

*Anxiety UK*  
Here for you since 1970

# Helping people with anxiety to receive the best from their GP: avoiding medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing





## Introduction

**Our survey on medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing found that people with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) struggle to access care because of their condition and are more likely to experience medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing, compared to those without GAD who struggle to access care.<sup>1</sup>**

This resource has, therefore, been developed to help individuals with anxiety navigate conversations with their general practitioners (GPs) to ensure their health concerns are taken seriously and investigated appropriately. Anxiety UK understands that navigating conversations with GPs can sometimes be challenging, especially when it comes to articulating your experiences, symptoms, and concerns. This toolkit aims to empower you to take an active role in your healthcare journey.

A complementary guide has also been developed for GPs with guidance on how to avoid medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing when consulting people with anxiety.



## Medical gaslighting (MG) definition<sup>2</sup>

Medical gaslighting describes a behaviour in which a **physician or other medical professional dismisses or downplays a person's physical symptoms** or attributes them to something else, such as a psychological condition. This may happen due to conscious or unconscious bias.



## Diagnostic overshadowing (DO) definition<sup>3</sup>

The failure to see a problem **because the symptoms are common to more than one condition and incorrectly attributed to another condition.**

In people with anxiety this could be, for example, failing to investigate raised heart rate as an indicator of a heart condition as it is attributed to the person's anxiety. Slightly different, but related, is when anxiety could be a 'symptom' of a wider condition, such as thyroid disease, and this is not properly investigated.

## Having a successful consultation

A successful consultation is an interaction between the patient and GP in which the patient presents their complaints and concerns, the GP utilises their skills and knowledge to address those complaints and concerns, and together they have an agreed plan that aims to maximise the health and well-being of the patient.







## How to use the toolkit

Within this toolkit you will find advice on how to navigate healthcare conversations, including questions to ask your GP and a symptom tracker which can help you speak to your GP about the problems you have been experiencing, that are unrelated to your anxiety.

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# Practical tips to help you prepare for your GP appointment



**Note down your symptoms**, if possible, several days before your appointment. You can use the symptom tracker on page 11.

**List out any points** you would like to make or questions you have in a notepad or on your phone ahead of the appointment. Take them with you and refer to them during your appointment.

**When booking your appointment**, ask the reception for at least a double appointment so you have enough time to discuss your symptoms.

**Reflect on why this new symptom** may be related to a different condition. Consider the possibility of various factors contributing to your current experience.

**If it is a pain, try and localise the symptom**, or put your finger on it. Does it spread out? Is it a deep pain or on the surface? What makes it worse and what eases it? Is there a particular activity or time of day when you have the symptom?

**If you are worried that the symptom is due to a particular condition**, consider offering the GP your suggested diagnosis.

**Consider if the new symptom feels the same** as an old symptom but in a different place.

**Similarly, assess whether the new symptom is situated in the same area as a previous symptom** but presents differently in terms of sensation or intensity.

# How to speak to your GP

In this section you will find top tips and advice on how to manage conversations with your GP.



## Document your symptoms

Using the symptom tracker on page 11, document what type of symptoms you are experiencing, when they occur, their severity and any triggers you have noticed. Take this tracker with you when you speak to your GP so that you can clearly show them the problems you have been experiencing.



## Express your concerns clearly

Be open about your concerns (and that you believe these symptoms are not related to anxiety if this is raised). Make it clear that you understand the difference between anxiety-induced symptoms and these new physical symptoms. Try not to feel like you must downplay your symptoms. Speak honestly and openly about the symptoms you have been experiencing.



## Be prepared to answer questions about your overall health, including how the management of your anxiety is going

Discussing your overall health, including the management of your anxiety, will provide your GP with a comprehensive view of your health status and can help them differentiate between symptoms of anxiety and other potential health issues.



## Ask for tests and seek a second opinion

If you suspect a specific condition, discuss with your GP about relevant tests. Remember, seeking a second opinion is your right. You can request it during the appointment or see another GP within the practice if needed. Your health and well-being are paramount.





## Seeking clarity

If there is anything you do not understand ask your GP to clarify.



## Note-taking

During the appointment, feel free to take notes as a memory aid.



## Advocate for yourself

Be persistent, you know your own body best, be clear if you are experiencing new or unusual symptoms.

