



How Anxiety Affects the Home

and what to do about it

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Part One: *Understanding Anxiety*

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What is Anxiety

Of all the emotions that children and teenagers will feel, anxiety is one that has the greatest potential to ruin their day. As their parent or caregiver, it can be the easiest to spot and, at other times, will be the invisible monster playing hide and seek.

You may find yourself wondering if you have an overly anxious child or teenager. To answer this question, it is important to know what anxiety really is.

Anxiety is a warning system letting you know that there is something going on that needs attention.

Anxiety is a feeling in your emotions. You could feel fear, tension, fright, anger, hopelessness, and many others.

Anxiety is a feeling in your body. You may have a racing heart, shortness of breath, heightened sensitivity to things around you, and even begin sweating.

Anxiety is thoughts in your mind. These thoughts can be intrusive, excessive worry, worst-case scenarios.

Anxiety is more than stress. Stress is the feelings you may experience when you would expect to (like a big test coming up). Anxiety is still present when it doesn't make sense (when the test is over).

Anxiety is more than worry. Worry is negative thoughts about what might happen. It is a part of anxiety, but just the thinking part.

Anxiety is persistent. It is still there when it doesn't make sense to exist.

Anxiety impacts your ability to function and lasts for a significant amount of time.

Anxiety may cause you to go to extremes to avoid situations that are anxiety-producing.

Anxiety is manageable and can be addressed in a healthy way!



Two Ways People Cope With Anxiety

When life gets difficult for your child and teenager and anxiety shows up, it doesn't always look the same for everyone.

INTERNAL

People who internalize anxiety take what they are experiencing and try to manage it quietly on their own. Rather than providing any outward expressions of their internal pain, they work tirelessly to keep a tight lid on it, so no one knows.

When children or teenagers only internalize anxiety, parents tend not to see the problem until it is significant because the more anxious they might become, the harder they may work to control it on their own.

For these children and teenagers, there are times anxiety is viewed as the choices of an over-achiever. For example, a kid is so anxious about getting the wrong grade or getting the question wrong, they overstudy and become consumed with it. Or they are so worried about getting in trouble, so they become perfectionistic about their choices. Studying and making great choices are great, but when your motivation is due to overwhelming anxiety, this is not a long-term life strategy.

EXTERNAL

People who externalize anxiety attempt to address the anxiety they are feeling on the inside through seeking solutions outside of themselves. They clearly communicate that something is not right, and YOU need to start, stop, or change something to make it better.

When children or teenagers externalize anxiety, parents tend to see behavior that seems to be out of character, defiant, overly emotional, and possibly out of control. They may be the kids that chase after you saying "Mom" or "Dad" five times in a row or ask you 500 questions about what is going to happen next. You can sense the unsettledness in them as they are scrambling for something to change in the present to feel better but never seem to quite find it.

As they manifest symptoms of anxiety, they feel that they are powerless to defeat it and rely heavily on outside circumstances to make things better.



Four Phases of Anxiety

Anxiety is easier to understand when broken down into parts. There are typically four phases to an anxiety-filled moment. These tend to happen in order but will vary in length from situation to situation.

TRIGGER

Something real or perceived starts the beginning manifestations of anxiety in your body and mind. This trigger doesn't have to be seen or present, it can be a thought or feeling. It is like a key starting a car.

ESCALATION PHASE

The fear and worry grow and the awareness that something is not right continues to increase. As the real or perceived danger or threat continues to fill your mind, the anxiety begins to escalate in the body (e.g., neck gets hot, heart beats fast, start to sweat). The intensity of the anxiety begins to increase unless something is done to short circuit the process.

PEAK

Anxiety reaches its highest level, which may look different for each person. This phase could result in completely withdrawing from the situation, shutting down and refusing, becoming angry and out of control, or the onset of a full-blown panic attack.

Note: The peak phase can look very different for those who process anxiety internally and those who process anxiety externally (See [Two Ways People Cope with Anxiety](#) Handout).

DE-ESCALATION PHASE

As your child or teenager begins to turn the corner and control the situation, the anxiety declines as the feelings settle, the thoughts slow down, and the body returns to normal.



