



Anxiety Disorders at Home

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to a stressful or fearful situation. Anxiety gives people energy to run from or deal with the problem. At low levels, anxiety is manageable and can be a benefit.

When Is Anxiety Disordered?

Anxiety becomes disordered when we have too much of it for the situation we are in **or** when we have it for too much of the time.

What Are The Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety is the most common family of disorders in children, adolescents and adults, affecting about 15 to 20 percent of the population over their lifetime. It often runs in families. There are many different anxiety disorders. The most common ones differ at various ages. For young children, the most frequent anxiety disorder is generalized anxiety. For adults, the most common are phobias (e.g., flying, heights, public speaking, etc).

Some of the anxiety disorders are:

Disorder	Characterized by...
• Separation Anxiety Disorder	- Fear of separation from significant people.
• Generalized Anxiety Disorder	- Frequent worries about many things.
• Panic Disorder	- Sudden, unexpected anxiety attacks.
• Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	- Intense, lasting response to traumatic events.
• Specific Phobias	- Fearful response to various specific stimuli.
• Social Phobia	- Fear of being in groups.
• Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	- Repetitive acts and/or intrusive thoughts.

What Are The Symptoms?

Anxiety is typically characterized by anxious thoughts and a physiological response. The physical response is very real and is usually the result of the body releasing stress hormones (adrenaline, steroids) and/or becoming tense.

Effects of Stress Hormones	Effects of Tension
Increased heart rate	Sore muscles
Increased breathing (hyperventilation)	Numbness or tingling
Upset stomach (sore, butterflies)	Cold limbs
Nausea	Pale skin
Hot, flushed, sweaty skin	Shaking or trembling
Dilated pupils	
Dizziness	

How Does Anxiety Manifest?

Anxiety presents itself in different ways. Some people ask a lot of questions (e.g., "When are we going?" "Is that a tornado?" "What if we crash?") Some people become quiet and withdraw. Others become active and agitated. Some can become angry and belligerent.

Anxious people tend to **avoid** what they are afraid of. They can become quite clever and creative in order to stay away from what they fear.

- Some find that withdrawing allows them to avoid situations ("*I don't want to*").
- Others become more restless, agitated and out of control as they get closer to the feared situation ("*I'm terrified!*").
- Some resist with anger and aggression ("*I hate you! This is stupid!*").
- Others become quite controlling and difficult ("*I'm not going. You can't make me.*").

In the end, **all of these people are attempting to control the situation in order to control their anxiety**. Often, controlling the situation also means controlling the people around them.

What Can We Do To Help?

There are many things we can do to help anxious children and adolescents.

1) Talk about emotions, including anxiety.

Help youth to build an emotional vocabulary. If we have words to describe the way we feel, emotions seem less overwhelming and more manageable. Some words to describe anxiety include: nervous, anxious, fearful, afraid, scared, tense, worried, frightened, terrified, timid, and shy. A good time to talk with young people is at the end of the day when preparing for bed. Ask them about good things that happened during the day and how that made them feel. Then ask about not-so-good things that happened during the day and how that made them feel. If they deny these feelings, you can say, "*You looked worried,*" or "*You seemed scared.*"

2) Encourage them to face what they fear.

The main treatment for anxiety is **exposure**. We want to support young people to face their fears; however, we do not want to overwhelm them. Begin with small steps and support them along the way. Try saying things like:

- ❖ "*I know this is hard for you, but I'd like you to try your best.*"
- ❖ "*I'll help you to try it out.*"
- ❖ "*You're doing great!*"
- ❖ "*I'm proud of you.*"

3) Be proactive.

Recognize situations where anxiety might arise (e.g., new situations, changes in routines, new caregivers, trips or outings). Help to prepare young people for these events. Ask them about concerns or questions they may have. Talk about what might take place. Talk about how they feel. Make a plan for success.

4) Use rewards to motivate. Avoid punishment.

The best rewards are natural ones and are easy to deliver. **Rewards should be immediate, frequent, small, and tangible** if possible. Rewards can be:

- ❖ Verbal (things to say)
- ❖ Activity (things to do)
- ❖ Material (things to get).

Teach youth to reward themselves verbally (e.g., “*I did a good job!*”).

5) Teach them to relax.

Relaxation is natural but bad habits can creep in. Help youth to recognize the difference between tension and relaxation. Remind them to relax their muscles. A good way to do this is to **tense the muscles for 5-10 seconds and then let them go**. This way, they learn what it feels like to be relaxed. Another good way to relax is to **breathe slowly and deeply**. Proper breathing triggers the body's natural relaxation response by absorbing adrenaline. When we breathe properly, the stomach should be pushed out for a second or two before letting it go. Another way to relax is to close your eyes and **imagine that you are in a relaxing situation**. Then visualize yourself being relaxed and successful in the anxious situation.

6) Help them to clean up their thinking.

Anxious people are filled with anxious thoughts and often expect the worst. Most anxious thoughts are distorted. A common approach used by people trying to be helpful is to counter their fears or distorted thinking (e.g., “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” “Monsters aren’t real.”). This approach does not work. What we need to do is to follow a 4-step process in dealing with anxious thoughts. Do not skip any steps!

1. Help them to recognize how they are feeling.

ASK: “*How are you **feeling**?*”

2. Help them to recognize their fearful thoughts.

ASK: “*What are you **thinking** about? ”*
*“What are your (anxious, worried...) **thoughts**?”*

3. Help them to recognize helpful things they can think and do.

ASK: “*How can you **think differently about that**?”*
*“What can you **do**?”*
“How likely is that to happen?”

4. Help them to evaluate and reward their success.

ASK: “*How will/did it **turn out**?”*
“What can you say to yourself?”

7) Reduce perfectionism.

Anxious people often want to get things perfect the first time. Encourage them to take risks and try new things. Help them to recognize that effort counts as much as results, especially when they are learning new things. Remind them that no one is perfect and help them to focus on what they did right and what they can learn from their mistakes. Emphasize improvements and personal bests, as well as setting realistic and achievable goals.

8) Evaluate their diet.

Some food and drinks contain substances that stimulate the system, which will contribute to agitation and anxiety. Common substances include:

- *Caffeine* which is found in coffee, tea, pop (usually colas), and chocolate.
- *Caffeine* is also found in some pain relievers and decongestants.
- *Nicotine* is a powerful stimulant found in cigarettes, cigars and pipe tobacco.

Some people also find that sugar stimulates their children.

Relaxing drinks that can help to settle people down include: warm milk (when the milk is warmed, it releases a substance called Tryptophan which is a natural relaxant), and herbal teas (such as peppermint and chamomile).

When Should A Specialist Be Involved?

Sometimes all our best efforts and supports are not enough, and youth need to see a specialist. People who treat anxiety disorders come from many professions, including physicians, psychologists, counsellors, and social workers. Sometimes medication is needed, but this can only be prescribed by physicians (e.g., psychiatrists, pediatricians, family doctors). If you are not familiar with a mental health specialist in your area, you can usually find one through your family doctor who will be able to make the referral.

Even when a specialist becomes involved, there is a lot you can do to help including monitoring your child's progress and providing important feedback to the treating professionals. You can also continue to try some of the preceding strategies.

Anxiety is very common. Thankfully, it is also highly treatable.

If you would like to learn some more about anxiety, the following readable and inexpensive book is available in the parenting section of most bookstores, or from your local library.

Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child
Written by Katarina Manassis, M.D.
Barrons Press, 1996; 2008