

# Managing Anxiety

## Coping with Anxiety for Children & Parents

### Anxiety

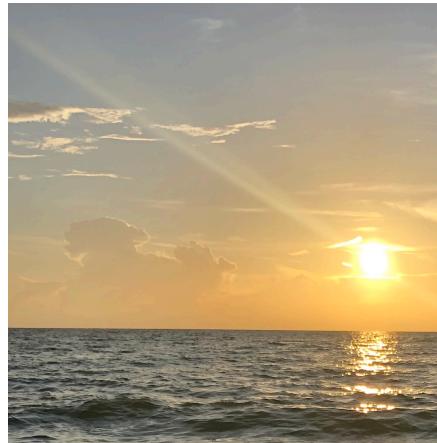
Anxiety is a normal reaction to high stress. It can be beneficial because it is our body's protective response to threat or danger.

Anxiety is helpful when there is a real threat. The fight or flight response allows us to respond to danger more effectively. However, anxiety can become a problem when it is intense, frequent, unrealistic, or limits enjoyment and participation in daily life.

Experiencing anxiety is like having a "false alarm" going off all the time. It causes very real physical (physiological) responses even if there is no present danger or the threat of real danger is unlikely.

It affects our bodies, our emotions, and our thoughts. A racing heart, shallow breathing, tightness in chest or throat, sweat, & headaches are all common physical symptoms. Anxious thinking often focuses on the worst-case scenario, the "what if" (possible, but a very low probability of happening) and an over-estimation of a negative outcome.

Anxiety CAN be reduced when emotions are acknowledged and both the body and the mind are calmed. This is possible by learning and using relaxation techniques to reduce physical symptoms and changing unhelpful and unproductive thinking. The goal is not to get rid of all anxiety, but to learn and practice strategies to cope better.



Anxiety can be successfully reduced.

Managing anxiety means calming the body and the mind.

Relaxing the body will relax the mind and vice versa.

Breathing, PMR, guided imagery and mindfulness can relax the body.

Using relaxation strategies in a moment of anxiety is hard without frequent practice of these skills when calm.

1

### RECOGNIZE

Recognize anxiety for what it is. Name it. Recognize early signs and symptoms.

2

### RELAX BODY

Use a relaxation strategy: belly breathing, PMR, guided imagery, mindfulness.

3

### CALM THOUGHTS

Notice thoughts. Label. Choose more helpful, balanced, and realistic "2nd" thoughts.

Identifying negative, anxious and unhelpful thinking patterns is also important.

Address anxiety with compassion. Challenge it and actively dismiss it.

# What anxiety might look like for children and teens

- Frequent reassurance-seeking.
- Afraid to separate from parents (clingy for young children) fear of being alone.
- Complaints about physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches).
- Anger or Oppositional behavior. Increased moodiness or irritability.
- More tantrums or meltdowns (particularly toddlers and preschool age children)
- Changes in appetite or eating behavior.
- Trouble falling asleep or regression in sleep.
- Forgetfulness, distractibility, difficulty learning and focusing.

## General Recommendations for Managing Anxiety

Get adequate sleep

Re-set with exercise and physical activity every day

Limit watching news and time on social media

Try to eat healthy (limit sugar, processed foods and caffeine)

Maintain a schedule that is balanced with productive time and relaxation time

Add purposeful pleasant or enjoyable activities to your day

**Practice Relaxation Strategies Daily** (Deep breathing, Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), guided imagery, mindfulness are research supported techniques).

**Watch your thoughts. Notice, use, or challenge worry.** The more your mind focuses on worst-case scenarios, the more anxious you will feel. When we think about something scary our brain tells our body to prepare to respond to the threat by sending fight or flight signals. Choose more helpful 2nd thoughts. Don't answer *What if* questions, ask *What else* instead. Designate worry time. Label anxiety. Question certainty of thoughts. Use coping statements.

## Recommendations by age

**Young children:** Maintain routines, provide calm activities before bedtime, provide reassurance, have patience. Provide comfort, rest and opportunities for active and expressive play. Limit media and news coverage and talk around children. Limit scary shows or movies.

**School age children:** Try to have more patience with whining, irritability, anger. Encourage expression of feelings in play and in conversations. Encourage regular exercise. Provide support and reassurances about health and safety, allow connection to friends via phone or internet, play educational games, and play games or do fun activities as a family.

**Teens:** Encourage healthy routines, self-care, and regular exercise. Talk about worries and concerns. Encourage questions, but don't force conversations. Validate feelings, particularly if self-conscious about an emotional response. Provide support and reassurances about health and safety. Encourage a balanced perspective. Review probabilities. Allow connection to friends via phone and video. Limit media exposure. Discuss helpful action steps.

## Websites

NCTSN: [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak\\_factsheet\\_1.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf)

Anxiety Canada: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/challenge-negative-thinking/>

Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/article/supporting-kids-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Go Zen: <https://gozen.com/50-calm-down-ideas-to-try-with-kids-of-all-ages/>

ADAA: <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/top-ten-covid-19-anxiety-reduction-strategies>