

# Breaking the Cycle of Anxiety

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural response to certain life stressors that people may experience every day. In healthy amounts, anxiety can be a motivational tool that helps people do their best and learn new skills. Anxiety can also protect us from danger.



If anxiety lasts too long, however, or is too intense, it may begin to interfere with a child's/youth's life. By constantly worrying about things that are unlikely to happen, and by avoiding certain situations or activities for fear of bad things happening, problems can arise at school and with friends.

## Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety can impact a child/youth in the following 4 ways:

### Physical (emotions felt in the body):

- Chest pain, stomachache, nausea, dizziness, lightheadedness, lump in the throat, headache, numbness or tingling, rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling or shaking.

### Behavior:

- Avoidance (not doing things or going places), difficulty raising hand, not getting routine shots or dental work, lack of social networks, trouble sleeping alone, school refusal, refusal to participate in activities
- Dependence and reassurance seeking (asking the same questions over and over again, and seeking comfort in non-threatening situations)

### Thoughts:

- Examples include: "I'll fail my exam, my teacher will yell and everyone will laugh at me, that dog might bite me, what if I throw up at school?"
- Extreme and excessive (worry about things in more extreme ways than their peers)
- Having trouble falling asleep because of thoughts
- Expecting the worst to happen, all the time.

## Functioning (daily life is severely impacted by anxiety):

- Not sleeping
- Trouble at school
- Social withdrawal
- Engaging in high risk behaviors
- Substance use/abuse

## How Can Parents Help?

As a parent, remember that you are the most important person in your child's life. Your child/youth needs a loving but encouraging parent to help support them through the process of learning to cope with and conquer their anxiety.

The goal is not to get rid of anxiety, but to reduce anxiety to manageable levels and improve every day functioning.

- **Educate yourself and your child about anxiety.** Encourage your child to open up about worries and fears. Teach your child/youth about anxiety and help them recognize anxiety in themselves.
- **Understand that some anxiety is expected and developmentally appropriate.** It is understandable that children are going to experience anxiety when placed in new and challenging environments, like starting a new school, making friends, or trying out for a team. We also expect our kids to have certain fears at different stages in life, for example being afraid of monsters or the dark is developmentally appropriate at certain ages. Consider if your child is being exposed to situations or ideas outside their ability to cope.
- **Do not dismiss a child's feelings.** Responding with "don't worry" or "that's just anxiety" can be unhelpful and may make the child feel like their feelings or concerns are not important or real. Instead, learn to recognize anxiety signs and try to identify possible stressors.
- **Identify and get help for anxiety symptoms as early as possible.** The sooner we can support a child/youth to address their anxiety, the easier it can be to break the cycle.

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- **Promote skills and discourage avoidance.**  
Consider what skills your child/youth has to cope with their anxiety and what opportunities we are providing for them to practice. Praise or reward your child/youth for facing fears/worries. Role model brave behavior and facing your own fears.
  - **Encourage independence.** Parents of anxious children can be overprotective. It is important for your child/youth to learn skills to cope with the world. Encourage your child/youth to try new things, take risks, and to do things on their own. Make these changes gradually so they are able to cope and become successful with each step towards independence.
  - **Help your child learn to recognize & address signs of anxiety** (i.e. what does it feel like in their body, what thoughts do they have, how do they behave when feeling anxious) and to develop coping strategies. This handout is a great place to get started:  
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/general/how-to-chill/>  
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/free-downloadable-pdf-resources/>
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## Resources

- Anxiety Canada: [anxietycanada.com](https://www.anxietycanada.com)
- Teen Mental Health: [www.teenmentalhealth.org](https://www.teenmentalhealth.org)
- MindShift: Mindshift is an app designed to help teens and young adults cope with anxiety.  
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>
- Mood GYM:  
<https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome>
- Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada:  
[www.anxietycanada.ca](https://www.anxietycanada.ca)
- Call Health Link Alberta: 811
- CYFAMH Intake: 780-342-2701
- Youth Addiction Services Edmonton: 780-422-7383
- Mobile Response Team: 780-427-4491
- Call 211 – Alberta Community resources
- Catholic Social Services: 780-432-1137
- The Support Network, Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868