

Anxiety: When to Seek Help

Anxiety is a universal emotional experience that everyone (including children) will feel from time to time. Anxiety is the body's normal stress response and can be brought on before taking a test, making a big decision or entering into a new or unfamiliar situation (i.e., starting a new school or a first sleepover away from home). When anxiety becomes excessive and overwhelming or unmanageable to the point where it affects quality of life, it could be an indication of an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are among the most common childhood and adolescent mental illnesses. Nearly 1 in 3 of all adolescents ages 13-18 will experience an anxiety disorder (National Institute of Health). While genetics, brain chemistry, personality and life events contribute to the onset of anxiety disorders, researchers have been exploring other factors as well. There has been substantial evidence that the pandemic has increased the number of youth who are feeling anxious. However, even prior to the pandemic, anxiety, especially in adolescents was already on the rise. According to the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, experts cite that anxiety among today's children and adolescents may be intensifying for a variety of reasons including, high expectations and pressure to succeed, a world that feels scarier (living in a world where violence and mass shootings frequently dominate the headlines) and growing up in the age of social media.

Understanding the difference between "normal" anxiety and anxiety that could more severe can be a helpful step in early intervention. Normal anxiety does not specifically interfere in a person's wellbeing and does not prevent a person from engaging in day-to-day activities.

"Normal" anxiety:

- Is related to a specific situation or problem
- Lasts only as long as the situation or problem
- Is proportional to the situation or problem
- Is a realistic response to a specific situation or problem

As anxiety intensifies, it may lead to a sense of helplessness. Abnormal anxiety is more persistent, it is excessive and may be out of proportion to the concern. In other words, the worry is greater than that experienced by most people. For example, a child who is nervous about going to a birthday party may exhibit normal levels of anxiety with a few tears and some reluctance of leaving the familiarity of their parent, but they eventually recover and are able to enjoy themselves. In contrast, a child who exhibits abnormal levels of anxiety may hysterically cry in terror at the thought of entering the party, become physically and emotionally distressed and refuse to go. As illustrated by this example, anxiety becomes a concern not based on what a child is worrying about, but rather how that worry is impacting a child's functioning. For someone who may be experiencing more intense levels of anxiety:

- Anxiety may come up unexpectedly, for seemingly no reason
- They may experience a lot of unrealistic anxiety, such as fear of a situation that may likely never happen
- Anxiety may last for a long time, even when the situation or problem has been resolved.
- Anxiety may feel impossible to control or manage (characterized by intrusive thoughts of worry)
- They may avoid situations or things that they believe to trigger anxiety symptoms.
- They may have an intolerance to uncertainty and may equate uncertainty with bad outcomes

Anxiety can become problematic for a child or adolescent when worry and avoidance become automatic responses, preventing them from participating in daily school activities, friendships and academic performance. Some signs of concern that may trigger a red flag that a youth may be suffering from high levels of anxiety include:

- Demonstrating excessive distress out of proportion to the situation
- Demonstrating excessive avoidance (refusal to participate in activities or attend school)
- Disruptions in sleep (difficulty falling asleep, difficulty sleeping alone, frequent nightmares)
- Headaches, stomachaches, regular complaints of feeling sick
- Seeking excessive reassurance that things will be “okay”
- Easily frustrated, agitated or distressed in a stressful situation
- Worrying more days of the week than not (uncontrollable worry and fear)
- Requires excessive time coaxing to do normal activities (homework, hygiene, meals)

Clinical anxiety isn't a light switch that can be flipped on or off. For the child or adolescent living with the anxiety, their worry and experiences can feel very overwhelming. Finding the right treatment is key to managing symptoms. One of the first steps in treating anxiety is seeking help from a trained mental health professional. A trained mental health provider can properly diagnose and provide treatment recommendations. Learning constructive strategies to cope with anxiety can help youth gain better control over thoughts and emotions. The goal of treatment isn't to eliminate anxiety but to learn how to manage it. While treatment may include a combination of therapy and medication, there are things adults can do to support youth who may be struggling with excessive levels of anxiety:

- Educate yourself about anxiety disorders
- Listen and acknowledge feelings- this sends a message that you care.
- Be sensitive to the fact that he/she has genuine worries and fears but try to not enable his or her avoidance behavior.
- Be Patient—coping with anxiety isn't as easy as just “snapping out of it”.
- Express positive but realistic expectations
- Encourage/teach relaxation strategies such as deep breathing
- Teach mindfulness- found to reduce symptoms of anxiety
 - Anxiety is driven by a brain that has been cast into the future, mindfulness helps train the brain to stay in the present.

For additional guidance on how to support kids in managing their anxiety, check out the article below from the Childmind Institute:

<https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/>

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; National Alliance on Mental Illness; National Institute of Health; National Institute of Mental Health

