

## ANXIETY

### What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to a stressful or scary situation. It can be helpful and protect us from danger. Anxiety becomes “disordered” when it is excessive, with symptoms beyond the fears and worries you would typically expect at a child’s age and stage of development. It starts to cause harm or impairment- such as affecting school attendance, enjoyment of activities, or sleep.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health condition in children and youth- with about 20% of children and adolescents affected at some time. It often runs in families.

### What are the Anxiety Disorders?

There are different anxiety disorders:

- Separation anxiety- fear of separation from significant people
- Generalized anxiety- frequent worries about many things
- Panic disorder- sudden, unexpected panic attacks
- Post traumatic stress disorder- intense, lasting response to traumatic events
- Specific phobias- fearful response to specific stimuli
- Social anxiety- fear of being in groups or social situations
- Obsessive compulsive disorder- repetitive acts and intrusive thoughts

### What are the symptoms of Anxiety?

Anxiety can present in many different ways. Sometimes anxious kids are quiet and well behaved and they “internalize” their worries. Sometimes anxious kids can act out, be disruptive, and have emotional dysregulation or “externalize” their anxiety.

Symptoms and signs of anxiety disorders often depend on the specific disorder. The main symptom of anxiety disorders is frequent and persistent fear or worry that is out of proportion to the actual situation. Common symptoms can include:

#### **Thoughts and feelings:**

- worries about school, family, the future, or other world events
- trouble concentrating
- feelings of panic or danger
- obsessive thoughts
- mind going blank

#### **Physical symptoms:**

- shortness of breath
- being very tired
- trouble sleeping
- sweating
- tummy aches
- nausea
- frequent headaches
- feeling tense
- chest discomfort
- pounding heart



- dry mouth
- Behaviours:**
- avoidance (e.g., social withdrawal, isolation)
  - defiance
  - irritability
  - restlessness
  - mood swings

### **What causes Anxiety?**

Anxiety is “multifactorial”- meaning there isn’t one reason a child will develop an anxiety disorder. Anxiety tends to run in families and have a genetic predisposition. There are social and environmental factors that can contribute as well (home environment, school difficulty, major life changes).

### **How are Anxiety disorders treated?**

- 1) Psychoeducation- having parents and children learn about anxiety is the first step in management (see resources below)
- 2) Psychotherapy/Counseling- This is the most important treatment for anxiety. This can be parent, child, or family focused. If age appropriate, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is the most effective type of therapy for anxiety.
- 3) Medication- for children who have significant impairment and are not making progress in counseling, prescription medication may be considered

### **Resources**

#### ***Websites:***

Anxiety Canada is a great website with MANY resources. There are great handouts and videos for children.

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/>

Anxiety Canada has developed My Anxiety Plan (MAP) for Children and Teens- this is an anxiety management program based on CBT

<https://maps.anxietycanada.com/courses/anxiety-plan-children-teens/>

Kelty Mental Health (BC Children’s Mental Health Resource)

<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/anxiety>

#### ***Books for Kids:***

“Hey Warrior” by Karen Young

“What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety” by Dawn Huebner

“Help your Dragon Deal With Anxiety” by Steve Herman

“Don’t Worry, Be Happy” by Poppy O’Neill

“Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid’s Guide to Managing Anxiety” by Dawn Huebner