

## Coping with Anxiety

**A**nxiety is common among teenagers. Sometimes normally happy teenagers will become anxious or fearful about something for a day or two, and then they will be back to normal without any need for parents to take any action. However, some teenagers seem to suffer from more intense and frequent feelings of anxiety that prevent them from doing things. This tip sheet gives you some suggestions on how to help your teenager cope with and reduce their fears.

### WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a vague, unpleasant emotional state that can make a person feel dread, distress and uneasiness. It occurs when we think that something dangerous, bad or scary is about to happen, and that there is nothing we can do about it. It might be anything from a fear of being hurt in a fight, to making a fool of ourselves in front of the class or worrying over an upcoming event.

It is often difficult for teenagers to talk about how they feel. Teenagers express their emotions in different ways. Sometimes they appear angry and aggressive, withdrawn, or tired and irritable. They may have difficulty sleeping, show little interest in food, and say very little. Others may avoid peers and social activities or refuse to attend school.

### WHAT CAUSES TEENAGERS TO BECOME ANXIOUS?

Everyone feels a certain amount of stress. However, high levels of stress in a teenager's life can cause anxiety. High levels of stress can come from a range of difficulties such as:

- pressures of school work, such as assignments and exams
- problems with peer relationships
- conflict at home with parents
- problems achieving a desired goal, such as getting into a sporting team, or doing poorly in a competition.

The human body reacts naturally when something unpleasant happens or seems about to happen. These reactions prepare the body to deal with the unpleasant situation and can include:

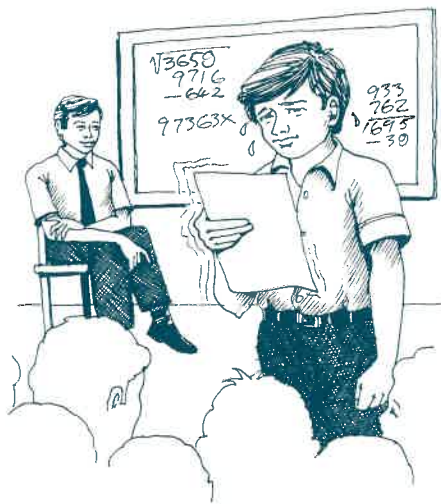
- increased heart rate
- rapid breathing
- sweaty palms
- light-headedness, feeling dizzy
- stomach-tightening.

However, these reactions do not usually last for long, especially when the threat is not

really there. After a few minutes, the heart rate returns to normal, breathing slows, and the other changes also return to normal.

The problem for some people in an unpleasant situation like this, is that they do not wait long enough for this natural slowdown to happen — they rush to escape. Also, they may avoid going back to the situation, or to others like it. They may become very wary, and look for ways to escape at the first sign (or thought) that something unpleasant might be about to happen.

The natural changes that occur when something stressful happens can be quite unpleasant and a teenager may become afraid that something serious is wrong with them. They may be afraid they are going to faint or even have a heart attack. These negative thoughts that something terrible is about to happen make the body's system speed up these changes even more as the thoughts add to the belief that there is a



real threat to defend against. This experience is often referred to as an *anxiety* or *panic attack*.

Although the real threat may actually be quite small, the situation the teenager is in at the time (e.g. classroom, social group) can become linked in their mind with this very unpleasant experience. So if it happens in class, when they are asked to speak on a topic, the class may become linked to the unpleasant physical sensations.


For some teenagers who have experiences like these, just thinking about class at home or in the morning before school, automatically brings on a mild version of the unpleasant experience. The teenager may then try to avoid going to the class because they are afraid that the unpleasant experience will be repeated.

Sometimes this fear can spread to other places, for example, where their peers will be, or anywhere where there are people. This is often accompanied by thoughts about terrible things happening such as losing control, going mad, or even dying from a heart attack. This can cause serious problems and interfere with normal life for a teenager.

Sometimes parents can unknowingly make things worse. Being too protective or critical may convey the idea that the parent thinks the teenager cannot cope.

In some families, parents do not give teenagers much attention when they are behaving well, but become very concerned and attentive when the teenager becomes ill, stressed or anxious. A teenager may then notice that their parents pay them a lot more attention when they are upset. Parents can therefore accidentally reward their teenager for being anxious.

