Anxiety in Teens – How to Help a Teenager Deal With Anxiety

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Posted by, Karen Young October 21, 2016

Anxiety can be tough for anyone to deal with, but add in the whirlwind of changes that come with adolescence, and anxiety can feel like an intrusive mind hog that spends way too much time squeezing, surprising and overwhelming anyone it lands on.

If anxiety is making a menace of itself, the good news is that there are ways to take it back to small enough. First though, it's important to understand the telltale signs of anxiety and where they come from. When you understand this, anxiety will start to lose the power that comes from its mystery and its unpredictability.

Teens With Anxiety. A Few Things You Need to Know

Anxiety has absolutely nothing to do with strength, character or courage.

People with anxiety will be some of the strongest, most likable, bravest people any of us will know. Anxiety and courage always exist together. Courage doesn't mean you never get scared – if you're not scared, there's no need to be brave. What courage means is that you're pushing right up against

your edges. It doesn't matter where the edges are. They will be different for everyone. The point is that courage is all about feeling them and making a push to move through them – and people with anxiety do it all the time.

Sometimes it drops in for absolutely no reason at all.

Anxiety happens because your brain *thinks* there might be danger, even when there is no danger at all. Brains are smart, but they can all read things a little bit wrong sometimes.

Anxiety is soooo common. Almost as common as having feet. But not quite.

On average, about 1 in 5 young people have anxiety. Without a doubt, someone you know or care about will also struggle with anxiety from time to time. Stats don't lie. They don't gossip and they don't start scandals either, which is why they're so reliable. They're good like that.

Everyone experiences anxiety on some level.

Anxiety exists on a spectrum – some people get it a lot and some people get it a lot less, but we all experience anxiety on some level at some time in our lives – exams, job interviews, performances. Sometimes it can happen for no reason at all.

Anxiety is a feeling, not a personality.

Anxiety doesn't define you. It's a feeling – it will come, but it will always go, and it's as human as having a heartbeat.

Your brain that is strong, healthy and doing exactly what brains are meant to do.

Your brain is magnificent. It's just a little overprotective. It loves you like a favourite thing and it wants to keep you safe. And alive. Brains love keeping people alive. They adore it actually.

Anxiety can look a little something like this …

Here are some of the common signs of anxiety in teenagers. If you have some of these, it doesn't mean that teenage anxiety is a problem for you. This list is a way to make sense of things that feel as though they're getting in your way, but if you experience some of them and you're travelling along beautifully, then there's no problem at all. Something is only a problem if it's causing you a problem.

Thoughts …

- Negative thoughts – what-ifs, thoughts about being judged or embarrassed, small thoughts that grow into big worries.
- Excessive worry about physical symptoms (that a cut might become infected, that a headache might mean brain cancer).

An anxious brain is a strong brain, and anxious thoughts can be persuasive little beasts that stick to the inside of your skull like they belong there. Write this down and stick it to your mirror, so you see it every morning when you're getting a faceful of your gorgeous head: 'Thoughts are thoughts. They are NOT predictions. Let them come. And then let them go.'

Feelings …

- Fearful, worried, overwhelmed, out of control.
- Dread, as though something bad is going to happen.
- Panic that seems to come from nowhere.
- Feeling separate to your physical self or your surroundings. (This is called depersonalisation and it can be driven by anxiety. Manage this one by managing your anxiety. Keep reading for how to do this.)

Physically …

- Racing heart.
- Tightening in the chest
- Butterflies.
- Tense muscles.
- Shaking hands.
- Feeling as though you're going to vomit.
- Dizzy or light-headed.
- Feeling as though you want to burst into tears.
- Feeling angry.

These are all because of the surge of neurochemicals that happen when the body is in fight or flight mode. They can feel frightening, but they are all a very normal part of the way your brain and body protect you from possible danger (more about this later).

