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Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Children

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Abstract: *The present text explores about Generalized anxiety disorder, specifically in children. Generalized anxiety disorder can be defined as an excessive worry about number of things. In children, worry is normal, but when it changes to uncontrollable and excessive worry then he/she is said to have Generalized anxiety disorder. In the forthcoming paragraphs, causes, symptoms, treatments and medications, coping strategies are thoroughly described.*

Keywords: *General Anxiety Disorder in Children, Anxiety, Stress in Children, GAD, Causes of GAD, Treatment of GAD, DSM-5, Diagnosis, Medications*

I. INTRODUCTION

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) can be defined as excessive and uncontrollable worry about a number of events. It mostly goes with physical symptoms such as fatigue, muscle pain, stomachaches, restlessness, heart palpitations, etc.

The American Psychiatric Association as a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3rd Edition, introduced generalized anxiety disorder: DSM-3 in 1980 when anxiety neurosis was split into panic disorder and GAD. GAD in children was first included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition: DSM-5 in 1994 when it replaced Overanxious disorder (OAD) of childhood.

Many children experience fears that are normal. However, children with GAD may fear and worry excessively about their performance in school or in sports. They also worry about personal safety and the safety of family members.

Children with GAD worry about the same things in excess. These worries lower their performance and they are unable to do the day-to-day activities. Children with GAD avoid activities in which they feel that they may not be able to perform well.

GAD is a common disorder among children and adolescents. If not treated the disorder may be dangerous and could lead the child to depression.

II. GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER IN CHILDREN

Studies have shown that approximately 2-6 percent of children suffer from anxiety disorders. And when it comes to GAD, girls are more likely to be diagnosed than boys and rarely emerges before adolescents. GAD in children could be defined as the persistent or excessive worry about the everyday tasks, which a child is not able to control. This worry and tension go on for almost every day for at least 6 months, resulting in a difficulty to perform these tasks.

In children, the anxieties often disturb their performance at school, sports and in their day-to-day activities. Anxiety can also disturb their punctuality. Children can start worrying about catastrophic events like earthquakes or any other natural calamities. They may be unsure of themselves and tend to redo tasks because of excessive dissatisfaction. They also require excessive reassurance about their performance and their tensions.

Although tension and worry is a developmental process and also appropriate, some of the children experience an excessive amount of worry that causes stress in their daily functioning.

The reported regularity rates for GAD in children and adolescents range from 0.16% to 11%, with regularity rates increasing with age. The average age at the beginning of GAD in children is difficult to find out. GAD is mostly accompanied by one or more additional disorders and the rates are as high as 90%.

One of the characteristics found to differentiate GAD from other anxiety disorders in children is the number of worries experienced. The following graph Fig.1 represents the percent of teens suffering from GAD:-

