

# What You Can Do to Help Your Teen With Anxiety

Anxiety is categorized by persistent worry or fear regarding lack of control over external threats (events or situations) or internal threats (health or thoughts). These threats can be realistic, such as an upcoming test or game, or unrealistic, such as a comet striking Earth or an alien abduction. Negative thoughts increase when an individual is experiencing anxiety. These thoughts could be expressed through comments as straightforward as “I hate my hair” or as complex as “I’m scared when I go to school.”

Anxiety affects 15% to 20% of students and often begins as early as first grade. If anxiety is untreated, it can result in long-term health complications.

The purpose of this resource is to help you identify the signs of anxiety and to provide strategies and resources that can help children struggling with anxiety.

## What Does Anxiety Look Like?

Anxiety can look very different from person to person, which can make it challenging to identify. However, the following characteristics are common:

- **Distraction:** People with anxiety may have trouble focusing or concentrating.
- **Unusually good behavior:** To distract themselves and others from their anxious thoughts, students may act more behaved than normal. In extreme cases, this can lead to “perfectionism,” which is setting unrealistically high expectations for oneself.
- **Physical reactions:** Anxiety can cause students to cry, breathe heavily or hyperventilate, shake, fidget excessively, use stumbling speech, or shout.

## What Does Anxiety Feel Like?

The brain of students experiencing anxiety goes into overdrive. Anxiety affects decision-making and makes all forms of thinking difficult.

Anxiety can make a person feel physically different. Anxiety can speed up students’ heart rate, affect their speaking, or cause excessive sweating, nausea, or shaking.

Students can experience the effects of anxiety at school, at home, or in social situations.

# I Think My Student Has Anxiety. What Can I Do?



## Strategies to Try at Home

### Normalize Anxiety

- Discuss your fears and how you deal with them. This conversation shows your student that fears are normal and can be addressed.
- Validate anxious thoughts at home. For example, say “I used to be nervous about that, too.”
- If your student mentions what you consider to be an irrational thought, talk through the thought together. Do not say that the thought is ridiculous.

### Work Through Anxious Moments

- Go on a quick walk with your student.
- Encourage your student to have a snack break or music break.
- Do breathing exercises with your student. For example, count to five while inhaling and again when exhaling.

### Use Validating Language

When listening to your student’s experiences with anxiety, use phrases like “I hear you,” “It sounds like you’re dealing with a lot,” or “That sounds really challenging.”

### Reduce Anxiety as a Family

- Try some family activities like exercising, having game or movie nights, or listening to calm music.
- Create a family schedule to increase the predictability of activities.

## Strategies for School

### Talk to the School’s Mental Health Provider

Set up a one-on-one meeting with the school’s social worker or psychologist or share questions and concerns via email or phone. This professional can provide helpful next steps that you can do at home or referrals for additional help.

### Talk to Your Student’s Doctor

Your student’s doctor can recommend ideas to try at home and options for additional support, such as therapists, peer groups, or activities.

If your student is exhibiting signs of unsafe behavior, toward themselves or others, text “HOME” to 741741 to connect with a crisis counselor.

For more information, visit the Crisis Text Line website at [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)

## Resources

For more information on anxiety, consult the following resources.

### For Teens

- To Write Love on Her Arms  
<https://twloha.com>
- Teen Line  
<https://teenlineonline.org>

### For Parents

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html](http://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html)