
ANXIETY: TIPS FOR TEENS

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... Robin has trouble concentrating in her chemistry class because she's getting so little sleep at night. She lies awake for hours worrying, and, when she does get to sleep, she's jerked awake by nightmares.

... Liz is starting to skip school and her grades are suffering. She had a blow up with her friends and now she's afraid of being rejected socially whenever she's at school.

... Kendrick saw an exchange of gunfire between rival gangs in his neighborhood and now, whenever he hears a loud noise, his palms get sweaty and he has a hard time catching his breath. Except for school, where he feels safe, he avoids going out of his house.

Anxiety is one of the most common problems facing teenagers in schools today. Worry and anxiety are normal reactions to concerns about what might happen in the future. Most teenagers worry at times about school performance, classmates and friends, family, appearance, health, and personal harm.

A certain amount of anxiety is healthy, especially when it results in productive action, such as when we worry about getting a bad grade on a test and, consequently, we study extra hard. We all know what it means to have butterflies in our stomach and to feel restless and tense from time to time. For some of us, though, anxieties and worries begin to control our lives. We may turn to drugs and alcohol in an attempt to reduce our anxieties or we may avoid participating in regular activities. These actions limit our enjoyment of life.

Approximately 1 out of 11 teenagers is diagnosed with anxiety severe enough to be considered a disorder, with girls being more likely to develop an anxiety disorder than boys. Common anxiety symptoms that can affect people at any age tend to increase during the adolescent years.

Anxiety Affects Us in Different Ways

Our feelings. The emotions commonly associated with anxiety are discomfort, fear, and dread. We may feel irritable and angry with others or we may feel that everyone is judging us and we can never quite measure up to others' expectations.

Our body's response. Sweating, nausea, shaking, headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, and generally being on edge are among the body's physiological responses to anxiety. Some of us may also experience dizziness, shortness of breath, and an accelerated heartbeat.

Our behaviors. Some of us who are anxious often engage in behaviors of avoidance and withdrawal, such as missing school and avoiding social gatherings.

Our thoughts. Some of us have difficulty concentrating when we are worried and anxious. Thoughts may be negative and unrealistic, and consequently events may be misinterpreted. For example, Mike may be worried about his acne. When he walks by a group of girls in the hallway and they are laughing, he is certain that they are laughing at him. In reality, they were not talking about him and did not even notice that his face broke out, but he starts to avoid talking to girls and keeps his head down whenever his skin breaks out.

Causes of Anxiety

There are many different causes of anxiety. Anxiety appears to develop from an interaction among different factors rather than from any single cause. In general, we are more likely to experience anxiety if one or both parents exhibit anxiety symptoms. That is, anxiety tends to run in families.

Behavioral inhibition, a temperament style, has also been linked to anxiety in children and teens. Infants with this type of temperament are described as shy, timid, and wary, and seem to be at a greater risk for developing an anxiety disorder when they are older.

We can learn to be anxious as a result of our experiences or conditioning. This is especially true for those who have excessive fears (phobias) for certain objects or situations. For example, a frightening experience such as being chased by a dog can become associated with *any* dog, resulting in an unreasonable fear of all dogs.

Certain styles of thinking also contribute to developing anxiety. Those of us who experience excessive worries and anxieties tend to develop a pattern of negative and unrealistic thinking. We can misinterpret harmless situations as threatening and focus our attention on what we perceive as threatening.

