NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

# Anxiety: Tips for Teens

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Most people experience some type of anxiety in their daily lives. Anxiety can range from mild feelings of stress to strong feelings of terror. Some amount of anxiety is normal, and can be helpful. For example, anxiety about an upcoming test may encourage you to spend more time studying. However, when anxiety is more severe, it can cause lasting distress and can disrupt your life.

## ALL ABOUT ANXIETY

Anxiety is a natural human reaction that incorporates responses from both your mind and your body. It is a response to a perceived (not necessarily real) threat. There are physical and mental aspects to anxiety.

### Physical Characteristics of Anxiety

When you feel anxious, you might feel your heart beat faster or your muscles become tense. You could feel your palms become sweaty, or your stomach might become queasy. This happens because of a rush of adrenaline and other chemicals that prepare the body to escape from danger. These sensations can be mild or extreme. The physical response happens immediately when a person senses a threat.

### Mental Characteristics of Anxiety

A few seconds after your body starts signaling anxiety, your brain begins to respond by processing the situation. The brain begins to determine whether or not the threat is real and how to handle it. If your brain decides the threat is not real, it sends a signal to the body to make the physical reactions stop. If the brain believes that the threat might last, the anxiety may stay and the physical sensations continue.

It is very common for new or challenging situations to cause anxiety. Although these situations might pose no physical threat, people may still feel threatened by the possibility of embarrassment or making mistakes. While a little anxiety can make a person more alert, focused, and ready to do well in challenging situations, too much anxiety can make a person feel overwhelmed and unable to function.

### Anxiety Problems

Difficulties arising from anxiety are common in childhood and adolescence. About one of every eight children and adolescents ages 9-17 years experience some kind of *anxiety disorder* (a significant mental health problem beyond normal anxiety). Girls are more likely to report (or to have problems dealing with) anxiety than boys. Nearly half of the children and adolescents with serious anxiety have a second problem, such as depression.

## ANXIETY DISORDERS

Anxiety that is so severe that it interferes with daily living is an *anxiety disorder*. Anxiety disorders are most likely caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors, such as brain chemistry, traumatic life events, personality characteristics, and genetic traits. There are several different types of anxiety disorders.

### Generalized Anxiety

People who have this condition have recurring fears or worries. The worries may have no cause or may be more intense than what one would expect, given the situation. A person with generalized anxiety worries excessively about everyday problems or problems that have not yet occurred.

### Panic

Panic involves sudden terror that comes without warning. Because the onset is unpredictable, people with this condition may live in fear about when it will occur. People may restrict their activities as a result of the

fear of panic. Panic attacks may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as pounding heart, chest pains, lightheadedness and shortness of breath, sweating, or hot flashes or chills.

**Phobia**

A phobia is an intense fear of objects or situations. The fears are irrational—illogical—or out of proportion to the potential danger, and may lead people to avoid situations that prompt fear. Many of the symptoms of panic can also occur with phobias. Phobias can involve fear of certain animals or fear of situations like crowds or high places; social phobias involve fear of social settings (like parties) or public places (like crowded theaters or stadiums).

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**

This condition involves constant and uncontrollable thoughts or "obsessions." In addition, the person engages in routines or rituals ("compulsions") to try to prevent or get rid of the thoughts that create anxiety. An example might be a compulsion to wash hands excessively because of fears of germs, or to count cracks in the sidewalk.

**Posttraumatic Stress**

Posttraumatic stress can occur after a person suffers a severe physical or emotional trauma such as a serious accident, crime, or natural disaster. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors become affected by the event. The person may constantly relive the event or may have a general emotional numbing. Other symptoms may include persistent anxiety, exaggerated startle reactions, difficulty concentrating, nightmares, or insomnia.

**Separation Anxiety**

Separation anxiety involves excessive worry or fear about being apart from parents or guardians, often with a fear that they will be harmed in some way. Very young children normally go through a period of separation anxiety, but they outgrow it as they become more independent as toddlers. In older children, separation anxiety can be a serious problem.

