Anxiety and Teens

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While all teens feel anxious from time to time, some feel it more than others.

Say your best friend tells you she's going to the airport with her dad to learn to skydive. She's totally excited. But just thinking of skydiving causes you tremendous anxiety. Your stomach churns, your heart races, and you feel a lump in your throat when you try to swallow. You can't believe your friend is actually doing this and think about it all day long. When she calls that evening, she says she can't wait to skydive again -- "It was thrilling!" While you and your friend are both thinking about skydiving, you perceive the situation in very different ways.

What Is Anxiety?

For teens or anyone else, anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. Things like tests, meeting new people, speaking in public, going on a date, and competing in sports can make us feel apprehensive or uneasy. But some teens react much more strongly to stressful situations than others. Even thinking about the situations may cause them great distress.
Anxiety can be a good thing when it helps you deal with a tense situation. For example, when you're studying for a test, a little anxiety can make you want to study hard so you do well. But at other times, anxiety can be harmful, especially when it is excessive and irrational, and prevents you from being able to focus.

Sometimes the anxiety can come between you and your friends, especially when you avoid going out with them or calling them because you're too panicked or tense. This level of anxiety is harmful and that's why you need to do something to feel less anxious so you can fully enjoy your teenage life.

**How Can Teens Cope with Anxiety?**

Many teens find ways to cope with the high anxiety they feel. It's important to recognize your emotions, know what you're feeling and why you're feeling that way. Recognizing the types of situations that cause your anxiety is helpful as well.

Sometimes just admitting that a situation is stressful and being prepared to deal with it can reduce your anxiety. If you try these simple measures and still have too much anxiety, getting treatment from a healthcare professional or therapist is the next step.

**How Much Anxiety is too Much?**

Here are some of the signs of excess anxiety:

- You feel anxious, worried, or afraid for no reason at all. Normally, teens feel anxiety because of something specific -- like a test or going out on a date. But if there's no obvious reason for your feelings, your anxiety level may be too high.
- You worry too much about everyday events or activities. Some worry is normal. But if you're constantly worrying about things that are not unusual, your anxiety level is too high.
- You continually check whether you did something right. While it's normal to check something you did to make sure it's right, continuing to check it again and again is a sign that you have way too much anxiety.
- You're so panicky you're unable to function in certain specific situations -- like taking tests or socializing with friends.

**What Anxiety Treatments Are Available for Teens?**

Finding the right treatment is an important first step in reducing your anxiety. Treatment involves seeing a psychiatrist, clinical social worker, or psychologist. Sometimes the counselors at school may serve as a resource to find the appropriate treatment. Treatment can improve many areas of your life, including your performance in school and relationships with your family and friends.
Here are the most common treatments for anxiety.

**Medication.** Several types of prescription medications can be useful, depending on the kind of anxiety you have. Generalized anxiety or anxiety in social situations are often treated with the same kinds of medication used to treat depression. These take 4 - 6 weeks to work best. Because of this, your doctor may also recommend another type of treatment such as cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Specific anti-anxiety drugs, called benzodiazepines (the oldest of which is Valium), can also be added or used alone, depending on the circumstances. Specific anxieties, like panic about tests or public speaking, can be treated by taking a single dose of a medication called a beta-blocker about an hour before the feared event.

New medications are being developed all the time. Your health care provider will work with you to find one(s) that work best for you. Remember, if you are taking medications for anxiety, it is important to follow your doctor's instructions for taking it. Never stop taking any anxiety medication without talking to your doctor first.

**What Anxiety Treatments Are Available for Teens? continued...**

**Cognitive-behavioral therapy.** You'll need to see a therapist for cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT. The therapist will help you identify what types of thoughts and beliefs cause your anxiety, and work with you to reduce them. It's important to see a therapist who has experience treating anxiety in teens, and to plan to see that therapist frequently. Keep in mind that any therapy can succeed only if you work on getting better. The therapist just helps by suggesting ways that may help you change and get better.

**Biofeedback.** This therapy uses electronics to measure how your body responds to stress. It's based on the idea that when people are given information about their body's internal processes, they can use this information to learn to control those processes.

During biofeedback, you'll be connected to a machine that tells you and your therapist when you are relaxing your body. With sensors placed over specific muscle sites, the therapist can read the tension in your muscles, your heart rate, your breathing pattern, the amount of sweat produced, and/or body temperature. Any one of these readings can let the therapist know if you are learning to relax. Biofeedback can be fun it's almost like playing a computer game.

**Relaxation techniques.** Relaxation techniques can help reduce anxiety and negative thoughts and help you manage stress. Common relaxation techniques include deep abdominal breathing, meditation, listening to calming music, and activities like yoga and tai chi.

**Start Your Own Relaxation Program**
To reduce normal levels of anxiety, set aside a period of about 20 minutes each day to devote to relaxatic
Remove distractions as much as possible. Turn off the sound on your computer and the ringer on your ce
phone.

During the 20-minute period, remain as still as you can. Focus your thoughts on the immediate moment,
eliminate any outside thoughts that compete for your attention. Try to notice which parts of your body fi
relaxed, and which feel tense.

As you go through these steps, try to imagine that every muscle in your body is becoming relaxed and fr
of tension. Picture all the muscles in your body beginning to go loose and limp.

Start Your Own Relaxation Program continued...

Concentrate on making your breathing slow and even. Each time you exhale, picture your muscles becon
even more relaxed, as if with each breath you breathe the tension away.

At the end of 20 minutes, take a few moments to focus on the feelings and sensations you have been able
achieve. Notice whether areas that felt tense now feel looser, and whether any areas of tightness remai

Some people find that chanting (even a single word) or singing, praying, or focusing their vision on an obj
or flickering light source (like a candle or fireplace) also helps them achieve a more relaxed state of mind.

Don't be surprised if the relaxed feeling begins to fade once you get up and return to your normal activiti
Many teens find that it is only after several weeks of daily, consistent practice that they are able to maint
the relaxed feeling beyond the practice session.

When Should Teens Get Help for Anxiety?

If you have high levels of anxiety as mentioned above, it's important to seek treatment. About 13% of
teenagers have high enough anxiety to need medical or psychotherapeutic treatment.

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