa an eight-year-old, had been trying to do her homework. She's aware of everyone's distress and cannot concentrate. She pushes her books aside and leaves the house to visit her friend next door. Dad suffers from anxiety and has struggled to cope with his work all day. He comes home to a tense situation. Dinner is not ready, the front room is littered with toys, and Mia is still crying. Agitatedly, he goes to the fridge, takes out a six-pack of beer and carries it to the back room of the house to drink while watching television.

Research shows, that around 14 % of the total Australian population suffers from anxiety disorders (Australian National Bureau of Statistics.). In the USA, 40 million people or 18% are affected by anxiety disorders (National Institute of Mental Health). In the UK, 7 million prescriptions were issued by the National Health Service (NHS) for anti-anxiety drugs. The numbers of anxious children and teenagers worldwide are alarming.

We are living in stressful, but exciting times. So much more is being learned about new treatments for anxiety and there are effective strategies available now to reduce it. Research studies into anxiety and related disorders, such as depression, gives hope for all sufferers and their families. Examples of some of the most recent research into anxiety are found throughout this book so that readers can be part of the new information.

A lot has been written about anxiety for individuals and for parents, but there is very little available to help anxious families. There is a lot of general information on book shelves and on the Internet about the way anxiety spreads between individuals in families, but almost nothing about ways to control it.

This book was written specifically to fill this need. It provides information about the most common anxiety disorders in all family members at different stages and levels of maturity. A member of the family may be suffering from mild anxiety or a more serious form, such as generalised anxiety disorder, panic attacks, social anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias, eating disorders or post-traumatic disorder. All the information plus suggestions and strategies needed to work towards recovery of the most common forms of anxiety in family members is found in this step-by-step guide.

Where do you start?

You have taken the first and most important step in starting to read this book. The next section, “The Structure of The Book” will help you to decide where you want to start reading. You could begin at the first page and read the whole book, if you wish. Or, you could read specific parts that offer you or your family members the most help. There is always time to go back and read more.

I hope that this book will help to set you and your family members on the path to recovery.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book has been divided into three parts to simplify finding information and help for families and their individual members suffering from different forms of anxiety. Every chapter has been specially designed to provide information and suggestions for each member of a family, from parents, grandparents or elderly relatives, to children of different ages. To enable you to follow the section of the book that most affects you, small icons have been included in every chapter as guides.

Throughout the book there are examples about people who suffer from different forms of anxiety to illustrate a particular aspect of this condition. The chapters also contain information about exciting new research studies on anxiety.

- ***Part one of the book is about gaining knowledge and understanding.*** It covers the most common types of anxiety disorders, emphasising the way they affect various family members. For example, generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), separation anxiety, social anxiety and other types of anxiety, are described as they occur in children of different ages, teenagers, parents, and grandparents. The symptoms and signs of the different forms of anxiety at their various stages are explained, as well as helpful suggestions offered. The worries that occur in children and then often disappear in time are described, as well as more serious forms of anxiety.
- ***Part two, provides strategies and suggestions for overcoming anxiety disorders.*** These strategies apply to all the members of a family from grandparents to young children. They include topics, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, nurturing self-esteem, reducing anxiety with assertiveness, preventing bullying and setting goals.
- ***Part three, covers changes in life style.*** Ways of helping all family members to overcome anxiety are described, such as relaxation, mindfulness, exercise, finding a spiritual path, resilience and working towards recovery.

INTRODUCTION

What are anxiety disorders?

Everyone experiences worries, doubts, stresses and fears at some time of life. It is normal to feel anxious when facing a challenging situation, such as an exam, a divorce, or job interview. Normal anxiety usually does not interfere with everyday life. But, an anxiety disorder is different. It is a serious condition that can cause extreme distress and has significant impact on ability to cope with daily living. For people with anxiety disorders, worry can be constant, overwhelming and crippling.

Anxiety disorders in families

We are all part of a family, a parent, partner, grandparent, sibling, child or teenager. Anyone with an anxiety disorder for a prolonged period does not exist in a vacuum. What we feel, say or do affects our other family members. As a result, individuals may become confused and not know how to help. Relationships between partners and children may become strained and usual routines and social activities disrupted. If household chores and financial responsibilities fall on other members of the family, resentment may result.

Look at your own family and your relatives. Does anyone in your family have any of the following signs and symptoms?

