

# Strategies for Managing Teenage Anxiety

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Anxiety is a common issue among adolescents, and can show up in various forms and intensities. It isn't always a negative experience. Sometimes, it can be performance-enhancing, acting as a signal from the brain to the body, indicating the need for extra energy to tackle a challenge.

When anxiety becomes a daily struggle, it's essential to reassess the approach. Anxiety often stems from an overestimation of danger or an underestimation of one's ability to cope. Encouraging teenagers to face their fears, can help them realise that the perceived danger is not as threatening as they imagined and that they are capable of handling the situation.

## Recognising the signs

Recognising anxiety in teenagers is crucial for early intervention and support. Here are some signs that may indicate a teen is experiencing anxiety:

- 1. Physical Symptoms:**  
Look for signs such as restlessness, increased heart rate, shaking/jitters, rapid breathing, sweating, trembling, fatigue, change in sleep patterns, fluctuating body temperature.
- 2. Avoidant Behaviour:**  
Teens may start avoiding situations or activities they used to enjoy, or they might procrastinate on tasks due to fear of failure or negative outcomes.
- 3. Changes in Academic Performance:**  
A sudden drop in grades or reluctance to go to school can be a red flag for anxiety.

4.

**Excessive Worrying:**

If a teen seems to be constantly preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, it could be a sign of anxiety.

5.

**Emotional Changes:**

Increased irritability, mood swings, emotional numbness or sudden outbursts of anger can sometimes be linked to underlying anxiety.

6.

**Social Withdrawal:**

Teens might pull away from friends or family and prefer to spend more time alone.

7.

**Changes in Eating Habits:**

Anxiety can lead to changes in appetite, whether it's eating too much or too little.

8.

**Substance Use:**

Some teens might turn to alcohol or drugs as a way to self-medicate and cope with their anxiety.

9.

**Physical Complaints:**

Frequent headaches, stomach aches, feeling sick or other unexplained physical ailments can be manifestations of anxiety.

10.

**Difficulty Concentrating:**

Anxiety can make it hard for teens to focus on tasks, leading to a scattered or disorganized approach to work and activities.

If you notice these signs in a teenager, it's important to approach the topic with empathy and understanding. Encourage open communication and consider seeking support from mental health professionals if needed.

## Key strategies for parents

Parents play a pivotal role in their teenager's mental health journey. Here are some key tips for supporting an anxious child:

1. **Understand the Teenage Brain:** Recognise that heightened emotionality is normal during adolescence. Support teens by listening, validating their feelings, and helping them develop coping strategies.
2. **Embrace Brief Stress/Anxiety:** Anxiety isn't always a negative experience. Short-term stress called 'Eustress' allows us to reach our maximum potential. Stress can improve cognitive function, enhance focus and can be performance-enhancing. Teach teens to reframe good stress as a source of energy for challenges.
3. **Radiate Calm:** However anxious your teen is, it's important for you to remain calm, composed and check their reaction. The way you react has a big part to play in their anxiety levels.
4. **Feel the Fear:** Encourage facing fears rather than avoiding them. This helps teens learn that they can cope and that the perceived danger may not be as bad as they think.
5. **Validate Feelings:** Listen actively and empathise without judgement. Validate their emotions without dismissing them or telling them to calm down.
6. **Avoid Accommodating Anxiety:** Be supportive but avoid taking over the situation, and finding solutions for them as this might enable avoidance behaviours that go on to reinforce their anxiety.

7. Breaking the cycle: Avoidance maintains anxiety. Gradual exposure and empowering teens to face their fears can break the cycle of avoidance. This helps teens learn that they can cope and that the perceived danger may not be as bad as they thought. Teach them to take one small step at a time.
8. The Reassurance Trap: Constant reassurance can reinforce anxiety. Instead, parents can create a "worry space" where concerns can be discussed at a designated time which can reduce the likelihood of rumination. You might suggest, 'let's park the worry for now, and we'll talk about it during our time'.
9. Use Physiological Techniques: Teach teens the physiological sigh – a double inhale followed by a long exhale – to calm the nervous system and reduce stress levels.
10. Enjoy Open Conversations: Encourage teens to express their concerns and work together to find solutions. This collaborative approach empowers them and reinforces their ability to cope. For example, talk to them to understand their social media use and its impact on their well-being, encouraging them to develop their own guidelines for healthy usage.
11. Address Social Media Concerns: Help teens assess how social media affects their well-being and encourage them to set their own boundaries and usage policies.
12. Get Professional Help When Needed: If a teen is self-harming or expressing suicidal thoughts, seek immediate professional assistance.



## Seeking help & useful resources for parents & teens

If you're concerned about your teenager's mental health, it's important to look out for signs that may indicate they need professional help. Then, make an appointment with their GP or healthcare provider and if you think it can help, take some notes along (check that your teen is happy for you to share). Remember to be as objective and detailed as possible in your notes, including patterns, symptoms, behaviours, and questions you might want to ask. This will help the healthcare provider make a more informed evaluation and develop an appropriate treatment plan for your teen.

Be prepared, as sometimes, and depending on the age of the teenager, a GP might suggest speaking to them alone.

### **Therapeutic interventions that work well for anxiety.**

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is as an evidence-based approach to managing anxiety. The speakers recommended self-help books that utilize CBT principles, which can help individuals identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviours, questions you've prepared.

They emphasized that while professional guidance is ideal, especially for severe cases, there are resources available that can provide support in the interim.

### **Exposure Therapy:**

Encourages teens to confront their fears directly. This approach, known as exposure therapy, helps them realise that the danger they perceive is often less severe than they think and that they are capable of coping with it.

Remember, seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and early intervention can make a significant difference in your teen's well-being.



## Seeking help & useful resources for parents & teens

Below is a list of resources that can be beneficial for parents and teenagers dealing with anxiety:

- Books for Understanding and Managing Anxiety:
  - "What to Do When You Worry Too Much" by Dawn Huebner
  - "Outsmarting Worry" by Dawn Huebner
  - "The Incredible Teenage Brain" by Dr. Bettina Hohnen and Dr. Jane Gilmour
  - "Incredible Conversations" by Dr. Bettina Hohnen and Dr. Jane Gilmour (available in October)
- Apps for Mindfulness and Relaxation:
  - Headspace: Offers guided meditations and mindfulness exercises.
  - Calm: Provides meditation, sleep aid, and relaxation tools.
- Techniques for Immediate Relief:
  - Physiological Sigh: A breathing technique involving a double inhale followed by a long exhale to help calm the nervous system.
- Therapeutic Approaches:
  - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): A type of therapy that helps identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors.
  - Exposure Therapy: A technique within CBT that involves facing fears in a controlled and gradual manner.
- Professional Help:
  - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):



## Seeking help & useful resources for parents & teens

### SESSIONS TO WATCH

There are many sessions on the **Let's all Talk Mental Health hub** for you to view on low mood, depression and related issues, including the talks linked below.



Coping with Teenage Anxiety



Back to School Teen Anxiety

This factsheet is for advice purposes. Please remember that we're not offering medical or clinical health services specific to your situation. If you need help, please contact your GP or other healthcare professionals – don't wait to get help if you or your young one needs it.