Other environmental factors that may cause anxiety include exposure to a stressful environment or a traumatic event, observing others' anxious behavior, having overly protective and controlling parents, and learning to avoid certain situations to relieve anxiety symptoms.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

What follows are the most common types of anxiety disorders experienced by teens:

- *Generalized anxiety disorder:* People with a generalized anxiety disorder experience excessive, unrealistic, and persistent worry about everyday life events and activities such as their school performance. They find it difficult to control their worrying. They may worry about their school work all the time and spend hours doing and redoing their work because it is not perfect. Their worry causes a tremendous amount of distress. They may experience physical symptoms including headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and muscle tension. Other symptoms may be restless and irritable behaviors, difficulty concentrating, and problems sleeping.
- *Obsessive-compulsive disorder:* People with an obsessive-compulsive disorder have repetitive thoughts (obsessions) or behaviors (compulsions) that seem impossible to control. They realize that their obsessions and compulsions are excessive and meaningless, but the repetitive thoughts and behaviors are difficult to stop and cause distress. Common obsessions include fear of contamination and thoughts of harm to themselves or family and friends. Common compulsions include washing and cleaning rituals, and checking and rechecking behaviors.
- *Panic disorder:* People who experience a panic disorder have recurrent, unexpected panic attacks. The attack usually lasts 10–15 minutes. There is intense fear and a shortness of breath, shakiness, dizziness, sweating, heart palpitations, and chest pain. These people live in fear that they are going to have another panic attack and will avoid situations that may bring on another attack, such as avoiding school and social situations they associate with panic attacks.
- *Phobia:* People who experience a specific phobia have an intense, persistent, and maladaptive fear of a specific object such as an animal or insect or of a situation such as standing on a tall ladder or being in an enclosed space. They avoid the feared object or situation leading to interference with their daily routines.
- *Post-traumatic stress disorder:* People with a post-traumatic stress disorder experience severe anxiety symptoms in response to a traumatic event. The traumatic event may involve a natural disaster such as a tornado, a violent act such as a school shooting or abuse, or a frightening act such as a car accident in which they were either a witness or a victim. The traumatic event may be re-experienced over and over again in nightmares, flashbacks, thoughts, or memories. These people avoid anything associated with the trauma. They startle easily, have difficulty concentrating and doing their school work, experience sleep disturbances and irritability, and have problems getting along with their friends.
- *Separation anxiety disorder:* People with a separation anxiety disorder experience excessive worry or anxiety when separated from their parents or primary caregivers. The excessive worry or fear is in response to routine separations such as their leaving home and going to school for the day. They may have physical complaints, such as stomachaches and headaches, refuse to attend school, do not like to sleep alone or away from home, and experience unrealistic worry that harm will come to themselves or their parents.
- *Social phobia or social anxiety:* People with a social phobia or social anxiety show intense fear in situations in which they may experience criticism, embarrassment, or humiliation in public. They may also experience anxiety in social situations when there is no identifiable stressor to others. Common social phobias include intense fear associated with public speaking and avoidance of strangers. They avoid feared situations, and their avoidance behaviors restrict their daily lives. Isolation and possibly depression may follow as a result of their behaviors.

What You Can Do

The following suggestions may be helpful to combat anxiety and worry:

- **Social support network:** Develop a social support network. It is important to have someone to talk to, a friend, a parent, an uncle or aunt, when you are feeling anxious or worried, and just talking it out can sometimes help reduce whatever anxiety or worry you may be experiencing.
- **Exercise:** Exercise on a regular basis. A 20- to 30-minute workout three to five times a week can be energizing, and can make you more alert and can calm you. However, before beginning any exercise program, it is important to be sure you are in good health. Ask your family doctor if this is a good idea for you.
- **Eat a healthy diet:** Eating a healthy diet is important. A balanced diet low in sugar and caffeine and junk foods is highly recommended. Eating well can increase your mental and physical energy and may lessen your anxiety.
- **Sleep:** Quality and quantity of sleep are important. Fatigue wears on our emotions. Sleep requirements vary, though. If you get enough sleep and if you have a regular sleep schedule (a specific time to go to bed at night and a specific time to get up in the morning) you will feel more refreshed and are in a better frame of mind to tackle worries and concerns.
- **Learn to relax:** Different activities are relaxing to different people. If you are feeling anxious or worried you can go for a long walk to relax or you can listen to soft music, read a book, draw or paint, do yoga or martial arts such as tai chi or tae-kwon-do, take a nice warm bath, listen to relaxation tapes, practice deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, or do anything that you find relaxing.
- **Prepare ahead of time:** If you feel anxiety before or during a test, for instance, it is a good idea to develop good study habits, time management skills, and organizational skills. Being well prepared may give you a sense of confidence and reduce anxiety. If you are concerned about public speaking or if you have to talk in front of others during a public forum, practice parts of the speech beforehand and prepare well. This may be easier said than done, but give it a try. Being prepared does help.
- **Set realistic goals:** It may not be a good idea to set goals that are too unrealistic because if you do not reach them then you may feel that you have failed yourself and have failed those who count on you. Be more realistic. You know what you can accomplish and what you cannot. Be patient. Feel good about what you have accomplished and can accomplish.
- **Be optimistic:** Try to be optimistic. View a problem or a situation as a challenge that can be overcome instead of an obstacle to be avoided or a situation that causes distress. Use positive self-talk to meet a problem or a situation directly. This will put you in a better position to resolve your problem or situation with less distress.