- Constant worry, tension and feeling on edge.
- Anxiety interfering with work or school attendance.
- A pounding heart that at times builds to panic.
- Irrational and unrealistic fears of danger or catastrophe.
- Avoidance or escape from situations or activities that cause anxiety.

If the answer is “yes” to some of these questions, one or more members of your family may have an anxiety disorder. Understanding anxiety disorders will make all the difference in supporting and assisting individual

sufferers in your family. The following table explains the difference between the normal experience of worry and an anxiety disorder.

EVERYDAY, NORMAL WORRY	ANXIETY DISORDERS
Worry doesn't stop one carrying on with daily life, going to school, work, or having a social life.	Worry interferes with all aspects of life.
Worries are unpleasant, but not overwhelming. They cause mild stress.	Worries are distressing and intense.
Worries are controllable and can be managed.	Worrying is uncontrollable.
Worry is about a small amount of concerns.	Worry is about a broad range of concerns or topics.
Worry lasts for a brief period.	Worry can last for 6 months or more.
Worry is about realistic concerns.	Worry is usually unrealistic and the worst is expected.
Worry usually does not occur together with physical or emotional symptoms.	Worry can occur with several physical and emotional symptoms.

Types of anxiety disorders

What makes one person anxious may not have the same effect on others. One person may be tense and restless for no particular reason, while another may feel panicky about being in a crowd. Someone else may have uncontrollable and dominant thoughts or flashbacks of a terrifying event. But, anxiety disorders have one thing in common - persistent and severe worry in situations that other people are unlikely to find threatening.

Researchers and academics have divided the various experiences of anxiety into categories and provided names for them, creating several types of anxiety disorders. They have created these divisions to make it simpler for medical diagnosis. Unfortunately, the average person often feels confused by the complexity and detail of these categories. Most people who see health professionals about anxiety will be given a diagnosis that may seem like a label.

Do not be concerned about diagnostic terms used to describe feelings of anxiety, simply use them to understand more about the difficulties you or family members are experiencing.

The most common anxiety disorders are:

- Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Panic disorder
- Agoraphobia
- Specific phobias
- Social anxiety disorder (SAD)
- Separation disorder
- Stranger anxiety
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

The following chapters in Part 1 explain the different forms of anxiety in family members. Disorders associated with anxiety such as depression, eating disorders and hyperactivity are discussed, as well as the causes of anxiety.

PART ONE

.....



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS

- Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Panic disorder
- Agoraphobia
- Specific phobias
- Social anxiety disorder (SAD)
- Separation disorder
- Stranger anxiety
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD and ADHD)
- Eating disorders
- The causes of anxiety disorders.

GENERALISED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD)

The term generalised anxiety disorder refers specifically to worry about a wide range of situations or events rather than one specific issue. The worry persists over a long period of time. It is often uncontrollable and out of proportion to the situation. If the anxiety level is mild, people with this disorder can function socially and hold down a job or study, but if the anxiety is severe, even the simplest tasks can seem too difficult. The symptoms of a generalised anxiety disorder differ according to age and may fluctuate over time. Most sufferers have a combination of physical, emotional or behavioural symptoms.

In this chapter, we look at the impact of generalised anxiety disorders on relationships within a family unit, as well as the way that various individual members of a family are affected.



THE EFFECT OF GENERALISED ANXIETY ON A FAMILY

Generalised anxiety disorder takes a toll on individuals and families. Often family members realise that something is “very wrong” with a relative who is constantly nervous, worried and cannot relax, but they do not know what the problem is or how to help. Though individuals may try to be supportive, relationships between family members can become strained.

If a sufferer begins to withdraw, communication within the family can become a challenge. Individuals no longer look forward to coming

home after school or work. A person with generalised anxiety disorder may have trouble keeping a job and the family may undergo serious financial hardship. Others may have to step in to help financially or take on added responsibilities. For example, if a father suffers from anxiety, a mother with a young child may have to return to work or siblings defer studies and take a job to support the family.

If an anxiety sufferer is reluctant to participate in social activities, family celebrations may have to be cancelled, and holidays become a thing of the past. With all these pressures in the family, individuals may become resentful or angry. Some members may become so concerned about the family's future well-being that they suffer an anxiety disorder for the first time. Pets know that even family pets are sensitive to the atmosphere in an anxious household, and can develop anxiety symptoms.

In the following example, Mr and Mrs Barnes are anxious about their youngest child Callum. The whole family is affected.

