

YOUR TEEN AND ANXIETY

FROM SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS TO TOOLS AND RESOURCES
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO GUIDE YOUR TEEN THROUGH THEIR ANXIETY



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YOUR GUIDE TO TEENAGE (ADOLESCENT) ANXIETY

Anxiety sucks. It sucks for adults...but it's even worse for teens and tweens. They have a much more difficult time realizing the problem and getting help for it. That's why it's so important as a parent to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms and know what to do to help. I hope this Guide helps you and your child in some small way.

Ann Coleman

Disclaimer: I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I say in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child's mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child's pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder, (whether or not they have any of the signs or symptoms listed in this Guide.) If they display signs that they may want to harm themselves, please call 988 for assistance or 911 for an imminent threat.

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While a little nervousness can signal your teen to give more attention to something like studying for a test or practicing more for a big game, an anxiety disorder takes “nervousness” to a whole new level. If they display any of these signs and symptoms, which are impacting their daily life, please seek help from your pediatrician or a mental health professional.

Signs and Symptoms of Teenage Anxiety

They may:

- say they feel “jittery” or “jumpy” or “have butterflies” all the time
- talk about feeling worried but not be able to pinpoint why
- seem to excessively worry about certain things
- seem to always be in a “state of alert”-like something is about to happen
- complain about being stressed on a regular basis
- appear extremely restless or “bored”
- suddenly appear really shy and withdrawn
- begin biting their fingernails or cuticles all the time
- appear extremely fearful of something seemingly irrational
- attempt to stay home from school or refuse to go to school
- not want to participate in their usual extracurriculars
- seem to have a fear of uncertainty in any situation and try to avoid it
- display extreme self-doubt and lack of self-esteem
- be overly conforming to their peers
- appear extremely perfectionistic

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Signs and Symptoms of Teenage Anxiety (continued from pg. 1)

They may:

- begin to use drugs and alcohol
- begin to perform self-soothing “rituals” to prevent feelings of anxiety
- suddenly have declining grades (procrastination, lack of focus)
- change their sleep pattern
- begin using food as a coping mechanism (eat too much, too little, etc.)
- appear sad or depressed (anxiety and depression often go together)
- have unexplained physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- experience dissociation – feeling like they “aren’t in their body”
- appear to be angry all the time
- begin to talk about suicide or death or “not wanting to be here anymore”
(immediately call 988 for support or 911 for an imminent threat)
- have anxiety attacks (over something specific) or even panic attacks (which come out of nowhere) – they might complain of tightness in their chest, breathing issues, dizziness, intense fear, rapid heartbeat, saying they feel “like they’re dying” or the “world is ending” (if this happens, get them to their pediatrician to rule out other issues)

Resources: [AACAP](#) and [Child Mind Institute](#)

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How to Explain Anxiety to Your Teen

What purpose does "nervousness" serve?

■ Fear, stress, nervousness, worry (whatever you want to call it) has a purpose. That purpose is to call their attention to something that needs to be addressed in some way.

For example: if they're nervous about a test, it means they need to study for it; if they're nervous about baseball tryouts they may need to practice more; if they're nervous about walking down a street at night, they may need to avoid that street, etc.

■ But when these feelings of fear, stress, nervousness, worry happen too often or they feel too strong, it can start interfering with your daily life – that's when it's called an anxiety disorder.

How Does Anxiety Happen in the Teenage brain?

■ There's a part of the brain called the amygdala that acts as our threat detector – kind of like the brain's security guard.

Its job is to sound an alarm in the brain and body when it detects a threat through one of the 5 senses (e.g., if you see a snake, hear someone scream, smell smoke, etc.)

The amygdala's alarm triggers chemicals to be released in the brain and body causing an automatic and unconscious response called fight or flight (it's important to understand this response is not on purpose).

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How to Explain Anxiety to Your Teen

How Does Anxiety Happen in the Teenage brain? (cont. from pg. 3)

When we go into fight or flight mode, our heart races, it makes our breath shallow, blood rush to our hands, we might sweat or tremble, etc.

This fight or flight response is meant to protect us from the threat – everything going on in our body helps us run away quicker from whatever is threatening us or helps us fight it off.

This response was extremely useful back in prehistoric times when humans lived in the wild with animals that could eat them or had to fight off roaming bands of warriors with clubs – these were physically threatening situations that made the fight or flight response absolutely necessary – that’s why our brain evolved this way.

But most parts of the world have evolved where we don’t have to live in the wild and physically fight people all the time. The problem is that the human amygdala doesn’t know it – it hasn’t as fast as the world has.

So, even though we don’t have to fight off wild animals and warring tribes like our ancient ancestors, the amygdala still sees “threats” all around us – that’s always been its job and that’s all it knows.

That means, in both adults and teens, the amygdala alarm can go off by mistake sending us into fight or flight response for no reason.

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How to Explain Anxiety to Your Teen

How Does Anxiety Happen in the Teenage brain? (cont. from pg. 4)

When this happens, and there's nothing to run from and nothing to actually fight off, those chemicals coursing through our brain and body have to be cancelled because if they're not, we have all those feelings in our body (heart racing, etc.) and nothing to do with it.

But here's the difference between what usually happens in an adult's brain and what happens in a teenager's brain:

- A teenager's amygdala is super jumpy and makes many more mistakes than an adult's – it thinks things are threatening that are nowhere near threatening, and
- The part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for calming the fight or flight response when the amygdala made a mistake, is still being programmed in the adolescent brain until around age 25 and is not yet good at doing this job.