## MANAGING ANXIETY AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

There are steps you can take to better control your anxiety. If you have an anxiety disorder, it is important that you get help as there are many effective treatments that can help you live a normal life. Up to 90% of people suffering from anxiety can be effectively treated. But if left untreated, anxiety can have negative effects in school, at home, and with relationships with family and friends.

If your anxiety is severe, you might have an evaluation (tests and interviews) to determine if you have an anxiety disorder. If you do, there are effective treatments that usually involve working with your physician and/or a psychiatrist or psychologist. The most effective treatments for anxiety disorders are a type of therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy, where you learn to think differently about situations that make you anxious, medication, or a combination of the two.

For less severe but troublesome anxiety reactions, you might find these tips helpful:

- *Learn about your anxiety.* Notice what makes you feel anxious and determine what triggers your feelings of anxiety.
- *Writing may be helpful.* Allow yourself time to write down the situations that worry you or cause you anxiety. Identify your problem and write about possible solutions. Make an effort to leave your worries on the paper rather than carrying them around in your mind.
- *Develop a plan.* Once you realize what situations make you feel anxious, create a plan to address that situation. Deal with only one or two worries at a time. For example, if you are worried about your grade in class, develop a study plan or meet with the teacher to get suggestions about how to succeed.
- *Exercise.* Physical activity can take your mind off of your worries and help you to think logically about a situation. The changes in brain chemistry that occur during physical exercise can also lessen anxiety.
- *Breathing techniques can help with feelings of anxiety.* People who are anxious may find themselves taking short, shallow breaths. Instead, focus on deep, quiet breaths from your abdomen. Breathe "slow and low." Taking deep breaths can help to calm your body.
- *Relax.* Find out what calms you down—whether it is yoga, meditation, a warm bath, or a long walk. Take time out of your day to help your body relax.
- *Reframe your thoughts.* Anxiety may be made worse by negative self-talk. You may feel overwhelmed with feeling like you are unable to do something. You may feel like bad things will definitely happen. Step back and take a look at those thoughts. Are they rational? Is it really inevitable that something bad will happen? Reframe your self-talk into logical thoughts, such as "It's possible that something bad may happen, but it is unlikely."
- *Take care of your body.* Limit caffeine, avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other nonprescription drugs, and make an effort to eat healthy foods and get enough sleep. These things may sound simple, but they really can help lower anxiety.

- *Don't worry alone.* Talk to someone you trust, such as a parent, friend, or teacher. Often, getting a different perspective on the matter will help you to arrive at a solution. Just sharing your concerns can alleviate them.

## WHERE YOU CAN GO FOR HELP

There are many people who can provide further help dealing with anxiety. Talk to your parents or another trusted adult about your concerns. You could also discuss this with your school psychologist, school counselor, or another mental health professional. You can find these people at your school, through your church or synagogue, or through teen and family centers in your community. See the books and websites below for some more ideas.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

You can find more help in books at the public library or online.

### Books

Fox, A., Kirschener, R., & Verdick, E. (2005). *Too stressed to think? A teen guide to staying sane when life makes you crazy.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

This book discusses stress and its effects. It also gives techniques for dealing with stress and discusses breathing techniques.

Hipp, E. (2008). *Fighting invisible tigers: A stress management guide for teens* (3rd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Addressing a variety of topics, such as being assertive, developing relationships, and using humor, this book is an easy-to-read guide for teens.

Powell, M. (2007). *Stress relief: The ultimate teen guide (It happened to me)* (paperback ed.). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

This reader-friendly book describes ways to prevent and avoid stress.

Schab, L. M. (2008). *The anxiety workbook for teens: Activities to help you deal with anxiety and worry* (2nd ed.). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Ideas to deal with day-to-day anxiety as well as resources for help.

### Online

Anxiety Disorders Association of America, *Children and adolescents*: http://www.adaa.org/GettingHelp/FocusOn/Children&Adolescents.asp

Information about anxiety in children and teenagers.

National Institute of Mental Health, *Anxiety disorders*: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml

Specific, detailed information about anxiety, treatment, and how to find services. This website offers information on current research.

Teens Health (Nemours), *Anxiety disorders*: http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/anxiety.html

All about anxiety and how it is treated. Links to related topics like phobias, test anxiety, stories from other teens with anxiety, etc.

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