Callum is seven years old, his sister is ten and his older brother is thirteen. He is a sensitive, anxious child and his parents worry about him. There are times when his parents blame each other for doing or saying something that could've triggered an increase in his anxiety. They know very little about anxiety and constantly search for ways to help Callum, but find they are at a loss. As a result, they feel helpless and incompetent as parents.

Instead of relaxing with the family after dinner and watching television as they once did, Mr and Mrs Barnes sit apart from the others to discuss Callum. Mrs Barnes is worried that he has stomach aches most days, and that he has become clingy when she drops him off at the school gate. She feels that he has been at school for a year now and should be used to leaving her. Callum's teacher is concerned that he is slipping behind the others in class, and that he has no friends. If his mother asks him why he is upset or if he is worried about something, he shakes his head and doesn't answer. If she continues to question him he bursts into tears.

Mrs Barnes has become so worried about her son that if he is just a few minutes late after school, she imagines something awful



Adults with generalised anxiety disorder

Symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder

Physical symptoms

- Trembling and twitches.
- Muscle tension, aches and pains.
- Fatigued, but unable to sleep.
- Stomach problems such as nausea and diarrhoea.
- Excessive sweating.

Behavioural symptoms

- Difficulty concentrating or focusing.
- Avoiding situations that cause intense anxiety.
- Restlessness, irritability and inability to relax.

Emotional symptoms

- Constant, uncontrollable worrying and intrusive thoughts.
- Worry that is out of proportion to the event or situation.
- Racing thoughts.
- Indecisiveness.
- Feelings of apprehension or dread. Imagining the worst possible situations.



Parents with generalised anxiety disorder

In recent years, there has been a lot of research about anxious parents passing on their anxieties to their children. But, if parents acknowledge and understand their own anxiety issues, their children will be far less likely to be anxious.

If you are a parent and were anxious as a child, and did not have the opportunity of a caring, secure and predictable childhood, it does not automatically follow that you will be a poor parent, or that your child will be anxious.

You may have endured trauma, sexual or physical abuse in the past. Your memories may have remained with you, making you fearful that your child may be harmed in some way. You may have suffered deprivation due to poverty or lack of affection. Perhaps your parents suffered in this way as well, and the struggle to survive goes back over several family generations. All these experiences can make parenting stressful and as a result, you may have difficulties interacting with your own children.

Naturally, you like other parents, try your hardest to protect your children from similar experiences. Without realising it, your own anxiety can creep back. Anxious parents can unknowingly pass on their thoughts and feelings to their children.

The following information from recent research studies shows how *some* anxious parents pass their anxiety on to their children.

Two recent research studies on anxiety and parenting:

1. A large important study was recently undertaken with children of twins, by an international team of researchers. The researchers analysed almost 900 families with adult twins, either fraternal or identical, who had children. They discovered that anxiety in the children was not due to hereditary factors or genetics. Instead they established that the spread of anxiety symptoms from parents to their children and adolescents was the result of the way anxious parents raised their children.¹
2. Prof. Ron Rapee at Macquarie University, Australia, recently studied toddlers watching their anxious parents in fearful situations, such as exposure to spiders and snakes. He came to the conclusion that over time children of anxious parents will eventually learn to become generally fearful and view their world as a “dangerous place.”²

These and other research studies show us that anxious parents can influence their children to develop anxious ways of thinking and behaving.

Research needs to be viewed in perspective

Research gives us guidelines that are vital to our modern society and the scientific process that is constantly changing. Old findings are reviewed over time and new ones challenged. Some of this research is confronting for parents, but viewed in perspective, the findings are positive. Of course, the research studies need to be taken into account, but no parent ought to become alarmed about the findings. The importance of these studies is that they show us that early diagnosis of anxiety disorders among children is essential. The earlier a diagnosis is made, the better a child will be able to cope with the normal stresses of daily life.

Always keep in mind that heredity and your child's temperament play a large part in the development of anxiety, as does the environment. Experiences at school, and with friends are also crucial in a child's development. You will be able to read more about what researchers believe causes anxiety, as well as aids recovery, throughout the book.

