



Understanding Anxiety in Teens

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety happens because your brain thinks it has detected danger. The important word there is *thinks* - it doesn't matter whether there actually is any danger, just that your brain thinks there is. Brains are smart but sometimes they get things wrong. Brains are also protective. So when they think we are in danger our brains automatically start doing things that are meant to help keep us safe and alive, like making our hearts beat faster and making us breathe harder. The thing about anxiety is that it always happens *in anticipation* of something bad happening, meaning the bad thing hasn't happened yet (maybe it never will), our brains just *think* it will or could happen. These thoughts often come in the form of worrying about "what if . . . ?"

SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

- Worrying - a lot
- Thoughts that others are judging
- Dread - as though something awful is about to happen
- Panic - sudden intense fear that comes out of nowhere
- Inability to relax or feelings of restlessness
- Racing thoughts or thoughts that just won't turn off
- Sleep problems including difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep or waking up during the night and having difficulty getting back to sleep
- Nightmares or dreams that are disturbing or distressing
- Avoidance of feared situations
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, racing heart, sweating, shaking, nausea, diarrhea, shortness of breath or dizziness
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Irritability - becoming easily upset over small things
- Triggering of fight (arguing, physical fighting), flight (wanting to run away, hide or disappear) or freeze (mind going blank, difficulty speaking) impulses



ANXIETY CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU!

In moderate amounts, anxiety can help us to be more alert, more aware of our surroundings, and more careful - so that we can stay safe and avoid real dangers. It can motivate us to prepare. For example, you might have felt some anxiety before a big test. If that anxiety motivated you to study more, it might have helped you to prepare better and get a better grade.



"Living with anxiety is like being followed by a voice. It knows all your insecurities and uses them against you. It gets to the point when it's the loudest voice in the room, no matter how much you try to get rid of it, it's just there."

- Hayley Greenwood
*What It Feels Like to Have Anxiety,
Because It Isn't Us 'Being Crazy'*

CRISIS HELP

Sometimes anxiety can be so intense and overwhelming that it feels like life is no longer worth living. If you or someone you know is considering suicide, help is available. It can get better. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255), the Crisis Center 330-452-6000, or send a text to 741 741.

HOW TO HELP YOUR ANXIOUS TEEN:



The goal is not to eliminate anxiety but to **manage** it. You want your child to learn how to safely and confidently deal with life's challenges.



Breathe - Taking slow deep breaths helps to clear the mind and settle the body.



Patience - Be supportive, understanding, and patient. Chances are your teen is already being tough enough on him- or herself.



Mindfulness - By teaching your brain to come back to the present you increase your ability to take control over your brain and stop it from worrying when it doesn't need to.



Listen - You don't have to have all the answers or know how to fix every problem. Just listen and empathize with the struggle.



Distraction - Drawing, coloring pictures, watching a movie or TV show, listening to music, playing a game, doing a craft. Repetitive, rhythmic movement can have a calming effect.



Perspective - Help to clarify what can be controlled and what cannot, and what is a realistic threat and what is not.



Encourage - Don't let your teen avoid doing the things that need to be done. The longer they try to avoid it, the bigger the fear becomes and the harder it will be to overcome that fear.



Accept - It's never helpful to tell someone who is anxious "stop worrying." It never helps to say they're just overreacting. Let them know you understand how real the fear is to them.

COMMON TYPES OF ANXIETY IN TEENS:

Generalized Anxiety - worrying more all the time and/or more than appropriate about a lot of things

Panic Attack - experiencing intense fear when the fight/flight/freeze response kicks in even though there is no real danger or *apparent* cause.

Test Anxiety - extreme distress or fear experienced before or during tests; the anxiety is so intense that it causes the mind to go blank and interferes with ability to perform well on the test.

Performance Anxiety - fear of doing something in front of other people.

Social Anxiety - intense fear of being watched and judged by others in social situations.

Phobias - intense fear or dread experienced in response to a specific object or situation.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) - Obsessions are unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that trigger intensely distressing feelings. Compulsions are behaviors or rituals done to get rid of the obsessions and/or decrease the distress.



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