**COPING WITH ANXIETY**

*Anxiety is common among teenagers. Sometimes normally happy teenagers will become anxious or fearful about something for a day or two and then they will be back to normal without any need for parents to take any action. However, some teenagers seem to suffer from more intense and frequent feelings of anxiety that prevent them from doing things. This tip sheet gives you some suggestions on how to help your teenager cope with and reduce their fears.*

**WHAT IS ANXIETY?**

Anxiety is a vague, unpleasant emotional state that can make a person feel dread, distress and uneasiness. It occurs when we think that something dangerous, bad or scary is about to happen, and that there is nothing we can do about it. It might be anything from a fear of being hurt in a fight, to making a fool of ourselves in front of the class or worrying over an upcoming event.

It is often difficult for teenagers to talk about how they feel. Teenagers express their emotions in different ways. Sometimes they appear angry and aggressive, withdrawn, or tired and irritable. They may have difficulty sleeping, show little interest in food, and say very little. Others may avoid peers and social activities or refuse to attend school.

**WHAT CAUSES TEENAGERS TO BECOME ANXIOUS?**

Everyone feels a certain amount of stress. However, high levels of stress in a teenagers life can cause anxiety. High levels of stress can come from a range of difficulties such as:

* Pressures of academy work, such as assignments and exams
* Problems with peer relationships
* Conflict at home with parents
* Problems achieving a desired goal, such as getting into a sporting team, or doing poorly in a competition

The human body reacts naturally when something unpleasant happens or seems about to happen. These reactions prepare the body to deal with the unpleasant situation and can include:

* Increased heart rate
* Rapid breathing
* Sweaty palms
* Light headedness, feeling dizzy
* Stomach tightening

However, these reactions do not usually last for long, especially when the threat is not really there. After a few minutes, the heart rate returns to normal, breathing slows, and the other changes also return to normal.

The natural changes that occur when something stressful happens can be quite unpleasant and a teenager may become afraid that something serious is wrong with them. They may be afraid they are going to faint or even have a heart attack. These negative thoughts that something terrible is about to happen make the body’s system speed up these changes even more as the thoughts add to the belief that there is a real threat to defend against. This experience is often referred to as an *anxiety* or *panic attack*

.Sometimes parents can unknowingly make things worse. Being too protective or critical may convey the idea that the parent thinks the teenager cannot cope.

In some families, parents do not give teenagers much attention when they are behaving well, but become very concerned and attentive when the teenager becomes ill, stressed or anxious. A teenager may then notice that their parents pay them a lot more attention when they are upset. Parents can therefore accidentally reward their teenager for being anxious.

**HOW TO PREVENT YOUR TEENAGER BECOMING ANXIOUS**

* **Create a positive family environment**

Parents can help prevent anxiety in a number of ways:

* Encourage teenagers to have realistic beliefs about their capabilities
* Encourage teenagers to develop good problem solving skills
* Talk openly about feelings and how to cope with upsetting events
* Make positive comments about things your teenager does well, especially when they are dealing with stress
* Encourage teenagers to take part in rather than avoid appropriate social and recreational activities
* Have consistent rules and appropriate discipline so that teenagers feel their world is secure and predictable

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOUR TEENAGER MAY BE ANXIOUS**

* **Monitor your teenagers emotions and behaviour**

Look out for changes in your teenagers normal behaviour patterns. These changes may be sudden, or more gradual and therefore difficult to notice.

Anxiety is usually associated with your teenager trying to avoid or get away from certain situations such as:

* Exams or public speaking
* Going to a social event where they do not know many people
* Having to take part in an activity they are afraid of failing at, such as a competition or sporting event

Sometimes, just thinking about these events in advance can cause anxiety.