Moving forward in parenting

Parenting is both a greatly rewarding and a daunting task. It involves balancing your own needs with those of your child. If you have your own struggles with anxiety, parenting brings added pressure to your life. You may be exhausted by your additional responsibilities or the caring role. But, this need *not* stop you from parenting well, maintaining balance and having a healthy and contented family. Try to move ahead with some of these suggestions:

Letting go of guilt and blame: Like every parent, you want the best for your children, but focussing on past situations, blaming yourself for problems in relating to your children, or for their suffering will merely upset you, and make your child more anxious. Instead, turn away from blame and guilt, and try to give yourself credit for the constructive aspects of your home life. If you are struggling to find positives about your parenting, ask friends or relatives for feedback as they will probably be more objective.

Value your experience: Let go of the "super parent" myth. If you parent from your principles, your values and positive experiences, you will reach out to your family and contribute important elements. If one or more of your children is anxious, you will have the knowledge and sensitivity as a

result of your own struggles, to understand and help. Never underestimate the value of your empathy in parenting.

Look after yourself: Though you care for your children you may neglect caring for yourself and add to your stresses. A parenting role is tiring and involves many extra responsibilities. It is essential that you care for yourself both physically and emotionally. Where possible, have time alone and sufficient rest. Emotional support from friends and family is of key importance, as well as finding a creative outlet or other interests. When children are young, your own needs usually come last, and may seem indulgent. Don't forget that your wellbeing and your family's health are interconnected.

Finding time for your partner: When your family is young, it can be difficult to find time to be alone with your partner, but it is important to spend time together as a couple. The family's welfare is essential, of course, but it should not be your only source of interest and communication. Parents need time together to enjoy each other's company and catch up on adult activities.

Resist worry: If you suffer from anxiety, this is your starting point. Chronic and persistent worry is the core symptom of generalised anxiety disorder. Therefore, it is important that you understand what is upsetting you, and why it is happening. Fortunately, there is a lot that you as a parent can do to help yourself and your family to make real and important changes. As you continue reading this book, you will find out more about making those key changes, in the following ways:

- Changing fearful and negative ways of thinking.
- Learning deep breathing and relaxation techniques.
- Living in the moment with mindfulness.
- Building self-esteem and assertiveness.
- Preventing bullying.
- Following aims and goals.
- Making lifestyle changes in nutrition and exercise.
- Connecting with others and communicating more openly.
- Encouraging creativity.
- Finding purpose and meaning.



Generalised anxiety in a partner or spouse

Severe anxiety sets a couple's relationship and the entire family out of balance. Everyone becomes upset when a parent is unwell. Life as it was in the family is no longer the same, and everyone has to adapt.

Suggestions for learning about your loved one's condition can never be made often enough. You will have a great deal of difficulty communicating with your partner if you do not understand the basic elements of how it feels to suffer from an anxiety disorder. Lack of knowledge can make you seem hurtful or uncaring. Comments to your partner, such as "relax", "take it easy" or "just get over it," can make matters worse. Though you cannot be expected to never feel frustration with your partner, there are loving ways to express your feelings. Being honest about your fears and feelings is important in any relationship.

Partners frequently feel helpless if their loved one suffers from this condition. You may have to accept that there is nothing you can do other than listen, be affectionate and encouraging.

If your partner is having trouble concentrating and making decisions, try not to harp on this. Offers of help can seem undermining. This can be extremely difficult to handle, and there are times when whatever is said, or help offered is taken as interference or criticism. Trying to overprotect your partner by avoiding sharing any bad news or keeping children away to prevent stress will not be constructive. Your partner needs to learn to cope in a real situation.

When a breadwinner can no longer work due to symptoms of generalised anxiety, the situation can become tense between a couple. Financial issues and a change of responsibilities require discussion. If communication becomes too difficult and arguments ensue, an outsider, such as an older relative or a doctor may be able to find an objective way of helping.

It is hard for a person who suffers from this condition not to feel guilty or a burden. Involving your partner in family events, continuing to share time together and enjoying former interests where possible, is a positive way of overcoming these feelings.

If anxiety continues or becomes more severe seek professional help from a therapist. Individual and couple therapy can make all the difference in your partner's recovery. It will assist in keeping your family stable, and improve your ability to cope with life.



Grandparents and elderly relatives with generalised anxiety disorder

Generalised anxiety disorder as well other emotional conditions are common in older people. Many older people worry constantly about their health, family, financial situations and their mortality. They are more likely to have these worries if they feel that their physical health and mental capacities are diminishing, and that they are losing their independence. Anxiety in older people can be so intense that it significantly impairs their daily functioning. As general anxiety disorder is often linked with depression or medical illness, it is important that a health professional is consulted as soon as possible if any signs of ill health are noticed.

