

# Recognizing and Dealing with Anxiety in Youngsters

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**J**ust like adults, children and teens feel worried and anxious at times. Throughout a child's life there will be times when they feel anxiety. For instance, many feel anxious when going to a new school or before tests. Some may feel shy in social situations. But if a child's anxiety starts to affect their well being, they may need help to overcome it.

About Our Children consulted with Dr. Kai-ping Wang, the Medical Director of Pediatric Psychiatry at the Valley Medical Group, for his expertise.

**About Our Children:** Are we seeing more anxiety in children and teens these days than in the past, and what is causing so much anxiety?

**Dr. Kai-ping Wang:** Traditionally anxiety has been vastly under recognized. It's often highly internalized and thus causes fewer problems than depressive or behavior disorders. Previously only more severe manifestations, like panic attacks or school refusal, merited attention. Thankfully, there is a growing awareness of mental health and the impact of untreated anxiety in childhood. There may be some external factors, as well. While we are lucky to not have the food anxieties and safety worries of basic needs of refugees or some strife-filled countries suffer, we, as humans do always seem to find something to worry



about. The hyper-connectiveness of social media is fertile ground for envy, insecurity and self-judgment as we compare ourselves to others. Media is rife with fear-driven stories. The importance of testing in schools and increased academic expectations raise the perceived stakes for getting into the best college possible.

**AOC:** When does "normal anxiety" such as taking tests or going to a new school become more worrisome?

**Dr. Wang:** While anxiety is clearly problematic if it affects behavior or function, such as in school refusal, physical complaints, insomnia, moodiness, isola-

tion, etc., any anxiety that adversely affects experience/enjoyment of its worth exploring. Even children with "normal anxiety" benefit from learning how to cope or deal with worry.

**AOC:** What can a parent do to help their children experience less anxiety?

**Dr. Wang:** Parents need to tread carefully, as there is danger in excessively protecting our children from harmful experiences. We hate seeing our kids suffer, but part of parenting and childhood is learning to deal with life's adversities, including anxiety and fears. This can take the form of teaching a child how to manage stress, understand the nature of

fear/anxiety, having coping strategies, and building confidence.

**AOC:** Should a parent be on the lookout for physical symptoms of anxiety, and what are they?

**Dr. Wang:** Yes, things like stomach upset, headaches, tension, fatigue, sleep issues, appetite changes, heart racing, etc.

**AOC:** At what point should a parent refer the child or teenager to a health professional and if so who would be best suited?

**Dr. Wang:** Level of severity and lack of (or limited) progress in coping with anxiety can be some guidelines in seeking an assessment. Most mild to moderate anxiety should be first addressed with therapy, but a good psychiatric assessment can also be of value if there is suspicion of medical involvement in anxiety.

**AOC:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Dr. Wang:** Anxiety is not bad, nor to be avoided. There are a lot of benefits to anxiety. Often it helps drive performance, is protective, or helps us be more connected. Excessive anxiety however, can cause needless worry or effort and stymie growth. Learning to recognize and deal with anxiety appropriately is a critical skill with far reaching benefits into adulthood.

*Heidi Mae Bratt is the editor of About Our Children.*

## Teaching Teens to Cope with Their Anxiety

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**T**eenagers face a plethora of stresses that may lead to anxiety.

There are the social stresses of trying to fit in. There are the stresses of doing well in school and academic performance. There are family stresses, whether it is a challenging or difficult relationship between parent and child, siblings, or the dynamic between parents. And in some families, there is also financial stress.

It is a lot of manage for an adolescent while he or she is trying to figure

out who they are now and who they want to be. Add to the growing list of stressors, the omnipresence and pressure of social media, and it seems that teens carry a weighty load indeed.

Temima Danzig, a clinical social worker who practices in Teaneck, says the key to managing the inevitable stresses is to learn effective coping techniques. In her practice, which targets adolescents and adults, Ms. Danzig uses cognitive, behavioral therapy, which focuses on thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a short-term, goal-

oriented psychotherapy treatment that takes a hands-on, practical approach to problem solving. Its goal is to change patterns of thinking or behavior that are behind people's difficulties, and so change the way they feel.

"I try to teach coping skills on how to handle the negative thinking," so it doesn't lead to problematic behavior patterns and bad feelings, said Ms. Danzig.

Through several different techniques, including visualization, mindfulness, and other techniques to stop distracting lines of thinking, Ms. Dan-

zig says that teens can learn to ebb their anxiety and better deal with the stress that comes naturally with life as an adolescent.

If problems bubble up during these years, it's a good idea, says Ms. Danzig, to teach these youngsters these skills. "We want to be able to teach adolescence how to deal with their emotions and teach effective coping skills," so they would have them for the rest of their lives.

*Heidi Mae Bratt is the editor of About Our Children.*