

# KidNews Today

## Special Edition: Helping Anxious Children and Teenagers

Anxiety disorders, including panic disorders, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, continue to be a problem for our children and teens. There are numerous signs and symptoms of anxiety and stress in children, many the same as those in adults. These include changes in appetite and/or sleep habits, expressing worried or fearful thoughts, clinginess, tearfulness, irritability, and worsening of physical problems. Asthma, headaches, and IBS are examples of physical problems that can be affected by stress and anxiety. One child may have a host of physical complaints: headache, tummy ache, not feeling well. Another may become irritable and seem more mean than worried. Still another withdraws, writing in journals, and acting sad. Others have panic attacks. Anxious people may engage in repeated behaviors, which professionals call "rituals," such as counting and recounting, repeated hand washing, or pulling out their own hair. These behaviors are often attempts to reduce the physical and emotional sensations of fear.

If you suspect stress and worry, talk to your child and take action. Anxious people (kids and adults) often learn to manage anxiety symptoms by avoiding stressful situations. What starts as school avoidance behaviors on test days is the same avoidance behavior that leads to adults with serious agoraphobia—those who don't leave their home, sometimes for years, because of fear they will have a panic attack. The sooner you intervene and provide both immediate relief and confidence-building strategies that help the immediate problem *and* develop the child's ability to cope with stressful situations in the future, the better for your child.

While these are all serious signs, it can be easy for any of us to minimize the problem. It's up to adults to notice the signs of anxiety, overwhelm and stress. You can help the young person recover, develop new strategies to deal with challenges, and create a healthier routine.

This brochure provides an overview of basic approaches for families helping an anxious, stressed child or teen. Always consult a professional for serious symptoms such as panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, self-harming behavior (such as eating disorders, cutting/burning, or substance abuse/misuse). Also see your pediatrician immediately if stress is worsening any chronic health conditions.

For milder signs of stress and depression, here is a suggested four-faceted attack plan:

1. Check for medical problems. As noted in the sidebar, many physical problems can cause anxiety-like symptoms. Stress exacerbates many physical problems.
2. Take a break. Many children (and adults) are overscheduled. If a child is showing consistent signs of stress and/or anxiety, take at least a one or two week break from extracurricular activities. Instead, make a family commitment to spend time without television, stereo or computer and devote some time to peaceful outdoor activities (walks, bike rides, going to parks). Regular, adequate physical activity and nature are potent "reset" buttons. Make sure enough nightly rest—9 to 11 hours for kids and teens—is included in your family plan.
3. Learn and regularly rehearse healthy stress-management techniques. For example, make a serious commitment (3 times a day for about 5 minutes should be adequate) for slow, deep breathing combined with progressive muscle relaxation. The frequent rehearsal helps your brain develop stronger connections between that first slow, deep breath and the body's relaxation response—a real chemical change that helps combat stress symptoms. You can learn this through self-help books or tapes, or consult a mental health professional.
4. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is the standard approach to learning to reduce, control and/or eliminate even serious stress symptoms such as panic attacks.—Dr. Lori Puterbaugh, LMHC, LMFT

**Special Edition  
2011**

**Anxiety  
Disorders**

*PHYSICAL PROBLEMS CAN  
CAUSE BEHAVIORS AND  
MOODS THAT SEEM LIKE  
ANXIETY*

*Check with your child's  
pediatrician and get ap-  
propriate care. Lab tests  
and a thorough physical  
examination are in order if  
your child seems edgy or  
anxious. These are just a  
few of the physical prob-  
lems that can cause anxi-  
ety-like symptoms:*

*Lead poisoning*

*Thyroid disease*

*Eating disorders*

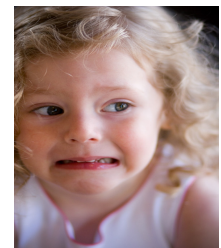
*Allergies*

*Asthma*

*Gastro-intestinal disorders  
leading to poor nutrient  
absorption*

*Medication side effects  
(including medications  
prescribed for other psy-  
chiatric problems.*

*This is a partial list.*



***This brochure is for informational purposes only.  
Always consult a healthcare professional if you have concerns  
about yourself or a loved one.***

## MINDFULNESS vs. MULTITASKING

Mindfulness is a mental discipline of being as aware as possible in the moment. It's the opposite of multi-tasking. When you're doing something mindfully, you are paying attention to this moment, this activity. When you are doing one thing and trying to do something else at the same time, your attention is divided. Anxious people are almost always in one place physically, while their mind is busy worrying about something else. By reducing the time spent multitasking and teaching ourselves and our children the mental discipline and joy of focusing on what we are doing, we can build up resistance to anxiety and worry. There are plenty of resources and professional therapists who can help you learn mindfulness and pass it along to your child or teen.



NEVER DISMISS A CHILD'S TALK OF SUICIDE!

### What Causes Anxiety?

Anxiety is a fear reaction. The physical sensations of an anxiety/panic attack are the body's response to any situation that seems to be a serious threat. When a person is worn down and stressed by many things, the tipping point into full-fledged anxiety can be more easily reached. Then the anxiety or panic symptoms themselves make the person feel more helpless and overwhelmed. Anxious or panicky people become fearful of their bodies' reactions to stress. *This feedback loop can be successfully changed. An anxious person can learn to be less afraid of the physical feelings and thus be able to handle stressful situations more effectively.*

### Where Can Our Family Go for Help?

First, consult a physician to be sure no illnesses or physical conditions are causing, or worsening, the signs of anxiety. Next, consult a mental health professional who is able to help address the many aspects of anxiety and stress.

**If possible, the family should be involved in the counseling process. Parents or guardians can be coached in ways to help the child or teen rehearse new ways of thinking and acting.**

There are many resources that families can use, especially with the help of a mental health professional. You can look at:

*Helping Your Anxious Child* by R. Rapee, Ph.D., et al.

*I Bet I Won't Fret!*, by T. Sizemore, Ph.D.

*Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Anxious Children* by R. Semple, Ph.D. and J. Lee, Ph.D.

*Think Good-Feel Good*, by Paul Stallard

*10 Days to Self Esteem* by David Burns, MD

*Unhappy Teenagers and How to Help Them*, by William Glasser, MD

DID YOU KNOW...that even 20 minutes of children's television programming has been demonstrated to have a negative effect on attention and concentration in children? The overstimulation of television, computer, electronic games, etc. is demonstrably damaging to everyone's ability to slow down and relax. Besides this, the blue light waves emitted by all electronics confuse the brain: that quality of light has the same chemical effect as the noon day sun, and can interfere with quality of sleep. Poor sleep quality interferes with mood, memory and the ability to focus, all of which can

**KidNews Today: Special Edition is not meant to replace professional advice. If you suspect a loved one is suffering symptoms of panic or anxiety, consult a professional immediately. The sooner you get help, the better.!**

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