Research shows, that anxiety is especially high for seniors who have left their own homes, no longer stay with their families, or now live in retirement homes.

In the following example, Dora a widow of 68 years, who lives alone suffers from generalised anxiety disorder.

Six months ago, Dora slipped on the kitchen floor of her apartment and broke her hip. She was taken to hospital and had a successful operation. After several months of care and rehabilitation, she was able to walk again. In spite of her recovery, she developed fears of losing her balance, slipping and falling. Consequently, she went out very little on her own. If she went shopping or to visit the doctor, her daughter accompanied her. Dora's daughter says that her mother has always been nervous and a worrier, but that since her fall her worries had increased. Dora tearfully told her doctor that she worried about the future and about ending up in a wheelchair.

Though being a grandparent is a joyful experience, many grandparents worry excessively about their grandchildren who are growing up in a very different world from the one in which their own children were raised. They often find the speed of change and emphasis on technology overwhelming. Grandparents might not always agree with the decisions that their children make about their grandchildren's behaviour, discipline, independence, use of technical material or their friendships. Many have trouble accepting that their children's ideas are different to their own, but are not necessarily wrong.

Grandparents are “elders”, and therefore important members of any family. Many anxious children who will not or can not discuss their worries with their parents, turn to their grandparents for emotional support and advice. As they are usually not responsible for disciplining their grandchildren, they are often seen as confidants or buddies. As mentors and educators, they bring children a different perspective to school knowledge – one of intellectual richness and skills gained over a lifetime. They hold connections to the past and the family’s history. As elders, they know family stories. When they talk about relatives no longer alive, they provide children with an important link to the past and the vital knowledge of who they are. The very presence of a grandparent in the family points to survival and resilience.

Grandparents ought to be included in any family group working towards helping an anxious family member, as they usually provide stability. They are slower and more measured in their approach and can draw on a great deal of life experience.

Children and generalised anxiety disorder



Generalised anxiety disorder in preschool children (3-5)

Childhood is not the worry-free period that parents imagine. As children begin life, their world is full of dangers, real and imaginary. They are confronted with so much that is new that can cause them to worry.

Young children’s emotions change constantly as they develop. Fear of strangers can begin at the age of six months and persist until a child is two or three. This usually passes as their thinking skills develop and they are able to understand the world around them. Preschool children often fear being separated from their parents and may be afraid of the dark, strangers, storms and some animals. All the signs of generalised anxiety may be present in very young children, but the way a child expresses distress can be too difficult for an adult to recognise. Children demonstrate their anxiety in a number of ways.

You may be aware that your child is different, cries more than others, or is particularly clingy, but you may not have recognised that your child is anxious. Perhaps you hope that whatever the problem is, it will pass and your child will “grow out of it”. It is often difficult for parents to decide

whether the signs young children display are normal, or if something more serious is occurring.

In the following example, five-year-old Emma is a worrier, but her concerns do not have a negative effect on her life. Her worries are normal at her stage of development.

Mrs Bolton describes her daughter Emma as an affectionate and sensitive child. Emma loves her cat and worries about things like whether the cat is warm enough at night and whether she has clean drinking water for the whole day.

On her birthday she wants to take a cake to school for the other children to share, but is concerned that there won't be enough for everyone, and that someone will miss out. She nags until her mother bakes a second cake.



Generalised anxiety disorder in school going children (6-12 years)

Though generalised anxiety disorder may have existed previously, it is usually first diagnosed when a child reaches school going age. Children are more able to describe their feelings at this age. Children with this disorder worry excessively about many issues, such as health, personal harm, disasters or war, school performance, past behaviours, future events, family matters and their personal abilities. Though parents may consider these worries minor, they are important to a child and can cause undue anxiety. Unlike adults with generalised anxiety disorder, children with this condition often don't realise that their anxiety is disproportionate to a situation. Children with particularly vivid imaginations tend to be more prone to this form of anxiety as they are able to imagine a large number of frightening situations in great detail.

Each child may have slightly different symptoms, but it is important for adults to recognize the following most common signs of childhood generalised anxiety disorder:

- Excessive and uncontrollable worry.
- Irritability and restlessness.
- Daydreaming.
- Headaches, muscle and stomach aches.

