

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY



What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal feeling that all people experience. It is our body's natural **alarm system** to warn us of immediate (fear) or anticipated (worries) **danger**. The normal response to anxiety is to escape (**flight**), confront (**fight**), or immobilize (**freeze**).

When Is Anxiety A Problem?

Anxiety becomes a problem when our body's alarm goes off too easily. When this happens, anxiety can become **severe and frequent, occur in multiple settings or situations**, and cause an **inability to cope, function, and enjoy life**. Anxiety is then called a **disorder**. Here are some signs of anxiety disorders:

- > Worry on most days about many things
- > Fear or worry about social situations or performances with avoidance of that situation or performance
- > Fear or worry about a specific object or circumstance with avoidance of that object or circumstance
- > Fear or worry about separation from a loved one
- > Panic attacks

What Causes An Anxiety Disorder?

Anxiety disorders are caused by a difference in the **structure or function** of the parts of the brain that control fear and worry. Vulnerability to anxiety disorders can be **inherited** from members of the family tree. Sometimes there is an **event in the environment** that triggers an anxiety disorder (such as an animal bite, domestic violence, being laughed at when performing, having painful medical procedures).

How Is Anxiety Diagnosed?

Your child's **primary care practitioner (PCP)** will be able to recognize and treat **mild to moderate** forms of anxiety disorders. For more **severe or complicated forms, behavioral health specialists** experienced with children and adolescents are best trained to diagnose and treat the disorder.

How Is Anxiety Treated?

An effective treatment for anxiety disorders is learning **cognitive behavioral skills** to manage the anxiety. These skills can be learned with the use of our **Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Families**, or by working with a behavioral health clinician (therapist), or both. These skills include learning:

- 1 How to **pay attention to situations that make us anxious** and rate the severity of those feelings
- 2 How to use **relaxation techniques** that calm the mind and body
- 3 How to **challenge ways of thinking** that worsen anxiety
- 4 How to **face fears** in a controlled and safe way

If an anxiety disorder is more severe, then **medication** (typically selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs) may be used as an additional treatment. Medication may help us feel more relaxed and in control when working on skills in therapy.

Other Things Kids and Teens Can Do to Help With Anxiety



Keep a healthy lifestyle

Get plenty of sleep, eat a healthy diet, get physical exercise daily, and spend time in nature, with pets, and with people who make you feel calm and comfortable.



Avoid alcohol or drugs

These substances can worsen anxiety by their effect on the brain, and by causing thoughts or behaviors that create more anxiety.



Solve problems

Talk with a trusted person about how to fix or improve things that are making you feel anxious.



Deal with trauma

If something very scary has happened to you, talk to a trusted person about what to do.



Avoid excessive media

Excessive media use can make you feel anxious by causing you to negatively compare yourself to other people. Remember that what you see on social media can be deceiving and not the whole story.



Practice relaxation skills

Skills like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery should be practiced every day and whenever you feel anxious.



Use anxiety productively

Anxiety can be a motivator to be more prepared to perform well; you can think of your anxiety as a message and motivator that what you are working on matters to you.



Things Parents Can Do to Help an Anxious Child or Teen

Validate the feeling

"I understand you are worried. I know it's tough to feel scared".

Encourage mastery

"I know you can overcome your fears if you practice your skills".

Reward brave actions

You can do this verbally through praise - "You did great facing that fear, even though you didn't want to", and/or with small treats or rewards.

Model positive coping

"Let me tell you what I do when I am feeling worried or stressed- it might help you, too".

Manage your own distress

While it's hard to see your child struggle, remind yourself that if your child successfully masters this challenge using the help provided, it will make them better able to face future challenges.

Avoid Common Parenting Traps

- **Avoiding:** Finding ways to help your child avoid what causes anxiety.
- **Rescuing:** Saving your child from doing what they have been avoiding.
- **Over-Protecting:** Not letting your child gain mastery through trial and error.
- **False Reassurance:** Telling your child that nothing scary will ever happen to them. Don't promise them something none of us are guaranteed.
- **Shaming:** Making fun of your child's anxiety or invalidating it.
- **Yelling:** Feeling so frustrated that you yell at your child.

***Safety: Severe panic with physical symptoms is a reason to seek medical attention right away to understand the cause of the symptoms.**

Ask your child or teen's PCP to "prescribe" the Guided Self-Management Toolkit for Anxiety, so that you and your child or teen can begin to learn and practice anxiety management skills at home!

This handout was created by Heather Walter, MD, MPH, Keneisha Sinclair-McBride, PhD, Erica Lee, PhD, and Zoë Judd, MS. © Boston Children's Hospital