* Report recurring distressing thoughts (obsessions) about impending disaster
* Carry out compulsive acts, such as checking windows and doors over and over before leaving home
* Engage in an unusual sequence of actions or rituals in the belief that this will prevent a bad outcome or disaster
* **Talk to your teenager**

See if you can identify any recent events in their life that may have upset them. Ask you teenager about:

* Schoolwork or any major exams or assignments that are due or have just been completed
* Friends and relationships, especially close friendships that seem to have suddenly ended or faded
* Decreases in regular activities that your teenager has previously been enthusiastic about
* Upcoming social events, especially any that they seem to want to avoid
* Feel overwhelmed or unable to cope
* Believe awful or negative things are going to happen that are outside their control, such as *I can’t do it, I know I’m going to fail, I’ll never be able to do it*.
* **Encourage regular school attendance**

Some anxious teenagers try to avoid going to school. Be firm about your teenagers attendance at school.

* **Talk to someone at school**

If you suspect there are problems at the academy, sharing your concerns with your Director of Learning can help you get a clearer picture of what is happening.

**HOW TO HELP YOUR TEENAGER MANAGE ANXIETY**

* **Encourage your teenager to face their fears**

Teenagers may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their anxiety and may not be willing to admit it at first. Explain to them that they are reacting in a very normal way, but to a situation that is not really a threat.

To overcome their anxiety, your teenager must stay in the feared situation as long as possible so that their natural body reactions have time to calm down. This can be difficult to do, but there are two unpleasant sensations they can learn to reverse.

* First, they need to learn to slow down their breathing when they start to feel anxious. Slower breathing signals to the body that it was a false alarm and there is no threat. The other bodily changes will then also begin to slow down
* Second, they need to tell themselves that they can cope. Telling yourself that everything is fine, you are under control, and nothing terrible is going to happen will turn off the body’s threat response

Your teenager will need to use these two skills together at the first sign of an anxiety or panic attack.

* **Encourage your teenager to practise their coping skills**

Without practice your teenager will find that controlling their breathing and thinking positive coping thoughts are not easy to do when the panic attack is happening. They must therefore practise and rehearse these new skills. Make a time with your teenager when there is no one else around and you will not be disturbed. Ask your teenager to sit comfortably and count their breathing. Most people breathe between 10 and 12 times a minute when they are at rest. If your teenager is breathing more than this when they are resting, they are already breathing too fast and are more likely to be at risk of having a panic attack. Get them to monitor their breathing regularly – say 4 or 5 times a day. The goal for your teenager is to slow their breathing so it is closer to a normal rate.

In order to make the practice more effective, before you start the next part, get your teenager to do some brief physical exercise to increase their breathing rate. This might involve them running up and down the stairs, or jogging on the spot for a minute or two.

After they have increased their breathing, ask them to follow these steps:

* ***Step 1*** – Hold their breath and count to 10
* ***Step 2*** – After 10, breath out through the nose, and say the work “relax” to themselves in a calm, soothing way
* ***Step 3*** – Breath in and out through their nose once in sex-second cycles. This means breathing in while slowly counting 1 – 2 – 3, then breathing out again whilst slowly counting 1 – 2 – 3. This will produce about 10 breaths per minute
* ***Step 4*** – After every 10 breaths (1 minute), go back to ***Step 1*** and start again

******

Repeat these steps for about 5 minutes. When the feared situation is next experienced, the teenager should repeat these steps until the anxiety sensations have gone.

Next, ask your teenager to write down the thoughts that they have when they start getting anxious. These thoughts will usually be about their lack of control of the situation, such as *I can’t cope with this. This is awful. I’m really stupid/scared. I’m out of control*.

Now get them to write down a different positive thought that they can use to replace each of the negative ones. For example, they could replace the negative thought *I can’t cope with this* with the positive one *I can handle this OK*, or they could replace *This is awful* with *I feel OK*.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

Daily disappointments and fears are all part of life and teenagers need to be able to cope with the regular stress of daily living. Often there is no need for parents to take any action, other than to provide understanding and support.

Sometimes, teenagers who are very anxious may also be depressed. There is a separate tip sheet which has some tips for parents who think their teenager may be depressed.



**KEY STEPS**

* Create a positive family environment
* Monitor your teenager’s emotions and behaviour
* Talk to your teenager
* Encourage regular school attendance
* Talk to someone at school
* Encourage your teenager to face their fears
* Encourage your teenager to practise their coping skills