- Sleep disturbance or difficulty falling asleep.
- Lack of concentration.
- Tiredness.
- Need for frequent reassurance and approval.

In the following example, Craig aged ten has generalised anxiety disorder. He worries constantly and his anxiety has begun to affect his daily life.

Craig's parents describe him as "a nervous sensitive child from the day he was born." He is shy, has made one friend at school, and is trying hard to keep up with the other children in his class. After his parents had a few loud disagreements late at night, Craig worried for weeks in spite of reassurance from both parents, that the arguments were not serious. When he began having trouble falling asleep and had stomach pains, he refused to go to school. His mother decided to take him to the family doctor. Craig liked Dr Morton. She smiled and listened patiently as he told her that he was worried that his parents would get divorced, like his friend's parents had a year earlier. He told her that he knew about orphanages and that if they split up he feared that his mother would keep Lily his younger pretty sister, and that he would be sent away.

When children play the role of parent

Some children become the main caregivers to their anxious parents. A parent with a generalised anxiety disorder may be unable to carry out household tasks or hold down a job. In these circumstances, older children may help parents with cleaning, cooking, looking after younger children and shopping for food. They may act as escorts to the doctor, or accompany a parent to the bank or post office. Some adolescents may have casual jobs to augment the family income.

When a parent is unable to cope, it is often left to children to make decisions or act in authority. As caregivers, not only are they carrying excessive responsibility for their age, but they are deprived of time to play before attending to their homework. Many children in this situation grow up to feel isolated and unloved.

They may feel, exhausted, burdened, distressed or even angry, but they are trapped in the caring role.

Even in families where there are several older children, one sibling generally becomes the primary caregiver. Other siblings may present all sorts of excuses to prevent them from being involved in caregiving. In many families the main caregiver is the child with the most gentle and helpful personality.

If caring for their parents is fairly short term most children are unscathed. For some, the experience may be a positive one, teaching empathy and understanding for people who are frail or sick. When they become adults many former caregivers choose to follow helping professions, such as medicine, nursing, teaching or social work.

Help for children with generalised anxiety disorder

Though children with generalised anxiety disorder are easily upset, try not to give them special attention or treat them differently from the rest of the family.

These are some suggestions parents and other family members can use to help children to cope with generalised anxiety:

Routine and structure: Set specific times for meals, homework, quiet time and bedtime. Instead of worrying what will happen next, plan the day so that children will feel more in control. At bed time in particular, establishing a routine that includes washing, story time or chatting about any worries will aid relaxation and improve sleep. Flexibility is important, as rigidity creates anxiety if children are unable to follow set plans or rules.

Praise and reward: If children manage to do something in a calm manner, encourage and praise them. Facing fears is challenging for anxious children and praise from parents acts a motivator for future courage. Often positive changes in children's ability to handle situations is noticed by members of the family, but not commented upon. Being noticed by loved ones for the right reasons provides the feedback that struggling children badly need.

Reassurance: Anxious children tend to constantly seek reassurance from parents and others. You may feel that you are being cruel or hurting your child by not providing the soothing demanded. Though it is tempting to give your children constant reassurance, and to try to protect them from worrying situations, as it will not help their anxiety in the long run. Children have to learn to manage situations when you are not present. The most loving approach is to provide support and love while teaching them to cope more independently.

A Plan: Suggest a plan of action for your children as well as for family members to follow when your child is extremely anxious. Once a plan is made, keep to it as much as possible or it will lose its value.

Children frequently ask questions. A plan may be to suggest that they think through a question and come up with their own answers. If an answer cannot be found, you or others are there for reassurance. Try to reduce the number of times the same questions are asked. Asking children to examine an answer already given may help them to rely on their own judgement.

Stay calm: Try to remain as calm as possible if your child becomes anxious about a situation or event. Children of all ages notice and follow their parent's reactions. They read anxiety signs on a parent's face and in their behaviour, such as crying, wringing hands, or a sharp rise in voice. Parents and caregivers are often unable to successfully mask their own anxiety. They should not attempt to lie to children about their feelings. It is far better to admit to being concerned than to insist that nothing is wrong or upsetting, when a child witnesses the exact opposite.

To reduce your children's anxiety, you will need to look at your own anxiety levels. Be objective as possible, question yourself about whether you are exaggerating your own fears. Take a few deep breaths and slow down. It is only when you feel and act more calmly that your children will follow your lead.