Behaviours …

- Skin picking (dermatillomania).
- Pulling out hair (trichotillomania).
- Nail biting.
- Avoidance of people or situations, even if they are things that would probably be fun. (This isn't necessarily about wanting to avoid the people involved and more about wanting to avoid the anxiety that comes with certain situations such as parties or get-togethers or anything unfamiliar.)
- Feel compelled to perform certain habits or rituals that don't seem to make sense (e.g. having to stack things in even numbers, having to touch the door handle a certain number of times before you leave, compulsive hand-washing, checking locks etc).

People with anxiety tend to find all sorts of ways to make their anxiety feel smaller for a little while. These self-soothing behaviours will often escalate with the intensity of the anxiety, but will ease once anxiety is under control. If you can manage your anxiety, this will help to fade these symptoms. (Sit tight – we'll talk about how to do that.)

You might have a bit of …

Tummy trouble – (constipation, diarrhoea, irritable bowel).

In the gut are hundreds of millions of neurons. This is affectionately known as ‘the brain in our gut’. These neurons are really important for mental health because they send information from the belly to the brain. When the environment in the gut is out of balance (not enough good bacteria, too many bad ones), the messages sent back to the brain can stir anxiety.

And those zzz’s …

> Difficulty sleeping – either trouble falling asleep, or waking up and not being able to go back to sleep.

When you’re still, quiet and trying to relax, negative thoughts or worries will see it as an invitation. They’ll put on their fancy pants and get the party started in your head. Pushy little sleep-thieving pirates that they are.

Practical, powerful ways to help manage anxiety.

Understand why it feels the way it does.

Understanding why anxiety feels the way it does will be one of your greatest tools in managing it. Think of it like this. Imagine being in a dark room that is full of ‘stuff’. When you walk around in the dark, you’re going to bump into things. You’re going to scrape, bruise and maybe drop a few choice words. Turn on the light though, and those things are still there, but now you can navigate your way around them. No more bumps. No more scrapes. And no more having to hold your tongue in front of people who can confiscate your phone. Here’s what you need to know …

Anxiety happens because a part of your brain (the amygdala) thinks there *might* be something it needs to protect you from. When this happens, it surges your body with a mix of neurochemicals (including oxygen, hormones and adrenaline), designed to make you stronger, faster, more alert and more powerful so you can fight for your life or run for it. This is the fight or flight response. It’s normal and healthy and it’s in everyone. In people with anxiety, it’s just a little quicker to activate.

The amygdala acts on impulse. It’s a do-er, not a thinker – all action and not a lot of thought. It just wants to keep you safe, because safe is a lovely thing to be and because that’s been its job since the beginning of humans. The amygdala can’t always tell the difference between something that might hurt you (like a baseball coming at your head) and something that won’t (like walking into a party) – and it doesn’t care. All it wants to do is keep you safe.

When there’s nothing to flee or nothing to fight, there’s nothing to burn the neurochemical fuel that is surging through you. The fuel builds up and that’s why anxiety feels the way it does. Here’s how that works:

» Your breathing changes from normal, slow breaths to short, shallow breaths. This is because your brain tells your body to conserve oxygen on breathing, and send as much as possible to the muscles so they can get ready to run or fight.

You might feel puffed or a bit breathless. You might also feel your cheeks burn red (from the blood rushing to your face) and your face become warm.

» If you don't fight or flee, the oxygen builds up in your body and the carbon dioxide drops.

You might feel dizzy or a bit confused.

» Your heart races to get the oxygen around your body.

Your heart can feel like it's beating out of your chest and you might feel sick.

» Fuel gets sent to your arms (for fight) and to your legs (for flight).

Your hands, arms and legs might feel tense or shaky.

» Your body starts cooling itself down to stop it from overheating if it has to fight or flee.

You might feel a bit clammy or sweaty.

» Anything happening in your body that isn't absolutely essential in the moment for your survival will shut down to conserve energy. Your digestive system is one of these. It shuts down until the 'danger' is dealt with, so the fuel it was using to digest your food can be used by your body for fight or flight.

You might feel butterflies in your belly. You might also feel sick, as though you're about to vomit, and your mouth might feel dry.