In families where parents worry a lot or have anxiety problems themselves, teenagers may observe how parents deal with stress and anxiety. A teenager may



then react in similar ways when confronted with stress of their own.

## HOW TO PREVENT YOUR TEENAGER BECOMING ANXIOUS

### ▼ Create a positive family environment

Parents can help prevent anxiety in a number of ways.

- Encourage teenagers to have realistic beliefs about their capabilities.
- Encourage teenagers to develop good problem-solving skills.
- Talk openly about feelings and how to cope with upsetting events.
- Make positive comments about things your teenager does well, especially when they are dealing with stress.
- Encourage teenagers to take part in rather than avoid appropriate social and recreational activities.
- Make sure there are plenty of positive interactions with parents and other family members.
- Have consistent rules and appropriate discipline so that teenagers feel their world is secure and predictable.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOUR TEENAGER MAY BE ANXIOUS

### ▼ Monitor your teenager's emotions and behavior

Look out for changes in your teenager's normal behavior patterns. These changes may be sudden, or more gradual and therefore difficult to notice.

Anxiety is usually associated with your teenager trying to avoid or get away from certain situations, especially where they may think they might fail or appear foolish.

These might include activities at school such as:

- exams or public speaking
- going to a social event where they do not know many people
- having to take part in an activity they are afraid of failing at, such as a competition or sporting event.

Sometimes, just thinking about these events in advance can cause anxiety.

A teenager may attempt to reduce these unpleasant feelings and thoughts by refusing to attend, or by seeking comfort

from parents. In extreme instances, teenagers may:

- report recurring distressing thoughts (obsessions) about impending disaster
- carry out compulsive acts, such as checking windows and doors over and over before leaving home
- engage in an unusual sequence of actions or rituals in the belief that this will prevent a bad outcome or disaster.

### ▼ Talk to your teenager

See if you can identify any recent events in their life that may have upset them. Ask your teenager about:

- schoolwork or any major exams or assignments that are due or have just been completed
- friends and relationships, especially close friendships that seem to have suddenly ended or faded
- decreases in regular activities that your teenager has previously been enthusiastic about
- upcoming social events, especially any that they seem to want to avoid.

Check to see if they have been disappointed about missing out on selection for a team or a competition, or if they are worrying about failing at something.

When asking about these issues, take care not to add to their anxiety by asking too many questions. Listen carefully to what your teenager says. This is a good way to show that you are concerned. Listen for comments that indicate your teenager may:

- feel overwhelmed or unable to cope
- believe awful or negative things are going to happen that are outside their control, such as *I can't do it, I know I'm going to fail, I'll never be able to do it.*

Sometimes teenagers may be less direct about their fears, and try to change the subject, or report feeling ill or sick. If you believe this is an attempt to avoid something they are worried about, ignore their attempts to distract you and return to the subject.

### ▼ Encourage regular school attendance

Some anxious teenagers try to avoid going to school. Be firm about your teenager's attendance at school. School provides teenagers with a wide range of activities

and a network of peers. Being involved in school activities helps teenagers to solve their problems and to have necessary social contact.

When teenagers are anxious they may find it difficult to go to school. If they complain of feeling sick in the morning, make sure they see a doctor to ensure there is nothing wrong. After you are sure there is no medical problem, ignore complaints and insist gently but firmly that they go to school. If necessary, take them yourself to ensure that they get to school.

### ▼ Talk to someone at school

If you suspect there are problems at school, sharing your concerns with your teenager's teachers can help you get a clearer picture of what is happening. This way you will pick up if they are finding some subjects difficult, or if they are having a hard time with particular teachers or activities.

School staff do not always notice when students are quiet or feeling anxious, but they may notice if there has been a change in the way your teenager usually behaves. They may also take a closer look if you express some concern. Ask school staff to check if there is a problem that your teenager is anxious about that needs dealing with, such as bullying.

Some teenagers become good at finding ways of avoiding situations that make them uncomfortable by volunteering to run messages, staying in the toilets, or helping in the library.

## HOW TO HELP YOUR TEENAGER MANAGE ANXIETY

### ▼ Encourage your teenager to face their fears

Teenagers may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their anxiety and may not be willing to admit it at first. Explain to them that they are reacting in a very normal way, but to a situation that is not really a threat.

