
Parenting for Prevention

Student Assistance Services Corp., 660 White Plains Road, Tarrytown, New York, 10591, October, 2016

New Beginnings

The fall is a time of renewal and starting fresh, whether a parent or child. Many of us even make “resolutions” similar to ones that we may make when a new year starts. Once the hot summer is over we may have a new vitality and energy to pursue a class, a new lifestyle, or make other positive changes.

For teens it is a time for “new!” New teachers, new curriculums, new notebooks, new clothes, new school activities, new exams and maybe even a new positive attitude toward the challenges ahead. For most children it is an exciting time filled with anticipation. But along with the excitement there is usually some anxiety especially as they settle into the first marking period. For most children, some anxiety can be motivating but for others the anxiety may be very difficult for them to handle and interfere with their ability to function and complete daily activities.

Additionally, sometimes this anxiety can contribute to a teen using alcohol and other drugs as they look for ways to calm themselves so they can deal with their responsibilities. This newsletter will examine signs of anxiety and offer some ideas about strategies that can be implemented to help and anxious teen deal with these feelings.

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CPP

Adolescents and Anxiety

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety is a normal reaction to stress but 25% of 13-18 year olds experience an anxiety disorder and the prevalence is higher for girls than boys. For teens, taking tests, meeting new people, going to a party or participating in an athletic game, concert or play can make them feel apprehensive and anxious. However, some teens feel anxiety more than others.

The fall can be an especially anxious time for teens as this is a time of “transition” when teens begin a new school year. All transitions are usually associated with some stress but in a school environment stress and anxiety are associated particularly with the transition from eighth grade to high school, from junior year into senior year with the attendant stress related to the college process or from senior year into college.

According the Mayo Clinic the following are symptoms of anxiety and may include:

- Persistent worrying or obsession about small or large concerns that are out of proportion to the impact of the event
- Inability to set aside or let go of a worry
- Inability to relax, restlessness, and feeling keyed up or on edge
- Difficulty concentrating, or the feeling that your mind "goes blank"
- Worrying about excessively worrying
- Distress about making decisions for fear of making the wrong decision
- Carrying every option in a situation all the way out to its possible negative conclusion
- Difficulty handling uncertainty or indecisiveness

Other signs and symptoms may include:

- Muscle tension or muscle aches
 - Trembling, feeling twitchy
 - Being easily startled
 - Trouble sleeping or eating
 - Sweating
 - Nausea, diarrhea or irritable bowel syndrome
 - Headaches
 - Irritability
 - Fatigue
 - Overeating
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How Much Anxiety Is Too Much

It can be difficult for parents to determine whether their teen is experiencing acute anxiety. However, a good criteria to assess the situation is to consider the frequency, duration and intensity of the anxiety. If a teen is frequently experiencing intense anxiety and it is interfering with normal activities, it would be wise to consult a mental health professional. According to a 2015 report for the Child Mind Institute, 80% of youth with a diagnosable anxiety disorder are not getting treated.

There are many types of diagnosable anxiety disorders in young people including:

Agoraphobia involves intense fear and anxiety of any place or situation where escape might be difficult, leading to avoidance of situations such as being alone outside of the home; traveling in a car, bus, or airplane; or being in a crowded area.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterized by excessive worry about a variety of everyday problems for at least six months. For example, people with GAD may excessively worry about and anticipate problems with their finances, health, employment, and relationships. They typically have difficulty calming their concerns, even though they realize that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants.

Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which there was the potential for or actual occurrence of grave physical harm. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, and military combat. People with PTSD have persistent frightening thoughts and memories of their ordeal, may experience sleep problems, feel detached or numb, or be easily startled.

Social phobia is characterized by a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and feeling embarrassed or humiliated by their actions. This fear may be so severe that it interferes with work, school, and other activities and may negatively affect the person's ability to form relationships.

Anxiety disorders often co-occur with depression and can lead to impaired school performance, impaired social relationships, and substance use.

The following are considerations when a teen is experiencing extreme anxiety.

It is not normal for a teen to feel worried, anxious or afraid for no specific reason at all. Usually a teen's anxiety is related to an event or activity so if there is no obvious reason for being worried it may be an indication that the teen's anxiety level is too high.

It is normal for teens to worry a bit about everyday events, but if a teen is worrying about

things that are not unusual, this can be an indication that their anxiety level is too high.

It is normal to check to make sure something is done correctly but if a teen checks something over and over again, it may be a sign of too much anxiety.

If a teen is so panicky that they cannot do normal tasks like taking a test, socializing or performing in a sporting event, it may be a sign that their anxiety level is too high.

Treatment for Anxiety

The first step in reducing a teen's anxiety is an accurate diagnosis, followed by the right treatment. It will involve the teen being evaluated by a licensed mental health professional. The most common treatments for anxiety are medication, cognitive behavioral therapy, exercise, and relaxation techniques. However, there are always updates in the research on effective methods so parents should always consult with a licensed mental health professional.