» The amygdala also controls your emotions so when it's in fight or flight, it's switched on to high volume. This means your emotions can be too.

You might burst into tears or get angry.

Everything you feel when you have anxiety is to do with your body getting ready to fight or flee, when there is actually no need for either. It's okay – there are things you can do about this. Let's talk about that …

Dealing with Anxiety – The How-To

Here are some ways to manage anxiety by strengthening the structure and function of your brain in ways that protect it against anxiety. Remember though, the brain is like any other muscle in your body – it will get stronger with practice. I wish I could tell you that it would get stronger with pizza and tacos but that would be a dirty big lie and very unhelpful. Delicious maybe, but unhelpful. What isn't a lie is that the following strategies have been proven by tons of very high-brow research to be very powerful in helping to reduce anxiety.

1. Mindfulness. But first to show you why.

A mountain of studies have shown that mindfulness can be a little bit magic in strengthening the brain against anxiety. In a massive analysis of a number of different mindfulness/anxiety studies, mindfulness was found to be '*associated with robust and substantial reductions in symptoms of anxiety*.'

Mindfulness changes the brain the way exercise changes our body – but without the sweating and panting. Two of the ways mindfulness changes the brain are:

- by strengthening the connections between the amygdala (the key player in anxiety) and the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that can calm big emotions (and anxiety counts as a big emotion). The stronger the connections, the more the pre-frontal cortex is able to weigh in during anxiety and calm things down.
- by teaching the brain to stay in the present. Anxiety is driven by a brain that has been cast into the future. Thoughts start out as 'what ifs' and turn into persuasive little beasts that won't let go. Mindfulness helps to keep control over your brain so you can stop it from worrying about things it doesn't need to.

Okay then. What else can mindfulness do?

Plenty. Mindfulness can improve concentration, academic performance, the ability to focus, and it can help with stress and depression. It also increases gray matter, which is the part of the brain that contains the neurons. Neurons are brain cells, so we want plenty of them and plenty of gray matter for them to hang out in.

So mindfulness hey? What is it *exactly*?

Mindfulness is about staying in the present and 'watching' your thoughts and feelings without hanging on to them for too long. It's this 'hanging on too long' that gives them the juice they need to become something bigger. Minds quite like to wander, especially anxious ones, so staying in the moment can take some practice. Here's the how:

- Get comfy and close your eyes.
- Notice your breathing. How does the air feel as you draw it inside you? Notice the sensation of the air, or your belly rising and falling. Notice your heart beating. If your mind starts to wander, come back to this.
- Now, what can you hear? What can you feel outside of you and inside your body? If your mind starts to wander, focus on your breathing again.

Is there an app for that?

There are some brilliant apps that can guide you through mindfulness. Here are three (with links) for you to have a look at:

Smiling mind – a free app has tailored programs for different ages.

Stop, Breathe, Think – start by choosing words to describe how you're feeling right now, and the app will suggest the best meditations based on where you're at.

Insight Meditation Timer – another free app with guided meditations from over 700 teachers. It also has a very excellent feature that shows a map of how many other people are meditating in the world (using the app) at the same time as you. How to make the world feel a little bit smaller and a little

more connected. Nice.

Exercise.

The effects of exercise on mental health are proven and powerful. The research on the positive effects of exercise on anxiety could probably cover a small planet, or, you know, a very big building. The point is that there's tons of it.

Here's how it works. Some neurons (brain cells) are born with the personality of puppies – very excitable and quick to fire up. We need these. They help us to think quickly, act quickly and remember. In the right amount and at the right time, these neurons are cell-sized bits of brain magic. Sometimes though, they can get a bit carried away with themselves. When too many of these excitable neurons get too active, anxiety can happen.