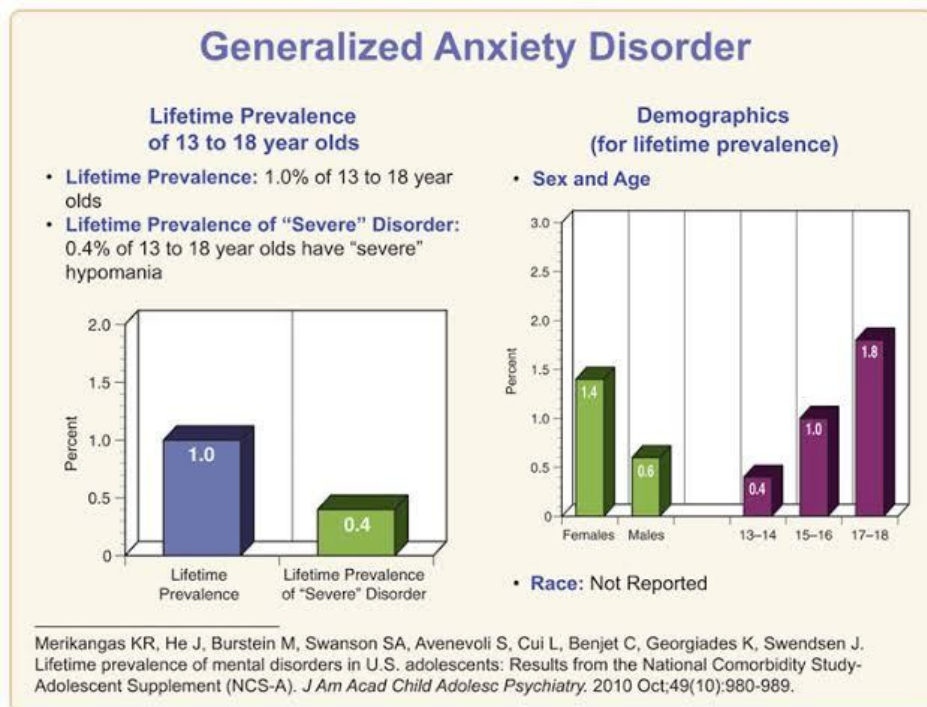


Fig. 1 Graph representing % of teens suffering from GAD

III. STATISTICS

If a child is suffering from GAD then they will have excessive worry about different things like family issues, relationship with friends, punctuality, performance in sports, etc. Children with GAD are over thinker and want reassurance on their performance because they strive for perfection. Anxiety disorders affect 25.1% of children between 13 and 18 years of age. Anxiety disorder should be treated immediately as soon as it comes in the notice of an elder. The children who are untreated with the anxiety disorder are not able to perform good as they are at higher risk to perform poor in their daily activities and in school. About 3% of US children and 10% adolescents are affected by GAD. Compared to other anxiety disorders, GAD is more likely to be present in the beginning and at more gradual development. It can start at any age, in children it usually develops at 8 or 9 but research by Kessler and Berglund showed that the mean age the of beginning of GAD was 32.7 years of age.

IV. DIAGNOSIS AND SYMPTOMS OF GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

Children with GAD experience severe tension and worry about day to day activities. They even foresee any kind of disaster and damage. Children suffering from GAD may also experience restlessness, fatigue, body ache, stomach ache, muscle tension, difficulty in concentrating, irritation, nervousness, difficulty in sleeping, etc. The constant tension and stress affects a child's day to day activities. And even if a child knows that their anxiety is increasing, it can be difficult to control or manage it.

Constant worry or tension is the main symptom of GAD which is for at least 6 months. Worry is something that cannot be stopped or is hard to stop for the person suffering from GAD. Worries about different kinds of problems such as performing well at school, fear about the well-being of themselves or their family, re doing the homework because they feel it is not done correctly, need constant reassurance that they have performed good in exams.

V. DSM-5 CRITERIA

The diagnostic criteria as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 5th Edition: DSM-5 (2013) which is published by the American Psychiatric Association for GAD is given below:

- A. Excessive tension and anxiety occurring for more than 6 months.
- B. It is difficult for the person to control worry and anxiety.
- C. At least three (or more) of the following six symptoms should occur.



Note: In children, only one symptom is required.

- 1) The person gets tired easily
 - 2) They feel difficult to concentrate.
 - 3) The person feels restless.
 - 4) The person gets irritated on even small things.
 - 5) They have muscle pain.
 - 6) They suffer from sleep problems, i.e. insomnia or hypersomnia.
- D. The anxiety, worry makes it hard for the person to keep going on with daily activities and responsibilities which results in causing problems at school, sports, work, relationship, or in any social gathering, etc.
- E. The disturbance is not related to any other medical condition and cannot be explained by the effect of substances (drugs, alcohol, medication).
- F. These symptoms do not fit better with another psychiatric problem such as anxiety disorders, panic disorder, etc.

VI. CAUSES

The exact cause of GAD is unknown. But there is number of causal factors that affect the development of GAD including genetic factors, biological factors, and environmental factors. Children who have any history of bad memories may be at greater risk for developing GAD.

It is common for people of all age who have experienced loss of a loved one, humiliation, abandonment to feel worried about their future situations of unpredictability, bullying, and for children it is no different.

- A. Genetic factors- Family history plays an important role on whether the child will develop GAD or not. If any of the one parent has GAD, then it is possible that the child may also has. Just as a child inherits the parent's blue eyes, black hair, likewise, a child can also inherit GAD from parents. Research suggests that 1/3 of the causes of GAD is genetic.
- B. Biological factors- Neurotransmitters are brain chemicals that send messages to control a person's feelings. There are two important neurotransmitters- dopamine and serotonin, when disturbed, can cause anxiety and depression. Brain has some parts that are involved in fear and anxiety.
- C. Environmental factors- A disturbing event, such as loss of a loved one, divorce of parents. prolonged illness, changing schools, a major event outside of the family may trigger the beginning of GAD. GAD may also be inherited from family members or others who are stressed or worried around a child.

