

Facing Anxiety

Natalie Haultain, Psy. D.
Licensed Psychologist
Children's Mercy-Kansas City

Up to one in four teens suffers with an anxiety disorder, making these disorders the most prevalent psychological problem affecting adolescents today. Having *some* anxiety is normal and helps to keep us safe and productive in society. Youth with anxiety disorders, on the other hand, experience anxiety symptoms that make it unusually difficult or impossible to engage in normal, age-appropriate activities. Some of them experience anxiety only in specific situations (e.g., test anxiety), whereas others are anxious about a number of situations and events (e.g., a teen with generalized anxiety may worry about germs, storms, spending the night away from home, *and* getting bad grades). Anxiety can manifest in myriad ways, including physiological symptoms (shaking, crying, hyperventilating), escaping the situation, repetitively seeking reassurance, shutting down, arguing or protesting, and staying at home.

While anxiety symptoms often wax and wane across time, teens with anxiety disorders rarely just grow out of it. Fortunately, however, they often experience significant improvement from psychotherapy. If you are seeking help for your teen dealing with anxiety, we recommend that you consult with a therapist who uses a cognitive-behavioral approach, because scientific studies have shown that this style of therapy is effective in reducing impairment associated with anxiety in children and adolescents. Ideally, the therapist will involve you, the parents, in your son's treatment in order to train you to be an effective "coach." Following are some ways you can help:

- Gradually reduce your own participation in your son's anxious habits. Allowing him to avoid crowded locations, avoid talking to a teacher when needed, and allowing him to check weather apps multiple times per day make a teen's anxiety worse in the long run by permitting avoidance.
- Avoid providing reassurance, which only makes your child more dependent on you in the future. Instead, help him to recognize that he's experiencing anxiety which is not based on a legitimate threat.
- Help your son to identify a more logical thought to replace the one driving his fear (e.g., "I can't predict the future," "the worst case scenario is highly unlikely to happen") and prompt him to reassure *himself* using this phrase.
- Help your teen identify avoidance behaviors (e.g., wearing headphones so that others won't talk to him) and have him try to eliminate one each week.
- Break down each feared situation into a few easier component steps, and have him practice the easiest step, followed by the next-easiest, and so-on. For example, a teen who is afraid of driving a car might start addressing this fear by sitting behind the wheel without turning the car on and remaining there until his anxiety subsides, then starting the car but not moving it, then practicing driving in an empty parking lot for progressively longer periods of time, then driving on a small neighborhood road, then taking a slightly busier route, and so on.

Depending on the severity of your son's challenges, his therapist may also recommend that you consult with your pediatrician to determine whether medication could also aid in treatment. Research suggests that many selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are effective and safe for youth with anxiety disorders.

For more information about cognitive-behavioral therapy for youth with anxiety, you may wish to consult the following resources:

- <http://youth.anxietybc.com/>
- The Anxiety Workbook for Teens by Lisa Schab, LCSW (2008)
- The Anxiety Survival Guide for Teens by Jennifer Shannon, LMFT (2015)

- Anxiety Relief For Kids: On-The-Spot Strategies to Help Your Child Overcome Worry, Panic & Avoidance by Bridget Flynn Walker, Ph. D. (2017)