To stop these neurons getting over-excited and causing trouble, the brain has a neurochemical, GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid is the name it likes to go by at scientific get-togethers and when it wants to make an impression). Neurochemicals are the suave little messengers in the brain that carry important info from one cell to another. GABA is the brain's calm down chemical – kind of like a sweet lullaby for the parts of the brain that are in very serious lullaby need. When the levels of GABA in the brain are low, there's nothing to calm the excitable neurons. Exercise is a really effective way to get the GABA in the brain to the right levels.

Once these neurochemicals are back to healthy levels, the symptoms of anxiety tend to disappear into the sunset, or into a box with a very tight fitting lid – we don't know for certain but wherever they go, it's somewhere far away from you which is the important thing.

Any activity that gets your heart going counts as exercise. This will be different for everyone. It doesn't have to mean pounding the pavement with your running feet on to the point of that you're gasping for sweet life and demanding an oxygen tank. Not that there's anything wrong with this, but it's just that there aren't always oxygen tanks handy when you need them. A brisk 20-minute walk or 8-10 minutes of going up and down the stairs a couple of times a day will also do it. Whatever works for you. Try for something you can do at least five times a week.

If vigorous exercise and you are still in the ~~getting to know you~~ trying-to-like-you phase of your relationship, non-aerobic exercise like yoga can also ease anxiety.

Breathe. But practice, practice, practice. And then practice a little bit more.

Anxiety can feel like such a gangster at times, it can be hard to believe that something as simple and as normal as breathing can out-muscle it – but it can. Here's why. Strong, deep breathing initiates the relaxation response. The relaxation response was discovered by a Harvard cardiologist to be an automatic response that can neutralise the surge of neurochemicals that cause the awful physical feelings of anxiety. Because it's an automatic response, you don't need to believe it works, it just will – but you do have to initiate it.

Breathing is the switch that will activate the relaxation response and start to put the symptoms of anxiety back to small enough. Once you start slow deep breathing, your body will take over and do the rest. Breathe in through your nose for 3, hold for 1 and then out through your mouth for 3. (If you're the type who quite fancies a visual, imagine holding a cup of hot cocoa and smelling the warm, heady aroma for three, hold your breath for one, then blow it cool for one.) Make sure the breathing is going right into your belly, not just into your chest.

In the thick of anxiety, the brain is too busy with other things to remember to do strong deep breathing. To make strong deep breathing easier for your brain to access, practice it a couple of times a day when you're calm.

Food. You've gotta look after your belly

We used to think that anxiety or depression caused tummy trouble, but increasingly researchers are thinking that it actually works the other way – an unhappy belly can make an unhappy brain. The good news about this is that it doesn't take too much effort to put it right, but eating well is super-important.

We know there are trillions of microbes that live in the intestinal tract. These send signals to the brain that can change mood and behaviour. If you eat too much processed food or too much sugar (or not enough good food) it can knock out the balance of good bacteria in your gut. This can upset the balance of everything and heavily influence your mood by sending funky messages back to your brain. Eating unprocessed, healthy food, and food that contains good bacteria (such as miso or yoghurt) can help to balance things out inside your gut and put things back on track.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with eating something unhealthily delicious now and then, but make sure that you're not overdoing it. The healthier your gut, the healthier your mental health. Gut bacteria are the rock stars of the mental health world. It's really important to keep yours happy, because, you know – cranky rock stars can be painful and annoying and cause more than a decent amount of trouble.

And finally …

Make sure you love yourself a little louder. At adolescence, you're at a point in your life where the world is opening up to you. It's a world that needs your wisdom, your courage and your interesting and very wonderful take on things. Anxiety can have a way of shifting the focus too often to the negative, but the things about ourselves that we would like to change often have very wonderful strengths built into them. Of course you would always rather not have anxiety, but there are so many strengths in you. Spend plenty of time noticing them.

Anxiety is something that happens, not something you are. What you are is smart, with truckloads of emotional intelligence, and a very wonderful and uniqe way of looking at things, as well as being the person people can count on, the one who thinks of things that other people haven't, creative (even if you aren't doing anything creative, it's in you), sensitive, strong, and brave. You would be most people's favourite type of humans.

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