Consistency: The more unified and consistent parents are in their approach to their children the better. Most importantly, an agreed approach towards managing children's anxiety brings them security and certainty. Parents will find it useful to discuss matters, such as routines, setting limits, and giving rewards for tasks well done. None of this is easy, but discussion and working as a team will provide support and direction, and benefit anxious children.

Avoid criticism: Though coping with your children's constant worry is trying for parents and family members, avoid criticism. This is the time to focus on attributes and optimistic outcomes. When distressed, anxious children cannot see positives, suggest activities of an optimistic nature, such as drawing or playing that will provide a positive flow of emotion.

Help siblings: If one child in a family has an anxiety disorder, siblings are likely to feel the impact. They may feel lonely, neglected or jealous and resent the attention given to an anxious sibling if their needs are not met. Or, if the bond between family members is close, the siblings of an anxious

sister or brother may try not to make extra demands on their parents. In either situation, siblings may not receive sufficient attention from their parents.

A useful approach for parents is to spend some time alone with each sibling of an anxious child. Explain that a brother or sister is suffering from anxiety as simply and clearly as possible. A good idea, is to emphasise that anxiety is a very unpleasant condition that can be debilitating, but it is not contagious or life threatening. Discuss ways in which they can support their anxious brother or sister as part of a family recovery plan. This is a positive and important way of learning about patience and caring, an experience that will be invaluable to them in later life.

➤ If your attempt to help anxious children fails, do not blame yourself. Generalised anxiety disorders can have a profound effect on children, and even an entire family. Turn to your doctor for a referral to a paediatrician, psychologist or psychiatrist, who will have the knowledge and skills to help. Then work with professionals and possibly a school counsellor.



Generalised anxiety disorder in teenagers

Adolescence can be a time of turbulence. Parents are often unaware that many teenagers feel isolated and vulnerable in our ever changing, complex world. Relationships, study stresses and expectations, early sexuality and constant media bombardment, are just some of the issues that face teenagers today. Technology dominates with computers, tablets, smartphones, Facebook and other forms of social media that have become part of their lives.

The changes that occur in teenage years can be disruptive for the family and the pattern and rhythm of family life can be turned upside down. As teenagers begin to assert their independence and find their individual identity, rebelliousness and moody outbursts can occur. The peer group dominates for most teenagers. They usually spend more time with friends than at home or with siblings. One of the ways of defining their identity is by wearing the right clothes and behaving like their peers. Rebellion is often a way of demonstrating their separation from parents and authority

figures and establishing stronger connections with their peers. Feeling different from the peer group or behaving in an unusual way is likely to cause a teenager anxiety.

Typically, teenagers worry most about their peer group, their school grades, exam results and their future. They may have other serious concerns about bullying, finances or family. In spite of their growing independence, many teenagers still feel uncertain, and continue to seek reassurance from their parents.

Much of the anxiety teenagers experience is regarded as normal considering the changes they are undergoing. However, some teenagers experience serious anxiety disorders during this period.

Many teens are not aware that they are anxious. They may think there is something physically wrong, that they are strange or going crazy. These thoughts are likely to heighten their anxiety.

Teenage symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder are similar to those in adults, but unlike adults with a similar disorder, many teenagers do not seem to realise that their anxiety is often more intense than the situation warrants. If they find their anxiety increasingly overwhelming, they are unable to study or socialise. It may lead them to refuse to attend school or they may halt their studies at college or university.

In the following example 15 year old Mia talks about her anxiety.

‘At night I worry about lots of things like how I’m doing at school. My parents are on my back constantly saying that I don’t study enough. I know they’re thinking about my future, but I can’t be stuck at my desk day and night. My friends go out on the weekends and I want to join them.

Lately, I’ve been worrying about Lance too. We have been together about a year. What will happen if he finds someone prettier and breaks up with me? If he dumps me, maybe I won’t ever find someone else. He hasn’t done a thing to make me think like this, but I can’t help it. I wish I could get the thought that he’s going to dump me out of my head.’

How to help teenagers with generalised anxiety disorder

Anxious teenagers need to feel that their difficulties are understood by parents and the rest of the family, and that they are not being judged

or criticised. Openness and preparedness to listen is what is important, whether what is said is agreed upon or not. If parents are short of time, a teenager may prefer to talk to a grandparent, relative, older sibling, a teacher or someone outside the family.

