

# Support for Teenagers with Anxiety



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looking after you always

# Support for Teenagers with Anxiety

Fear & anxiety are normal feelings we all experience from time to time. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, fear relates to a known or understood threat, whereas anxiety is based on an unknown, expected or poorly defined threat.

Anxiety can actually be helpful; it is considered to be adaptive because it protects us from potential danger and in our evolutionary history it helped our species survive. Even today, if we imagine ourselves crossing a road and suddenly noticing a car driving towards us, anxiety helps us to escape that threat. Anxiety can become a problem when it becomes overwhelming, when it causes us distress and stops us from doing things we would like to do.

## What is anxiety?

The brain reacts to **perceptions of threat** with an anxiety response. There is a physical response in the body that prepares us to react to the situation. This is often called the “fight, flight, freeze” response. Physically, our bodies release chemicals to enable us to respond to the threat. We might notice some physical sensations such as:

- Heart beating faster
- Breathing rate increase
- Dry mouth
- Increased perspiration

Our bodies are preparing us to respond and keep us safe. **The body, however, cannot distinguish between a threat that is real and a threat that is perceived** e.g. when we get fired up with anxiety during a scary film sequence, but we can cognitively override this by telling ourselves that it is only a film.

What if questions can be interpreted as a “threat”. If you imagine yourself going into an exam, you’ve

done a lot of preparation and feel pretty ready for it. But coming up to exam time you might start thinking “what if I can’t remember anything I’ve learned”, “what if I fail this exam”, “what if...” and the pattern continues.

“What if” questions need answering. We sometimes do not have the answers to the “what ifs” of life and what does come to mind can frighten us. Try to answer the “what if” questions with “I can handle this”, or you might try to imagine yourself talking to a friend who was in our situation, often we are kinder and more understanding to the people we care about in our lives.

Anxiety can become habitual; it can become a vicious cycle in which we can become anxious more regularly. For example, if we get anxious in a situation and leave that situation we can be left believing “if I hadn’t got out of there, what I was afraid of might have happened”. The next time we’re faced with that situation, we understandably may want to avoid it. Unfortunately, avoidance can strengthen our anxiety.

**The Goal is  
not to limit  
anxiety.**

**The goal is to  
manage it.**



## Tips for dealing with anxiety

1. Get good sleep
2. Eat a **balanced diet**
3. Get **regular exercise** - 30 minutes exercise 5 times a week
4. **Mindfulness** - prayer or meditation can help us deal with anxiety by quietening our mind.
5. **Practice breathing** (focussed breathing to calm your limbic response): breath in through the nose (counting to 4) and then slowly exhale through the mouth (counting to 6). Practice this for 5 minutes every day and then use it when you are feeling stressed.
6. **We can handle this.** There is nothing that can be thrown at us in this life that we can't handle. It may be painful or unpleasant, but you can handle it. **What would happen to your fear and anxiety if you could believe this?**
7. **Perspective:** Sometimes things could be better. Sometimes things could be worse. This perspective helps us think positively.
8. **Try to avoid avoidance** - It is really understandable to avoid situations that brings up anxiety, but often avoiding these situations strengthens the anxiety. If it feels possible, try to face the fear rather than avoid it. Letting people we trust know what is going on can help as they can support us tackling our fears.
9. **Talk to someone we trust.** If we are finding it difficult to manage our anxiety, talking to someone we trust can help. Sometimes just talking things through helps in itself, and another person can help us develop some perspective if we're finding that difficult.

## The Basics

### Parent Child Relationships

Relationship with trusted adults have a significant impact on the teenager's wellbeing and potential. Good communication can ensure that the teen has someone to support them. Parents, older siblings, family members, teachers are all here to support us.

### Eating well: Buy well, eat well, be well

A balanced diet is essential for the mental wellbeing of all members of society, but while the teenager is growing this is particularly important.



### Sleeping

Teenagers need a lot of sleep. Getting to bed by 10/10:30pm is essential. Phone free zone - this is key for good sleep habits. The phone should be outside the teenager's bedroom. The whole family need to give good example here.

### Problem-solving Skills

Parents who are able to model behaviour, who can show us how they can solve problems without anxiety or show us how they can solve problems and deal with their own anxiety, are able to provide an 'optimal parental environment'.

### Know you are not alone

There are times in which many of us will find anxiety difficult to deal with, around 1 in 10 people at any time. If you find yourself trying to deal with it but you are still struggling, talk to someone you trust. There is lots of help available and sometimes we all need a little extra support.

## Reference

### Tips for Anxiety Dr Paul Jenkins

Search "Self Care Strategies For Anxiety Dr Paul Jenkins" in YouTube.