Who You Can Contact for Help

Sometimes you may need help in dealing with your anxieties and worries, especially if anxiety increases in severity and interferes with your everyday life. Do not be embarrassed about seeking help. Almost everybody needs help at one point in their lives. And those who have not sought help probably should have done so. So, here are a few people you can contact to help you through this difficult time.

- **Parent or primary caregiver:** They care. They are there with you and know about you. Talk to them. Tell them your worries and anxieties. Maybe they can help.
- **School psychologist, school social worker, guidance counselor, or school nurse:** Sometimes it is good to speak to people who are not related to you and who are trained to help you. They can provide you with information about anxiety and can possibly treat or make a referral to another mental health professional who specializes in the treatment of teens with anxiety problems.
- **Family physician:** Visit your doctor. Your doctor can rule out other possible medical causes for the symptoms you are experiencing and can help determine if you have an anxiety disorder and can then help refer you to someone who specializes in teens with anxiety problems.

What Help Is Available

Anxiety problems are serious but treatable. Possible treatments include individual or family therapy, parent training, and medication. These treatments may be used alone or in combination.

Two approaches to therapy include changing the way we think and behave, and changing specific behaviors by replacing ineffective behaviors with more desirable behaviors.

Therapists can help you sort out your thoughts, feelings, and problems and may come up with solutions to resolve your problems. A relationship of trust and rapport first has to be established with the therapist. You have to speak honestly with the therapist, and the therapist has to discuss with you and your family limits on confidentiality, or information that will and will not

be shared with others. You have to set ground rules with your therapist about what can and what cannot be discussed with your parents, for instance, or with anybody else.

Parents should also learn to use techniques that may help you lessen your worries and anxieties. A therapist can work with several members of your family or the entire family to address issues that relate to your anxiety.

And, finally, sometimes medication prescribed by your physician can be used in addition to therapy. If medication is prescribed, be sure to take it exactly as instructed and let your parents or school nurse know if you are experiencing any side effects—feeling sick, being more anxious or extra sleepy or having trouble sleeping. You are the best judge. Medication does not work for everyone and sometimes it takes a while to find the right medication or the right dose.

Resources

- Davis, M., Robins-Eshelman, E., & McKay, M. (1995). *The relaxation and stress reduction workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger. ISBN: 1572242140.
- Greenberger, D., & Padesky, C. A. (1995). *Mind over mood*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 0898621283.
- Hipp, E. (1995). *Fighting invisible tigers: A stress management guide for teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit. ISBN: 0915793806.
- Powell, M. (2003). *Stress relief: The ultimate teen guide (It happened to me, 3)*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow. ISBN: 0810844338.
- Seaward, B. L., & Bartlett, L. K. (2002). *Hot stones and funny bones: Teens helping teens cope with stress and anger*. New York: Health Communications. ISBN: 0757300367.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit