



Talking to Teens About Anxiety

A Supplement to the 2018
Children's Mental Health Report



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Everyone talks about how “stressed” they are, but getting teens to open up about serious anxiety isn’t easy. Sometimes just finding the time to talk to them is hard. Teens aren’t usually enthusiastic about talking to their parents — particularly about uncomfortable topics. And it can be really, really hard for them to admit they’re having difficulty with their feelings. But it’s so important to let them know how to tell when garden-variety worries have morphed into an anxiety disorder, and when they should ask for help.

In the following guide, we offer basic tips on talking with your teen about tough subjects. Following that you’ll find suggestions for using our 2018 Children’s Mental Health Report (childmind.org/2018report) to have an open and ongoing conversation about normal fears, how persistent anxiety can develop into a disorder and why it’s good to get treatment early.

Here are some tips for starting a conversation and building rapport with your teen:

1. **Start by being curious.** Ask your teen how they are doing and be interested in the response — without judgment. You might start with, “I’ve noticed that...”
2. **Show trust.** Teens want to be taken seriously. Look for ways to show you trust them.
3. **Don’t be a dictator.** Offer ideas but don’t try to solve all your child’s problems. This is about collaboration.
4. **Give praise.** Parents praise younger children, but teens need the self-esteem boost, too.
5. **Control your emotions.** Teens are less able to think critically when they’re emotional. If you stay calm, they’re more likely to follow your lead.

Inside, you’ll find suggestions on how to talk about a variety of important subjects — like the intersection of social media and social anxiety, how anxiety is a risk factor for serious issues like depression and substance use, and the difference between an anxious temperament and an anxiety disorder. We suggest a fact from the Children’s Mental Health Report to start with, although you could take a look and choose another! Then we provide resources from childmind.org that you can look at and share with your teen.

Finally, we provide a list of discussion prompts and questions to get the conversation started. You do not have to be an expert to talk to your kids about these issues — just be a good listener, and don’t be afraid to look up the facts together with your child. The report is a resource you can read together.

Anxiety: Under the Radar

FACT

As little as 1% of youth with anxiety seek treatment in the year their symptoms begin, and most anxiety symptoms go untreated for years.

RESOURCES

How Anxiety Leads to Disruptive Behavior
childmind.org/article/how-anxiety-leads-to-disruptive-behavior

Teachers Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom
childmind.org/guide/a-teachers-guide-to-anxiety-in-the-classroom

TALK ABOUT IT

- ⇒ Anxiety disorders are the most common disorders of childhood and adolescence, affecting 30% of young people at some point before the age of 18.

- ⇒ Anxiety disorders are some of the easiest mental health disorders to treat effectively.

- ⇒ Yet anxiety is described as the “invisible condition” because symptoms are so often ignored, or the “great masquerader,” as symptoms are misattributed to other issues.

- ⇒ Untreated anxiety disorders increase the risk for depression, school failure, substance abuse and difficulty transitioning to adulthood.

- ⇒ Types of anxiety disorders include separation anxiety, social anxiety, selective mutism, generalized anxiety, specific phobias and panic disorder.

Questions for your teen:

- Do you know what the symptoms of anxiety are?
They include physical problems like stomachaches or trouble sleeping, school avoidance and fear of being away from parents, trouble focusing and outbursts.
- Do you feel anxious sometimes? Does it get in the way of doing what you want or need to do?
- Do you feel comfortable talking about these feelings with your friends or teachers? With your doctor? With your parents?
- Do you think it's OK to admit you are scared or uncomfortable?
- Do you know what to do or say if you think you (or a friend) might need help?

Social Anxiety Disorder

FACT

Around 50% of teens either consider themselves “shy” or are described as shy by their parents; 12% of those shy adolescents may actually meet criteria for a treatable social anxiety disorder

RESOURCES

What Is Social Anxiety?

childmind.org/article/what-is-social-anxiety

Tips for Managing Social Anxiety

childmind.org/article/tips-managing-social-anxiety

TALK ABOUT IT

⇒ According to a study of more than 10,000 teens, 9% of US adolescents will meet criteria for social anxiety disorder at some point before they turn 18 years old.

⇒ Social anxiety disorder is diagnosed when children are excessively self-conscious, so much so that it is impairing in everyday life.

⇒ Anxiety is the most frequent concern (48%) among college students seeking mental health services.

⇒ Just as normal anxieties or fears are appropriate at different times in development, anxiety disorders begin at different times. Social anxiety presents later (the average age of onset is 14) when peer relationships become more important.

⇒ In social anxiety disorder, earlier age of onset is linked to more severe anxiety later.

Questions for your teen:

- Do you ever feel excessively worried that you will say or do something that will be humiliating?
- Do you ever avoid doing a presentation or group project because you worry what others will think about you or your performance?
- Has being anxious about how your friends or peers might react ever caused you to do something you were not comfortable doing?
- Do you think you are shy? Do you see a difference in your friends between being shy and being so anxious that it's a problem?

Social Media Risks and Rewards

FACT

Higher emotional investment in social media has been strongly correlated with higher levels of anxiety.