Explaining this to your teenager may help them to feel more normal, but it will not usually be enough to overcome their anxiety problem. The unpleasant sensations they experience are often so powerful and so quick that your teenager may still find it

very difficult to remain calm the next time it happens.

To overcome their anxiety, your teenager must stay in the feared situation as long as possible so that their natural body reactions have time to calm down. This can be difficult to do, but there are two unpleasant sensations they can learn to reverse.

- First, they need to learn to slow down their breathing when they start to feel anxious. Slower breathing signals to the body that it was a false alarm and there is no threat. The other bodily changes will then also begin to slow down.
- Second, they need to tell themselves that they can cope. Telling yourself that everything is fine, you are under control, and nothing terrible is going to happen will turn off the body's threat response.

Your teenager will need to use these two skills together at the first sign of an anxiety or panic attack.

### ▼ Encourage your teenager to practice their coping skills

Without practice your teenager will find that controlling their breathing and thinking positive coping thoughts are not easy to do when the panic attack is happening. They must therefore practice and rehearse these new skills. Make a time with your teenager when there is no-one else around and you will not be disturbed. Ask your teenager to sit comfortably and count their breathing. Most people breathe between 10 and 12 times a minute when they are at rest. If your teenager is breathing more than this when they are resting, they are already breathing too fast and are more likely to be at risk of having a panic attack. Get them to monitor their breathing regularly — say 4 or 5 times a day. The goal for your teenager is to slow their breathing so it is closer to a normal rate.

In order to make the practice more effective, before you start the next part, get your teenager to do some brief physical exercise to increase their breathing rate. This might involve them running up and down the stairs, or jogging on the spot for a minute or two.

After they have increased their breathing, ask them to follow these steps:

- *Step 1.* Hold their breath and count to 10.
- *Step 2.* After 10, breathe out through the nose, and say the word 'relax' to themselves in a calm, soothing way.
- *Step 3.* Breathe in and out through their nose once in six-second cycles. This means breathing in while slowly counting 1 — 2 — 3, then breathing out again while slowly counting 1 — 2 — 3. This will produce about 10 breaths per minute.
- *Step 4.* After every 10 breaths (1 minute), go back to *Step 1* and start again.

Repeat these steps for about 5 minutes. When the feared situation is next experienced, the teenager should repeat these steps until the anxiety sensations have gone.

Next, ask your teenager to write down the thoughts that they have when they start getting anxious. These thoughts will usually be about their lack of control of the situation, such as *I can't cope with this. This is awful. I'm really stupid/scared. I'm out of control.*

Now get them to write down a different, positive thought that they can use to replace each of the negative ones. For example, they could replace the negative thought *I can't cope with this* with the positive one *I can handle this OK*, or they could replace *This is awful* with *I feel okay*.

**FOR FURTHER HELP** If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your teenager's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet, or contact:

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland.

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Get your teenager to write these new positive thoughts on a card that they can carry with them. Get them to practice saying them out loud at first, and then just to themselves. Encourage them to say the positive thoughts with enthusiasm and confidence.

After practicing they should be able to use both of these skills to calm themselves and to avoid the spiral into a full panic attack. If possible, arrange for someone to be with the teenager when they are likely to experience their next problem situation. A support person can be useful by prompting the teenager to use their new coping skills and to help them resist the urge to escape.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

Daily disappointments and fears are all part of life and teenagers need to be able to cope with the regular stress of daily living. Often there is no need for parents to take any action, other than to provide understanding and support.

When teenagers experience long periods when excessive worrying or fears appear to take over their lives, parents need to take action and consider seeking professional help. If your child is seeing a professional for anxiety they may be taught anxiety coping skills you can help them practice at home.

Sometimes teenagers who are very anxious may also be depressed. There is a separate tip sheet which has some tips for parents who think their teenager may be depressed.

### KEY STEPS

- Create a positive family environment.
- Monitor your teenager's emotions and behavior.
- Talk to your teenager.
- Encourage regular school attendance.
- Talk to someone at school.
- Encourage your teenager to face their fears.
- Encourage your teenager to practice their coping skills.