Several kinds of prescription medications can be useful on a short term basis depending on the kind of anxiety a teen has been diagnosed with by a mental health professional. Antianxiety drugs, are called anxiolytics and can include benzodiazepines such as valium and Xanax.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a specific approach to anxiety. A specially trained therapist in CBT helps a teen identify the thoughts and beliefs that cause a teen anxiety and then works with the teen to reduce those thoughts. The therapist makes suggestions and ways to help a teen change those thoughts and beliefs but it is up to the teen to make those changes.

Relaxation techniques can also be helpful to reduce anxiety and negative thoughts and help a teen manage anxiety. They include deep breathing, meditation, listening to calming music, and activities like yoga or tai chi. Helping a teen become knowledgeable about the benefits of these initiatives can be very helpful. Many communities have yoga classes that are only for teens.

Exercise is an effective anti-anxiety treatment and can be a very positive way to reduce anxiety. Exercising releases powerful chemicals in the brain like serotonin which reduces anxiety.

Practicing mindfulness and meditation can also be very effective in reducing anxiety. Mindfulness is a state of mind where you learn to observe your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a present, compassionate, and non-judgmental way. Doing this often helps to bring a sense of calm and relaxation.

In many situations a combination of some or all these treatments can be very helpful for a teen who is experiencing anxiety.

Concerns

Benzodiazepines are the most widely prescribed type of medication for anxiety. Because they work quickly and typically bring relief within 30 minutes to an hour. However, these medications have the potential to be physically addictive and are not recommended for long-term treatment.

Benzodiazepines work by slowing down the nervous system, helping a teen to relax both physically and mentally. But it can also lead to unwanted side effects. The higher the dose, the more intense these side effects typically are. However, some people feel sleepy, foggy, and uncoordinated even on low doses, which can cause problems with work, school, or everyday activities such as driving. The medication's effects can last into the next day.

If a teen is taking this medication, they can also be at risk for accidental death as they may feel disorientated, sleepy and even confused. A teen on this medication may not be able to drive a car or any other vehicle. Even riding a bike or skateboarding can be risky until they process and evaluate the extent to which they are impacted by the drug. **There is a high risk of overdose if the anti-anxiety medication is being used with alcohol or opiates.**

Given the concerns about the increased use of prescription drugs in our country, a teen on medications should be closely monitored by a medical professional so that they do not become addicted to their medication for anxiety. In addition, less risky treatments for anxiety like cognitive behavior therapy, exercise or yoga should be aggressively explored.

Another concern to consider is to make sure a teen is not sharing or selling their medication to others. All teens feel some anxiety and sometimes a teen may feel that they are doing a friend a favor by giving them one or two pills. However, this is against the law as the pills were not prescribed for that teen and taking the pills could have serious consequences for another teen as these are very strong medications.

Anxiety and Substance Use

Using alcohol or marijuana may provide almost immediate but short term reductions in anxiety for some teens but for others, marijuana may increase anxiety and cause paranoia. It is important for parents to explain to teens that every drug, including alcohol and marijuana, may react differently with different people and in different situations. It is also important to explain that every drug has an opposite effect when the desired effect wears off. This is called a withdrawal reaction.

Typically using alcohol for anxiety will have the teen feeling irritable as it wears off. Using marijuana can increase anxiety as the effect wears off and make the teen feel even worse leading to wanting to use more to alleviate the withdrawal reactions. (Shrier 2014)





**New teachers,
new supplies,
new clothes,
new friends,
new pressures.**

**New opportunity
to talk to your teen.**

Back to school is an exciting time filled with new opportunities. But for many teens the start of the new year can also be filled with stress, anxiety, and the pressure to fit in. Learn how to talk to your teen about coping with these things safely at www.PowerToTheParent.org.



A program of the Westchester Coalition for Drug and Alcohol Free Youth. Funding was made possible (in part) by Grant Number SU795P01556 from Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and through a Drug Free Community grant from SAMHSA. For more information call 914-332-1300 or email: LetsDoThis@PowerToTheParent.org

The following are reliable websites that parents can go to for accurate, updated, and research-based information.

National Institute of Health,
<https://www.nih.gov>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) www.samhsa.gov/

Up Coming Event

December 2 9am to 2pm
Youth Leadership Conference,
High School Students
Westchester County Center
Contact: Patty Warble,
(914) 332-100



**Vampires, witches,
zombies, goblins,
peer pressure, drugs,
and alcohol.**

**Some Halloween dangers
are much more real
than others.**

Halloween is one of the biggest nights for teen drinking and drug use. Combined with unsupervised parties and careless drivers, Halloween can be a frightful night for families. Power to the Parent is here to empower Westchester parents. Learn the facts, strategies and information to help you get through to your teens. Teach your teen how not to get tricked this Halloween. PowerToTheParent.org.



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