

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

Get Some Zzzzzz's!

As more studies are done on the topic of youth and sleep, we are learning more and more about the role that adequate sleep plays in the formative years of youth. There are studies now that not only prove that youth who do not get enough sleep have difficulty in school, but it also puts them at a higher risk for other health problems in their future. Some of the common health problems that have been associated with youth not getting enough sleep include obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and mental health issues.

Sleep is the process your mind and body need to recharge from the day. Sleep is a key factor in helping students with learning and being able to regulate emotional and behavioral factors of their bodies. Some common signs that a student is not getting enough sleep include struggling in school, having trouble with their memory, concentration and motivational abilities, sleeping more often in places they should not be sleeping, involvement in car crashes if they are old enough to drive, and possibly feelings of depression or other mood disorders. With sleep playing such an important role in body and mind development, what are some ways to help students get a better night's sleep?

The biggest factor that can help students get a better night of sleep is to have a relaxing bedtime routine. This helps their body get into a routine and engage in calming activities to help their mind and body slow down at the end of the day. Calming activities include taking a warm bath, reading, listening to soothing music, and having a cool, dark and quiet environment for sleep. In addition to having a bedtime routine, it is also suggested youth have a consistent bedtime and wake up time every day, even on the weekends or days when there is no school.

Another thing students can do to help with sleep is exercise every day. Exercise helps reduce stress and invigorates the body and mind. However, hard or strenuous exercises should be avoided in the evening before bed. Exercising in the evening can stimulate the body and amp you up to the point where you are wide awake. So, it is better to exercise in the morning as a way to wake you up and be ready for the day. Another way to prevent over-stimulation that could inhibit sleep is to limit your caffeine intake. It is suggested to stop drinking caffeinated drinks after the mid-afternoon as this can cause your body to be wide awake and not settle down in time for bed.

Screen time also plays a huge role in inhibiting a student's sleep. Not only is it a distraction that can keep students up, but the screen's lighting can stimulate the brain and make it harder to fall asleep at night. This includes phones, tablets, computers and even T.V.'s. It is suggested screen time be limited in the evening and devices be put away at least two hours before bed.

Sleep is a very important component to the development of youth bodies and minds. Without sleep, youth are not able to regulate emotions and behaviors which can lead to lifelong health struggles. If your student is not getting enough sleep despite your best efforts, it is important to talk to your physician. There could be underlying health issues like sleep apnea, or even some mental health issues, that are contributing to their inability to sleep.

References

Teens and sleep: Why you need it and how to get enough

https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/healthy-living/teens_and_sleep

Sleeping to Succeed

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/sleeping-to-succeed/>

Insufficient Sleep in Adolescents and Young Adults: An Update on Causes and Consequences

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2014/08/19/peds.2014-1696.full.pdf>

Why sleep is so important (Kidshelpline)

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/why-sleep-so-important>

CDC

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sleep.htm>



Online Challenges

The quick and easy access of smart phones with continued improvements and updates of recording features, paired with the widespread use of social media apps and sites such as Tik Tok and/or Facebook, has led to the “online challenge craze”. Kids as well as adults over the last few years have been completing a variety of these challenges and posting them online.

An online challenge generally involves a person recording themselves completing a challenge and posting the video on a social media site. Different challenges are created almost daily, and some of them go viral.

Many of these challenges are fun and light-hearted, such as the Ice Bucket Challenge or the Mannequin Challenge.

However, some of the challenges are extremely dangerous and life threatening, such as the Tide-Pod Challenge and Planking. These challenges have led to serious injuries and even death for some partaking in the challenge.

More recently, we have heard about challenges such as the Slap a Teacher Challenge or the Devious Lick Challenge. Kids might find these challenges to be funny but they are criminal in nature and have led to serious criminal charges and arrests of students.

And while it seems rather overtly obvious to many of us that some of the challenges are extremely dangerous, risky or just plain inappropriate, kids don't necessarily make that connection in the same way adults do. We need to remind ourselves that kid's brains are not fully developed and fully wired like an adult's brain.

As we know, research shows us that adult and teen brains operate differently. Most adults think with our prefrontal cortex, the brain's rational part. This part of the brain helps us with judgment by thinking through long-term consequences and helping us with impulse control. Teens process information with the amygdala. This is the emotional part of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is one of the last parts of the brain to mature for teens.

So, What Can You Do?

Quite simply, talk with your kids/students. While adult brains and teen brains operate differently, that does not mean kids/teens don't know right from wrong and/or recognize what is dangerous. Many times, just talking about things going on in their lives, especially on social-media sites/apps, is one of the best ways to get to know what interests them and if they are being safe and using good judgment. It also gives them the opportunity to think about situations more deeply and all the different consequences and risks involved to themselves and others. Furthermore, discussing possible consequences of their actions can actually help teens' brains develop by producing and making connections in their prefrontal cortex which helps wire their brains to make these connections more often.

Let them know what the expectations and rules are when it comes to phone and social media use and make it known there are consequences when they don't comply with

your expectations and rules. Likewise, they should also know they could face legal/criminal consequences that go well beyond any of the consequences you have outlined for them.

In addition to all the above, make sure when it comes to sharing warnings about online challenges, that you look into them first. Sometimes we have a knee jerk reaction to things we hear and inadvertently spread panic about challenges which turn out to be hoaxes. And make sure to check the factual basis of any harmful online challenge using a known, reliable source.



<https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/adolescent-brain-development>

<https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/how-to-respond-to-dangerous-online-challenges/>

<https://www.common sense media.org/blog/viral-youtube-challenges-internet-stunts-popular-with-kids>