Anxiety Disorders in Teens

What Are Anxiety Disorders?

A small amount of anxiety is normal for teens. Teens with anxiety disorders have too much fear and worry that lasts a long time. They may have problems at school or socially because of it.

Some teens:

- Have aches and pains, like headaches or stomachaches
- Feel restless, tired or tense
- Have trouble focusing or sleeping
- Do not feel confident and are easily upset

What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

There are many reasons why a teen may have anxiety. It can run in families and start at birth. It can also start after exposure to stressful events and problems in school or with friends.

What Are the Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders?

A teen with anxiety may:

- Worry a lot about many things, and not be able to control the worry
- Be afraid of making mistakes and being embarrassed
- Avoid places or activities that make them nervous, like being in crowds or speaking in school
- Have a hard time doing schoolwork and be slow to finish work
- Have unwanted thoughts often
- Repeat specific behaviors in response to having worries
- Feel very scared of specific things like animals, heights, being in an airplane or seeing blood

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How Are Anxiety Disorders Treated?

Anxiety will not get better without help. There are two ways to treat anxiety: psychotherapy and medicine.

Treatment for mild anxiety starts with psychotherapy**.** In psychotherapy a health care provider helps your child understand how they think and feel about things.

Teens will learn to:

- Replace their anxious thoughts with helpful ones
- Control their anxious feelings with coping skills

Your teen will need to practice what they learn outside of sessions. This is an important part of therapy. Psychotherapy is usually done by psychologists, mental health counselors and clinical social workers.

Medicine may be prescribed to help your child's anxiety. Medicine can help decrease feelings of anxiety. For moderate to severe anxiety, treatment that uses psychotherapy and medicine together may be most helpful.

How Can I Help My Teen's Anxiety?

- Encourage relaxation activities such as deep breathing, meditation and yoga. These should be practiced regularly.
- Help your teen notice physical feelings with their anxiety (stomachaches, headaches, feelings of restlessness). Make sure they use their relaxation strategies at those times.
- Help your teen get enough sleep and exercise and eat a nutritious diet.
- Listen carefully and respectfully when your teen is willing to talk about their anxiety. Do not tell them not to worry. Your teen's worries are very real to them.
- Encourage your teen to practice positive self-talk. Help them turn negative thoughts about themselves into positive ones.
- Talk with your teen's school to let teachers know how they can help your teen practice using their coping skills. If anxiety causes problems for your teen at school a special plan called a 504 Plan or IEP may be needed. These plans can offer accommodations like extra time on tests, reduced workload, help with organization and adjustments to presentations.

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