So, *through no fault of their own*, teenagers walk around with an amygdala that can send them into fight or flight mode for no good reason *and* without much of a way to calm down without help from someone or skills they've been taught.

When the teen's amygdala makes too many mistakes and sends a teenager into fight or flight mode too often, the teenager can develop an anxiety disorder.

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How to Explain Anxiety to Your Teen

How Negative Self-Talk Causes Anxiety in Teens

Thoughts can also trigger the amygdala's alarm and send a teenager into fight or flight mode.

We all have an inner voice than sort of chatters at us all day every day. We don't really acknowledge it much – it happens pretty much outside of our awareness. But this little voice can cause a lot of unpleasant emotions – even if we don't realize that's what's causing them

For example, if we see a friend, but they don't even look at us or say hello, we might tell ourselves or assume it's because they're mad at us or maybe because they think they're better than we are. Those are negative thoughts or negative self-talk.

Because of how a teenager's brain is being programmed, they tend to make more negative assumptions than adults do. They have more negative thoughts, use more negative self-talk.

A lot of that negative self-talk is about how they look or how they fit in or appear to their peers. So, telling themselves “No one likes me” can trigger the amygdala's alarm and cause nervousness, anger, etc.

It's important for teens to work on negative self-talk. Therapy is great for this but there are also books and workbooks, group counseling, online programs that can also help.

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How to Explain Anxiety to Your Teen

Situations That Can Trigger a Teen's Amygdala

- thinking a negative thought
- getting a certain "look" from a sibling
- someone not returning a Snap
- a comment on social media or a text
- a parent asking to do a chore
- a parent saying "no" to a request
- a parent saying anything at all!
- a bad grade
- a test coming up
- a teacher's remark in front of the class
- a stain on a favorite shirt
- hair that won't cooperate
- a sibling entering their bedroom
- any comment by a parent
- misplacing something
- running late
- a class presentation
- a homework assignment
- and on and on and on – the amygdala can be a real pain in the butt!

It's extremely important for your teen to understand this is what's happening in their brain and body.



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Tools to Help Your Teen During Anxious Moments

Breathing Exercises

Breathing helps counteract the fight or flight response in the brain and body. Teach them to breathe deep from the diaphragm instead of shallow from the chest – and in through the nose and out through the mouth.

The exercises can be done in any position and with eyes closed or open. Help your teen figure out what's most comfortable for them.

- “Square” Breathing – breathe in for the count of 4, hold for 4, out for 4 and hold for 4 (repeat as long as it takes for them to feel calmer)
- “Triangle” Breathing – breathe in for the count of 3, hold for 3, out for 3 and repeat

You could even add imagery, like asking them to close their eyes and imagine they're smelling a flower – breathing in for the count of 3 and out for the count of 4. Use your imagination or check out this resource from [women's health](#) (they work for boys too!)

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Tools to Help Your Teen During Anxious Moments

Grounding Exercises

Grounding is a way of bringing someone back to the present moment and stop any anxious thoughts from bouncing around in the brain and keeping the fight or flight response going.

5-4-3-2-1 is a simple technique to break the fight or flight cycle. First start with a couple of breaths in and out.

Then have them name:

- 5 things they can see
- 4 things they can feel
- 3 things they can hear
- 2 things they can smell
- 1 thing they can taste (If your teen gets anxious a lot – keep their favorite sour candy or gum on hand for this exercise.)

Tell them to keep repeating the exercise from the beginning, naming different things each time – until they feel calmer.

If they don't feel like they can remember what to do, make them a note to keep in their purse or wallet and even post it in the house a few places so they can get the hang of it.

Check out these additional grounding techniques on [healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com)



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Tools to Help Your Teen During Anxious Moments

Mindfulness

As I've written before, mindfulness is one of the single best ways to reduce stress and become more aware of and better at regulating our emotions. It's been a miracle in my own life.

If you're interested in a bit of the neuroscience and how mindfulness meditation positively impacts the brain and mental health, have a look at [this video](#) from University of California TV from April 2020.

Check out these resources on mindfulness and see if you can get your teen interested:

If you want to learn more about mindfulness, the science behind it, the benefits and access free guided meditations, the [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#) has it all covered. You can download their app for guided meditations in the app store (search "UCLA mindful") or access them at the website on your PC. I highly recommend the website to learn everything you need to know about mindfulness and the app is excellent!

UC San Diego also has a [Center for Mindfulness](#) and the website has guided audio and video and even free live practice sessions.

[InsightTimer](#) is a website with tons of good information and free videos regarding mindfulness, meditation, yoga, etc. Their app of the same name is highly regarded and apparently has 100,000 free meditations.



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Tools to Help Your Teen During Anxious Moments

Mindfulness (continued from pg 10)

Specifically teen-related resources for teen (I am not an affiliate):

[A 4-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Group for Teens Starts 10-4-22](#)

[Stressed Teens website](#) with lots of wonderful resources for teens and parents!

[Mindful Moments Video Series](#) (by a teen facilitator certified by “Stressed Teens”)

[Teen Breathe Magazine](#)

[Mindfulness Workbook for Teens](#)

[The Mindful Teen](#)

[Live Online Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens Courses](#)



Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

If you enjoyed this Guide, you may be interested in the Speaking of Teens PARENT CAMP to help you strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the PARENT CAMP membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



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