Teenagers are almost adults, but they still need to know their boundaries. Even though they will test those limits, they ought to show their parents and family members respect, and not treat their home as a hotel. Limits as regards aggression, sexual activity, fast driving, drug taking and alcohol, need to be clear and responsibilities emphasised.

Reassure your teenager and explain as much as possible about anxiety and its signs. Understanding the condition is always a good place to start, as knowledge allows everyone to view the issues involved objectively. It banishes fear, as well as stigma and judgment.

Treatment Options for Generalised Anxiety Disorder

A diagnosis

If family members work as a team to help each other, the outcome will be far more positive than if there is an atmosphere of secrecy and resentment. But, sometimes working together doesn't happen easily. There may be old wounds that make talking difficult.

The best approach for any family with members suffering from anxiety is to seek a medical diagnosis before embarking on any treatment. All the possible treatment options, their advantages and disadvantages need to be discussed, so that the most suitable therapy can be chosen. Diagnosis may reveal that an individual has more than one anxiety disorder, such as a phobia and possibly depression as well. Within the family, members may suffer from different forms of anxiety and other conditions. Any symptoms of depression or drug or alcohol abuse will need additional treatment.

➤ If the anxiety is mild and no additional disorders are involved, try to work through a self-help book such as this one, or use a programme on the Internet for generalised anxiety disorders that would be suitable for any family member. However, if these approaches do not help or the level of anxiety is severe and complicated by other issues, visit a psychologist or psychiatrist.

A psychological approach

Whatever the age of the sufferer, psychological treatment for this disorder is usually advised before medication is prescribed. The psychological approaches are namely:

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): This therapy is regarded as one of the most effective treatments for generalised anxiety disorder. Studies of different treatments for generalised anxiety disorder have shown that many of the benefits of cognitive behavioural therapy are longer lasting and can be more effective than those of medication. This therapy may involve an individual sufferer or the whole family. (Read more about cognitive behavioural therapy in Part 2.)

Relaxation: Often relaxation techniques are recommended as well as cognitive behavioural therapy or medication. These techniques involve learning to relax in response to the physical and emotional aspects of anxiety. (See more about relaxation techniques in Chapters 13 and 14.)

➤ Change and recovery is always possible. Emotions such as fear and anxiety are controlled by the brain, that is far from the rigid organ as once thought. The brain is adaptable and constantly changing from birth to old age. Researchers have shown that recovery can be aided by specific strategies, such as altering negative thinking, exercise, relaxation, mindfulness, nutrition and alternative therapies. These techniques are discussed throughout the book.

STOP FAMILY ANXIETY

This breakthrough book addresses the current problem of anxiety in families and the suffering of family members from anxiety disorders – parents, school going or younger children, teenagers or grandparents. Step-by-step solutions are offered clearly and without jargon.

This book provides families with three major ways of overcoming anxiety:

1. **Stopping the cycle of anxiety spreading in families.** Anxiety is like a virus. When one person suffers from anxiety, it can spread to other family members without anyone realising it is happening. Home life can begin to deteriorate and break down.
2. **Ways in which a family can unite to support an anxious loved one,** and how individual members can help each other to recover.
3. **Information about how to cope with all common anxiety disorders,** including generalised anxiety disorder, panic attacks, agoraphobia, social anxiety, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and separation anxiety. Conditions associated with anxiety such as depression, eating disorders, ADD/ADHD are discussed as well.

The issues covered in this book include:

- The difference between worry, everyday anxiety and anxiety disorders.
- Understanding relationships and developing stronger family bonds.
- The causes of anxiety.
- Changing destructive, anxious thinking with cognitive behavioural therapy.
- Reducing anxiety by nurturing self-esteem and developing assertiveness.
- Preventing anxiety caused by bullying at school, work and cyber bullying.
- Spiritual belief as a means of finding meaning and purpose.
- Methods of deep breathing, relaxation and mindfulness.
- The calming effect of exercise the effect of substance abuse on anxiety.
- Exciting current research studies on anxiety giving information and hope.

Joan Zawatzky is a psychologist who brings her experience of over 25 years in counselling individuals, couples and families to this book. She writes directly and compassionately, offering practical support to sufferers of anxiety and their families. This book follows her previous book, *Depression: Light at the End of the Tunnel*. She is also the author of *The Scent of Oranges*, *The Elephant's Footprint* and *The Third Generation*.