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Simple, At-Home Exercises for Anxiety

5-4-3-2-1

When: When you notice your child or teenager exhibits anxiety or is at the peak of anxiety.

What: The child or teenager becomes grounded by redirecting their thoughts from the source of anxiety to what is around them in the present.

How:

5- Name 5 things you can see. (Name out loud if possible.)

4- Name 4 things you can touch.

3- Name 3 things you can hear.

2- Name 2 things you can smell.

1- Name 1 thing you can taste.

FROZEN STRATEGY “DO THE NEXT RIGHT THING”

When: When uncertainty, questions, and concerns lead your child or teenager to freeze in decision making.

What: The child or teenager is able to move from the current problem to the necessary solution without the answer to their question by taking one small successful step.

How:

1. Acknowledge as a parent- the answer doesn't exist at this time.
2. Work together with your child/teenager to answer the question, “What small step can we take right now where we can be successful?”
3. Take the next step in that direction.

NAME IT TO TAME IT

When: When you notice your child or teenager is manifesting signs of anxiety, external or internal.

What: The child or teenager shifts from focusing on the problem towards focusing on the feelings “associated with the problem.” This exercise allows them to express the feeling in the present, so they are able to focus on problem-solving later.

How:

1. Ask, “What are you feeling?” rather than “what is wrong?”
2. Ask them, “What are you feeling in your body?” For example, “Does your neck hurt?”
3. Tell them what you notice, i.e., I see you clenching your fist.



How to Build a Team: Create Support for You and Your Child

Surround your child with a team of people linked arm-in-arm who, together, give them the care they need to deal with their anxiety.

1. FIND A TRUSTED FRIEND FOR YOU.

As a parent, you have your own thoughts and feelings so take time to write them down and to speak them out loud. Taking these steps allows your thoughts and feelings to find clarity. Find a trusted friend, send a text, write an email, have a conversation to put meaning to the moment. The more you process what is going on talk about it, the greater the understanding you will find in what's going on with your child and their anxiety.

Cost: Free

2. TALK TO YOUR PEDIATRICIAN.

Ask the doctor what resources or strategies or referral programs they may have. Ask for suggestions where you can plug your child into something meaningful that we might be able to give them some practical tools to manage anxiety.

Cost: \$-\$\$\$

3. TALK TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER.

Your child's teacher can definitely be aware of what's going on with your child, but they might also be able to give some extra support for your student. Share with them what you notice. Ask them what they notice, especially moments when your child manages it well. Ask if they have any ideas for you at home.

Cost: Free

4. TALK TO YOUR CHILD'S GUIDANCE COUNSELOR AT SCHOOL.

Often, schools have a ton of resources that can help give your child tools and skills. Ask them for resources or recommendations within the school system and their connections in the community.

Cost: Free

5. TALK TO YOUR MINISTRY LEADER OR PASTOR.

They care for your child's heart and soul so they will care deeply about what is going on. Plus, they may have experienced already encouraging your child or teenager through their journey.

Cost: Free

6. TALK TO A HIGHLY TRAINED PROFESSIONAL.

Find a highly trained professional to support your child and your intentional parenting to equip them with strategies to deal with anxiety.

Cost: \$-\$\$\$



How to Parent When You Have Anxiety

Anxiety is contagious and spreads like a virus. If one person in the family is feeling it, then everyone feels it. When considering what is a trigger for you and your anxiety, sometimes it is the presence of anxiety in your child. When anxiety continues to escalate in the parent and child, the cycle can continue until everyone is so utterly exhausted they give up in defeat. Sadly, this most often leaves the source of the anxiety issue unsolved and sets everyone up for failure the next time it occurs.

Be the thermostat, not the thermometer. What this means is rather than allowing what is going on around you to push you down the river of conflict, be the person who sets the tone for the situation, no matter how difficult or volatile. If you can remain calm and consistent, the peace will eventually return.

Here are three commitments to set the stage for success.

