



# Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety

## What is anxiety?

There are many types of anxiety disorders that affect youth, the most common being Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, and Phobic Disorders. Individuals with anxiety frequently worry about daily problems or worry that something bad will happen, even though there may be little or no reason to think that way. They may seem nervous or tense much of the time. Approximately 6-20 % of children and adolescents have an anxiety disorder. For school-aged children, the most common types of anxiety include separation anxiety, social anxiety, school anxiety, or fearing harm for their parents. During adolescence, performance anxiety, school anxiety, social anxiety, and the fear of not fitting in are the most common.

Anxiety can affect anyone. It can interfere with school performance and even lead to physical problems, such as headaches, chronic pain, digestive problems and later- heart disease. Co-morbid disorders, in particular ADHD and depression, are not uncommon. Anxiety may last months, years, or even a lifetime.

Fears or worries that keep children/teens from participating in normal activities (school, sports, etc.), cause distress, are associated with acting-out behaviors, or develop after a traumatic life event warrant further evaluation and treatment.

## Common signs of anxiety in youth

- Recurring fears and worries about routine parts of everyday life
- Irritability or other changes in behavior
- Avoiding activities, school, or social interactions; fear of separation from a loved one
- Decline in school performance/grades
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle tension
- Difficulty sleeping
- Sweating or shaking
- Fast heartrate
- Feeling short of breath or like fainting
- Chronic physical complaints, such as nausea, stomachaches, headaches, and fatigue
- Substance abuse or other risky behaviors

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of anxiety is unknown. Individuals with anxiety may have increased or decreased amounts of chemicals in the brain that affect thoughts and emotions. Anxiety disorders can also run in families and can be a learned behavior if a child sees a parent that is often worried. High expectations and pressure to succeed may be a contributing factor to adolescent anxiety also.

We live in a sometimes scary and threatening world. There has been an increase in school shootings, terrorist attacks, drills, and school lockdowns. Most recently, we have experienced a global pandemic, where schools were closed, schedules changes, and life changed pretty drastically. Watching or reading the news can be stressful for anyone, particularly youth. Places or activities that previously felt safe, may now be a source of fear. Other stressful events such as serious illness, bullying, divorce of parents, or family conflict may also contribute to anxiety.

Today's youth are constantly connected on social media. Teens often compare their life and social connections to what others are doing and posting on social media. Cyber bullying can also occur. An adolescent's self-esteem and worldview are heavily influenced by their social media life.

Anxiety is also more common in children who have a poor diet, lack of exercise, or have few friends/family, or enjoyable activities.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your child's healthcare or mental health provider will get an in-depth history of your child's symptoms, medical and family history, and medication list. They will screen for medical illnesses, medication issues, or substance abuse problems that could



be contributing to the symptoms. Your healthcare provider may refer you to a mental health therapist for further testing and evaluation.

#### **What Can I do to help?**

Support your child and allow him/her to share feelings they find scary or anxious, but do not force the issue if they do not feel like sharing their thoughts. Avoid criticizing your child for their fears. Let them know they are loved, safe, and protected.

Be mindful of the expectations you set for your child/teen. It is important to help your child reach his/her potential, but ensure that expectations are realistic. It is also important to remember that kids and teens need time to relax, play, and be with friends. This is important for both their physical and mental health. It is important to remember there is more to life than just achievement.

Talk with your child about social media use and the effects it can have. Set limits on social media use.

Help your child to learn to manage stress. Help them view their problems in a more positive way and break them down into smaller, more achievable steps. You can gradually expose them to the feared object or experience to help them master their fear, but avoid “tricking them” into an exposure. It is also appropriate to offer small rewards for displaying brave behaviors to increase their success in tolerating the situation in the future. Teach them ways to manage stress, including deep breathing or other relaxation techniques. Refrain from allowing your child to avoid situations or expectations that cause anxiety (that are developmentally appropriate). Avoiding these situations will only worsen their anxiety.

Ensure your child is eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and getting regular exercise. Limit screen time and encourage them to partake in fun activities with family and friends. Teach your child to avoid drugs, alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine.

Stay in touch with your child’s school and other caregivers and encourage them to share information about symptoms your child may experience. Contact your child’s therapist or healthcare provider if you have concerns or feel like your child’s symptoms are worsening.

Seek emergency care if your child/teenager has thoughts of suicide, harming themselves, or harming others. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.

#### **What are the common treatments for anxiety?**

There are a number of different treatments for anxiety, including counseling/therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and medication. Treatment can also include working with the child’s school and/or having the child involved with peer support or self-help groups. CBT helps patients identify and change thoughts and behaviors that contribute to anxiety. It can help your child better manage stress and can improve self-esteem. CBT is often offered by counselors and therapists. It can also be helpful to practice relaxation techniques, this may include deep breathing, yoga, exercising, reading, or any activity that your child finds enjoyable and relaxing.

There are no FDA approved medications for the treatment of anxiety disorders in children. However, selective-serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the medications most frequently used in practice. Your child’s healthcare provider will work with you in deciding when and if medication is appropriate and discuss available options.

#### **For additional help:**

- National Institute of Mental Health  
866-615-6464  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>
- Mental Health America  
800-826-3632  
<https://www.mhanational.org/>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)