VII. TREATMENTS

Treatments for the children suffering with GAD helps them to feel better- physically and mentally. And it also helps them to engage with the people, things, or situations about which they used to worry about previously. These treatments are described below:

A. Medicines

Different types of medicines are used to treat GAD, some of them are described below:

- 1) *Antidepressants*: Antidepressants including medicines in the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) and serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor (SNRI) are the first time medication treatments. It takes several weeks before their effects are visible. Examples of antidepressants used to treat GAD are- Escitalopram (Lexapro), Duloxetine (Cymbalta), Venlafaxine (Effexor XR) and Paroxetine (Paxil Pexeva).
- 2) *Benzodiazepines*: In very rare cases the doctor may prescribe a benzodiazepine to cure anxiety. Benzodiazepines are sedatives and are generally used to cure acute anxiety but for the short term. These medications are not a good choice as they can be addictive.

B. Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is very popular when it comes to cure GAD. These are also called talk therapies and can be very helpful to cure GAD. They are described below:



- 1) *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)*: CBT has become increasingly effective for GAD. CBT is a short term and structured treatment that focuses on controlling thoughts, feelings, behavior and actions that carry anxiety. It can be used to treat adults, as well as children and adolescents.
- 2) *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)*: The ACT is another therapy that helps to reduce anxious thoughts and feelings. The goal of this treatment is to reduce anxiety and worry and can increase involvement in other mental activities.
- 3) *Other talk therapies*: There are two other types of talk therapies- psychodynamic therapy and interpersonal psychotherapy.
 - a) Psychodynamic therapy is based on the plan that the feelings and thoughts which are outside of our awareness can lead to an interval disagreement which results in anxiety.
 - b) Interpersonal psychotherapy is another type of talk therapy which is time limited. It is based on the assumption that symptoms may be caused by problems in relationships and that solving these problems can reduce the symptoms.

C. *Yoga and Meditation*

Yoga and meditation is an effective method when it comes to treating GAD. Relaxing the mind and body can help reduce symptoms such as worry, fatigue, restlessness, headaches, muscle pains, etc. Yoga and meditation can help to lessen the worry and anxiety and also helps to keep a healthy mental strength.

VIII. CASE STUDY

Jessica was a 15-year-old girl. She was described as an anxious child. She had been shy and a quiet girl in kindergarten, but blended well with her classmates in grade 7 and also started making friends and succeeding academically. She experienced severe abdominal pain several times that was worst in the morning and not present in the night. Because of which she had to miss her school many times during the previous year. She would also complain about muscle pain and fatigue. She would avoid school trips fearing the bus would crash. She also had sleeping issues and asked her parents about their reassurance multiple times.

Jessica worried that she and her parents might die. She used to tense a lot before a test and could not sleep the night before that. She could not concentrate on her studies as well. Her performance deteriorated in school and sports. She would be in constant fear and worry and in the evening, she would insist on securing the house, fearing intruders.

Many children experience fears that are normal. However, children with GAD experience constant fear or symptoms related to anxiety for months.

The duration of Jessica's difficulty and the symptoms including abdominal pain, muscle pain, constant fear that she and her family members may die, need of constant reassurance, decreasing performance in school and sports, etc. are all developmentally inappropriate, and suggest GAD.

Her family sent her to a student counseling center for several months but had not found it useful. Jessica had heard that CBT might be helpful. She was in treatment for almost 5 months, during which time she found training in deep muscle relaxation helpful in the overall level of tension. CBT helped reduce her worry levels. She still had fear issues but this too was improving. She also began socializing more frequently. She is getting better day by day.

IX. COPING SKILLS/STRATEGIES

There are a number of coping strategies that can be used by children to help soften the symptoms of GAD.

- 1) *Meditation*: Meditation has been found effective in the management of GAD. It helps to release tension and worry. It relaxes the brain and slows down the anxious thoughts and emotional responses. Slowing down the process with peaceful action can be helpful.
- 2) *Social Connection*: A child should feel safe to connect with others but anxiety makes them want to detach from friends and family members. Parents should offer their children opportunities to be with family, spending time outdoors together. Volunteering is another helpful way to socialize.
- 3) *Self-Care*: Eating habits, physical activities and sleeping routines should be planned to effectively manage the stress. Self-care can be valuable to cope with anxiety, fatigue, muscle tension, restlessness, irritability, etc.



VI.CONCLUSIONS

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