1. ***Commit to learning*** what you feel like and look like during your Trigger, Escalation, Peak, and De-escalation Phases (See ***Four Phases of Anxiety*** Handout). When you do this work, then you will know when anxiety is controlling you so that you will be able to be who your child needs you to be in their moment of distress.
2. ***Commit to identifying*** the ways you internalize and/or externalize anxiety (See ***Two Ways People Cope with Anxiety***). The more aware you are of how anxiety presents itself in you, the quicker you will be able to turn the tide as it tries to creep into any situation.
3. ***Commit to being part of the solution*** rather than contributing to the problem. There is a lot of pressure to be right when you can see that the situation is clearly irrational. At that moment, it is best to be doing the right thing for your child with your wise restraint. After the situation has de-escalated, you can return to the conversation to clear up any misconceptions.



Two Mistakes to Avoid When Parenting Anxious Children

Many times, an anxiety flare-up will occur in a difficult or inconvenient time for a family. This is especially true when there is a transition from one setting to another and time expectations on the line. Here are a few typical ones:

- You are trying to get your family somewhere on time
- You have to leave and get somewhere yourself and already late
- Your child has to finish work for school
- Your child must go into a new and unknown situation

When you find yourself here with your child, remember these two items.

Consider your words. As you feel the intense pressure of the moment, always be aware of the words that you are saying. What we say will escalate or de-escalate the situation. We want to ensure the experience of an anxiety meltdown is separate from who they are as a person, that they understand anxiety is what they are dealing with, and is not who they are.



Don't Say

You are anxious.

You always do this.

Stop it!



Do Say

You are feeling anxious.

We've gotten through this before.

Let's use our tools to move forward.

Consider your responses. Dealing with anxiety as a parent can be super frustrating at times. To help with those difficult moments, we can lay a foundation for success when times are peaceful. We do this by ensuring we engage with our children as much or more when they are not as anxious as when they are. Doing this allows them to know that our relationship is built on our love for them, not just their problems.



How to Take the Temperature of Your Home

Parents interact with their children all throughout the day, and each interaction falls under one of three categories: Correct, Direct, Connect. If you spent time thinking about yesterday's interactions from the time your child woke up to the time they went to bed, under which category would each one fall?

CORRECT: AN INTERACTION WHEN A PARENT CORRECTS A CHILD.

Example: "I asked you to be ready for school 30 minutes ago. You are not ready to go. Now the consequence is..."

DIRECT: AN INTERACTION WHEN A PARENT GIVES A CHILD DIRECTION.

Example: "Good morning. Time to get ready for school. Make sure to get your backpack ready. We leave in 30 minutes."

CONNECT: AN INTERACTION WHEN THEY ARE NOT BEING DIRECTED OR CORRECTED.

Example: "Good morning. I am so glad you are here."

Families who struggle with anxiety can often fall under the categories of Correction and Direction, but Connection helps build a relationship. When parents "know" and "see" their children and teens, they give them a firm foundation. So when life stacks on top of them and anxiety comes, kids know they will be okay because they have a Connection with their parent.

Temperature Exercise

Spend time recalling yesterday's interactions with your child or teen. Put a checkmark under the corresponding category.

CORRECT

DIRECT

CONNECT



How to Connect to the Heart of Your Child

- Have a conversation with them that does not involve asking them to do anything or discussing anything that they have done wrong.
- Look for connection moments that emerge throughout the day where you let them know that you “see” them.
- Connection moments don’t have to be deep connections, just simple statements or post-it notes that remind them you thought of them or thought of something special about them.
- Connection moments are your way of saying, “I see you. I see you and not the results of what you’ve done - positive or negative. Just you. I see you.”
- Connection moments don’t need to require long conversations. You are merely allowing your child or teenager to know that you are showing up for them, and they are important enough to engage with them even when they are not in trouble or feeling anxious.
- Connection moments aren’t about their responses, but your initiative. Even if your teen or child doesn’t offer much in return, the point is to show them you were thinking of them.

Author

Jason Gibson is a leading US parenting educator, author, and director of the Babb Center for Counseling, providing guidance to leading counseling centers in Tennessee. Jason has worked with schools, early learning centers, and treatment facilities across the US as a learning and behavioral consultant, supporting children and adolescents with social, emotional or behavioral issues.

With degrees in psychology, social work, and education, Jason's peer-reviewed research has been published in journals such as "Topics in Early Childhood Special Education," "Closing the Gap," and "Education and Treatment of Children with Developmental Disabilities".



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