RESOURCES

How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers
childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers

Managing Social Media Stress With Mindfulness
childmind.org/article/social-media-stress-mindfulness

TALK ABOUT IT

- ⇒ 95% of teens have a smartphone and 45% are online “almost constantly” in 2018 compared to 24% in 2014.

- ⇒ 24% of teens surveyed said they thought social media had a negative impact, and the biggest reason was bullying/rumor spreading.

- ⇒ 31% of teens surveyed said social media has a mostly positive effect, and the biggest reason was connecting with friends and family.

- ⇒ Teens who are highly social offline tend to benefit from social media more.

- ⇒ But for teens with anxiety or depression, social media engagements (likes, comments, views) may be overwhelmingly important.

- ⇒ Social media is a huge part our lives now, but it can also have a negative effect on self-esteem and mood.

Questions for your teen:

- Do you think when your friends post on social media they are posting about how their lives really are or how they want them to appear?
- Do you feel pressure to look or act a certain way because of other people’s profiles?
- Do you feel your online life is balanced with face-to-face interactions?
- How can we set healthy limits for the amount of time you spend on social media?
- Do you know what to do if you or a friend is the victim of cyber-bullying?

Anxiety and Substance Abuse

FACT

Anxiety disorders are linked to a two-fold increase in risk for substance use disorder.

RESOURCES

How to Talk to Teens About Alcohol or Drug Use
childmind.org/article/talk-teenager-substance-use-abuse

When Teenagers Self-Medicate
childmind.org/article/teenagers-self-medicate

TALK ABOUT IT

⇒ A study following youth over 14 years found that anxiety disorders are linked to a twofold increase in risk for substance use disorder.

⇒ If you start using drugs even infrequently, you are more likely to develop a habit, increasing your risk for later addiction.

⇒ Marijuana use may even accelerate the onset of other serious illnesses, like psychosis.

Questions for your teen:

- What do you think are the most common substances teen struggle with?
- Do your friends use alcohol or drugs?
What about vaping?
- Does this information change the way you think about using drugs?
- What can you do if your friends are drinking or using drugs and you don't think it's a good idea?
- Does knowing that anxiety can increase the risk for substance abuse make you concerned about yourself or your friends?

Anxiety Disorders, Depression and Suicidality

FACT

When adolescents have depression alongside social anxiety, it is strongly associated with more suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and more depressive symptoms.

RESOURCES

Preparing for College Emotionally, Not Just Academically
childmind.org/article/preparing-for-college-emotionally-not-just-academically

Mood Disorders in Teenage Girls
childmind.org/article/mood-disorders-and-teenage-girls

#MyYoungerSelf: Rachel Bloom Talks About Depression and Anxiety
childmind.org/blog/rachel-bloom-myyoungerself

TALK ABOUT IT

- ⇒ Social anxiety disorder has the highest correlation to later depression: twice that of other anxiety disorders and three times that of youth with no anxiety.

- ⇒ When adolescents have depression alongside social anxiety, it is strongly associated with suicidal ideation and attempts.

- ⇒ When severe social anxiety keeps you from doing things you like to do, and everyone else is doing, it can trigger depression.

Questions for your teen:

- What would you do if a friend told you she was suffering a lot from anxiety?
- Do you think it's possible that you could be so anxious you become depressed?
- Is suicide something that seems very far away from your friend group?
- What you you do if you knew a friend was hurting herself?

Treatments That Work

FACT

A combination of cognitive behavioral therapy and antidepressant medication was effective in 81% of youth with separation anxiety, generalized anxiety and social anxiety disorder.

RESOURCES

Behavioral Treatment for Kids With Anxiety
childmind.org/article/behavioral-treatment-kids-anxiety

Best Medications for Kids With Anxiety
childmind.org/article/best-medications-for-kids-anxiety

TALK ABOUT IT

⇒ Most kids with anxiety disorders don't get treatment, which is unfortunate since cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to be highly effective in combination with medication.

⇒ Exposure and response prevention (ERP) is a kind of CBT that works by helping children address their anxiety and fears in incremental steps in a safe, controlled environment.

⇒ A long-term follow-up study found sustained benefit from CBT treatment 8 to 13 years later.

⇒ The clear medications of choice for treating anxiety in children are serotonin reuptake inhibitors, the "antidepressants." Study after study shows that they can be extremely effective.

⇒ Benzodiazepines are short-term medications that can be extremely effective in reducing intense anxiety in youth, but there is little data supporting their long-term usefulness, and they have a risk of dependence and addiction.

⇒ Mindfulness meditation is increasingly being introduced in a variety of situations (school, clinical mental health) to help young people manage stress, emotionality and problem behaviors, often as part of a treatment called dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT).

Questions for your teen:

- Are you comfortable talking to your parents or your doctor about treatment for anxiety?
- Did you know there is treatment for anxiety that isn't necessarily medication?
- Did you know exposure therapy can teach you ways to feel more comfortable doing things that are hard or anxiety provoking?
- Do you think you understand when anxiety becomes something that you should ask for help about?
- Are you worried that there is a stigma around getting help for anxiety?