## Remember, your GP wants to help you.

As the GP is listening, the GP is also considering various explanations diagnoses. The likelihood of any specific explanation is based on many factors. Factors such as age, gender, lifestyle, etc. can alter a likely diagnosis, even when the symptoms are the same. The GP will give a diagnosis based on the most likely explanation; or a list of possible conditions that share the same symptoms that you described.

On encountering a patient who has a new problem for the first time, usually not all the necessary information is available for the GP to make a definitive or confirmed diagnosis of the patient's problem.





## Questions to consider asking your GP

I have been experiencing the following symptoms *[describe your symptoms]* and I am concerned:

- Could you explain what might be causing these symptoms I'm experiencing?
- Are there any tests we should consider to rule out other health conditions and/or to confirm a diagnosis?
- Could any of my current medications I am taking be causing my physical symptoms in any way?
- What investigations or treatment options are available for these symptoms?
- Should I see a specialist for further evaluation of these symptoms?
- What should I do if these symptoms persist or worsen?
- If I have additional questions about the condition or medication, how can I contact you or someone for advice?
- Are there information resources you would recommend for me to learn more?
- Is it possible that my symptoms arise from another cause?



# Recognising medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing



**Medical gaslighting** describes the behaviour where a medical professional dismisses or minimises your symptoms or concerns.<sup>2</sup>



**Diagnostic overshadowing** is a phenomena that occurs when a person's existing mental health condition prevents the accurate diagnosis and treatment of other medical conditions, as the symptoms of these conditions may be incorrectly attributed to the existing mental health condition.<sup>3</sup>

## Signs include<sup>4,5</sup>

### Dismissal of symptoms

Your GP may dismiss your symptoms as being “all in your head” or attribute them to stress or anxiety without conducting a thorough examination or investigation.

### Minimising concerns

Your GP may minimise your concerns, suggesting that you are overreacting or being overly sensitive about your symptoms.

### Lack of validation

Your GP may not validate your experiences and feelings, leading you to feel unheard and misunderstood.

### Provoking feelings of guilt

Your GP may make you feel guilty for seeking care or for questioning their advice or treatment plan.

### Lack of thorough examination

Your GP may not feel it is necessary to conduct further tests and examinations of your symptoms.



## How to respond to medical gaslighting and diagnostic overshadowing

If you feel your symptoms are not being taken seriously, here are some additional questions and conversation starters that can help you advocate for yourself.

- I know I have anxiety, but my anxiety can give rise to other conditions. Is it possible that what I am experiencing is due to something else?
- It feels to me that what I am experiencing is different from my anxiety. What makes you so confident that it is attributed to the anxiety?
- You may be right, but I would like to have the confidence that...
- What objective tests or investigations can you perform to ensure we appropriately identify that there isn't another health condition causing these symptoms?
- How can we differentiate between symptoms caused by my anxiety and symptoms caused by other health issues?

Remember, you have the right to understand your health and to be involved in decisions about your care. Don't be afraid to ask questions and seek the care you need.

**If you still feel dissatisfied, feel confident in asking for a second opinion.**









## References

- 1 [Anxiety UK](https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/projects-campaigns/), Medical Gaslighting and Diagnostic Overshadowing in those with Anxiety. <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/projects-campaigns/> [last accessed 05.02.2024]
- 2 [Medical Gaslighting](https://www.bupa.com.au/healthlink/mental-health-wellbeing/mental-health/medical-gaslighting-what-is-it-and-how-to-be-heard) Definition: Margerison, S. (2023, May 30). Medical gaslighting: What is it? And how to be heard. <https://www.bupa.com.au/healthlink/mental-health-wellbeing/mental-health/medical-gaslighting-what-is-it-and-how-to-be-heard> [Last accessed 30.01.2024]
- 3 [Diagnostic Overshadowing](https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.13034) Definition: Hallyburton A. Diagnostic overshadowing: An evolutionary concept analysis on the misattribution of physical symptoms to pre-existing psychological illnesses. *Int J Ment Health Nurs.* 2022 Dec;31(6):1360-1372. doi: 10.1111/inm.13034. Epub 2022 Jun 19. PMID: 35718951; PMCID: PMC9796883.
- 4 [VeryWellMind](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-medical-gaslighting-6831284#:~:), What are the signs of medical gaslighting? <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-medical-gaslighting-6831284#:~:> [Last accessed 30.01.2024]
- 5 [Science Direct](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/diagnostic-overshadowing), Diagnostic Overshadowing, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/diagnostic-overshadowing> [Last accessed 30.01.2024]

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