



Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

April 2016

Anxiety and Teens Why They Get It and How Parents Can Help

Studies have shown that in terms of sheer intellectual power, the capacity to learn will never be greater than in the teen years. Studies have also shown that the parts of the brain involved in emotional responses are more active in teens than in adults, while the parts of the brain involved in controlling emotional, impulsive responses are still maturing. This might help explain teens' tendency to act on impulse and why they are more susceptible to stress and anxiety.¹

Normal Anxiety vs. Anxiety Disorders

Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety from time to time—but for teens, anxiety can feel

much worse. Mild anxiety can make teens feel uneasy or nervous. More intense anxiety can make them feel fear, dread or panic. Tension and stress are also forms of anxiety. Anxieties may become anxiety disorders, causing teens significant distress or impeding normal functioning. Anxiety disorders involve excessive amounts of these feelings and can include²:

- Generalized anxiety: common disorder with excessive worry about many things (e.g., school, health or safety of family members, the future) and physical symptoms (e.g., chest pain, headache, tight muscles, stomachaches, vomiting).
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD): anxiety that takes the form of obsessions (bad or persistent distressing thoughts) and compulsions (actions that try to relieve anxiety).
- Phobias: intense fears of specific situations or things that may or may not be dangerous (e.g., heights, dogs) but cause teens to avoid them.

- Social anxiety: intense anxiety triggered by social situations or speaking in front of others.
- Panic attacks: episodes of anxiety that occur for no apparent reason, producing sudden and intense physical symptoms (e.g., pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, numbness, or tingling feelings).
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): anxiety disorder resulting from a traumatic or terrifying past experience, with flashbacks, nightmares or constant fear.

When anxieties and fears persist, problems can arise. As much as you might hope your teen will grow out of it, sometimes the opposite occurs and the anxiety becomes a phobia, or a fear that's extreme, severe and persistent. A phobia can be hard to tolerate, both for teens and those around them, especially if whatever is causing the anxiety is hard to avoid (e.g., thunderstorms).

How to Identify the Signs of Anxiety

Parents are usually the first to recognize that their child has an anxiety problem. Not every problem is serious. In fact, many everyday stresses can cause changes in your teen's behavior. But pay special attention to behaviors that include:⁴

- Problems across many settings, such as at school, at home or with peers
- Social withdrawal or fearful behavior toward things your teen normally is not afraid of
- Signs of being upset, such as sadness, tearfulness or outbursts
- Signs of self-destructive behavior, such as head banging or tendency to get hurt often
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Severe mood swings
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Extreme difficulties in concentrating
- Persistent nightmares
- Threats of self-harm or harm to others
- Repeated threats to run away
- Repeated thoughts of death

If problems persist over an extended time or if others involved in your teen's life are concerned, talk to an adolescent psychiatrist or a trained mental health professional.

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Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Click on BeWell to access the section on “Anxiety” where you can find assessments and screeners, self-help programs, Webinars, guides and more. For additional support, you can find a clinician by clicking on the Search for Clinician tool.

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.

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Ways To Help Your Teen

A therapist can diagnose the specific anxiety disorder and create a plan to help your teen get relief. Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), a type of talk therapy, is often used in treating anxiety disorders. Sometimes, but not always, medication is used in treatment.

You can also help your teen develop the skills and confidence to overcome fears and anxieties so they don't turn into phobic reactions by³:

- **Recognizing the fear is real:** As trivial as a fear may seem, it feels real to your teen. Talking about it can make the fear become less powerful. But don't cater to the fear.
- **Teaching coping strategies:** Teach teens relaxation techniques and positive self-statements (e.g., “I can do this” and “I will be OK”) to say to themselves when anxious.
- **Getting a checkup:** See a doctor to make sure there are no physical conditions that could be causing symptoms.
- **Working with a mental health professional:** Ask a doctor, nurse or school counselor for a referral to someone who treats anxiety problems.
- **Keeping your teen healthy:** Encourage him or her to get regular exercise, good nutrition and sleep to provide the body and brain with the right fuel and time to recharge.
- **Trying to stay patient and positive:** It can take time for your teen to feel better and develop the courage to face his or her fears.

1 National Institute of Mental Health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>. Accessed April 2015.

2 National Institute of Mental health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/anxiety-disorders-in-children-and-adolescents/index.shtml>. Accessed April 2015.

3 Anxiety, Fears, and Phobias, <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/anxiety.html#>.

4 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, http://www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/When_To_Seek_Help_For_Your_Child_24.aspx, Accessed April 2015.