



How To Help Your Anxious Teen

By Sheila Josephs, PhD and Niranjana Rajan, MD

Adolescence can often be a time of increasing anxiety. Grades become more important, the social scene can be fraught with challenges and getting into college is a looming stress. Below anxiety specialist, Dr. Josephs, a psychologist, and Dr. Rajan, an experienced pediatrician, suggest simple ways for parents to help teens prevent and manage everyday anxiety and when to consider seeking professional help.

- **First empathize with your adolescent.** Acknowledge their feelings. Empathy – the art of showing that you understand others’ feelings – helps you truly enter your adolescent’s world. Without feeling first understood, your adolescent is likely to shut you out completely and not let you help them with coping strategies.
- **Anxiety often triggers lots of avoidance of new challenges.** Notice, praise, and reinforce behavior that confronts fears. Help your teen realize that their worst fears may not be the most likely outcome.
- **Help your adolescent engage in more effective problem solving strategies.** Anxiety often results in an inability to think through options for solving a problem. An adolescent may have “tunnel vision” only noticing obstacles. Help your teen break down large challenges into small, doable steps and identify positive solutions to lessen or solve a problem.
- **Model for your teen effective ways to cope with anxiety.** We all have “bad days” where things go wrong and we are drawn to fearing the worst outcome. Show your teen how anxiety can be managed through changing one’s perspective on a situation and engaging in useful problem solving and coping strategies.
- **Help your adolescent find opportunities for self-soothing and relaxation.** These need not be more formal “relaxation” strategies (such as doing yoga), but could be simple activities such as listening to music, shooting some hoops, scrapbooking, or playing an instrument for fun (vs. practice).
- **Be careful not to overschedule your teen or let them overschedule themselves.** Today’s teens are striving to achieve in many areas, but the result is often burnout, less time to unwind and lots of stress associated with meeting deadlines.
- **Provide structure to help your teen get enough sleep.** That includes limiting electronics. These days, teens are drawn to social media and electronic games, both of which draw them away from getting to sleep at reasonable times. Poor sleep aggravates already stressed nerves making anxiety all the more likely.
- **Adolescents who are stressed are often not eating well and usually not exercising either.** Encourage a healthy diet with more proteins and complex carbohydrates, excluding caffeine completely, and regular, vigorous exercise (at least 20 minutes of cardiovascular exercise, three times a week).

- **Sudden changes in appetite or weight can signal a problem.** This may be a sign of significant mood issues, such as anxiety or depression, and suggests further evaluation to rule-out medical or psychological causes is necessary.
- **How do we know if everyday anxiety is turning into a more serious problem?** Anxiety that is of concern is one that is more severe and disabling and out of proportion to the triggering event. If such anxiety happens on a frequent basis or is especially disabling, it is time to seek professional advice.

Helping your teen manage everyday anxiety has numerous benefits for them. It will help them more successfully manage school stress, be more resilient and thrive in the face of challenges, and have a more positive relationship with you and with their peers. If you are concerned that your teen is facing disabling anxiety, speak to your child's pediatrician. A psychological evaluation may be indicated.

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