



Anxiety in Youth

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is normal. It can even be helpful as it motivates you to work harder, or pushes you to be better prepared for something (like studying for a test or practicing before giving a presentation in front of the class). In fact, it is a survival mechanism. It is our body's way of keeping us safe. It helps us respond to a threat by telling our body to prepare to fight, flee from the danger, or freeze. However, sometimes our brain 'misfires' and tells our body to prepare for danger when there really isn't a danger present, and this causes a very uncomfortable or distressing feeling.

When teens (or adults) face a fear, either real or perceived, their natural response is to react with **fight, flight** or **freeze**. When our bodies respond with **fight** it can come across as aggression, both verbal (yelling out and arguing) or physical (throwing, kicking, shoving). It can cause irritability and defensiveness. We experience increased heart rate and muscle tenseness as our bodies prepare to respond. When our bodies go into **flight** mode, it means we may physically run from the stressor, avoid the task altogether, or refuse to participate. When we **freeze**, we do just that, freeze in place. We can also feel numb or detached, break down in tears, and either give up on the task entirely or develop a sense of perfectionism because we are frozen in fear of making an error and become consumed with making it perfect.

Anxiety not only affects your body, it also affects your thoughts and behaviours. Anxious feelings show themselves in three ways: **physical** (what you feel), **thoughts** (what you say to yourself), and **behaviours** (what you do). How these symptoms display themselves can be quite different in each person. When you are anxious, you may feel like the anxiety is going to last forever, but anxiety is temporary and will eventually decrease. The



first step to successfully managing anxiety is to recognize and understand how it affects you. Self-awareness is very important.

Common Physical Responses:	Common Thinking Errors:	Common Behaviour Responses:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dizziness• Blurred vision• Dry mouth; feel like it is hard to swallow• Shortness of breath• Fluttering or racing heart• Trembling/shaking• Tightness of muscles• Sweating• Stomach aches• Headaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think that danger is everywhere,• Think that some thing or situation is very dangerous when it is not;• Worrying way too much about bad things happening;• Constant thoughts or images of bad things happening;• Predicting negative outcomes• A lot of “what if” thoughts;• Being overly critical of yourself or perfectionistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding situations, people or things• Outbursts• Repetitive rituals• Checking things over• Seeking a look of reassurance• Difficulty falling asleep or waking up frequently throughout the night• Over-preparing• Not letting anyone help you with things



Stay Connected: It is important to have people in your life that you can count on. It helps to be able to talk to a friend when you have had a bad day or are struggling with a problem.

When there might be a problem:

There is a difference between the normal anxiety that we all experience, and having an Anxiety Disorder. Anxiety can become a problem when:

- fear and worry occur when there is no real or immediate danger
- when feelings are frequent and intense, and
- stop you from doing fun and important things (e.g., like going to school, meeting new people, trying new things, doing homework/chores, going to special events).

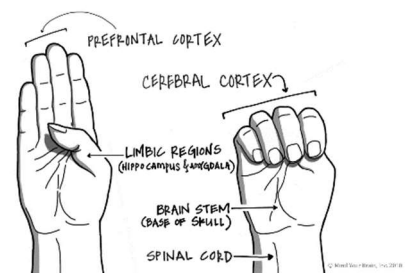
If this is happening, it is important to talk with a trusted adult and seek some support. Get help right away if you are purposefully doing things to hurt yourself or you are drinking and taking drugs to block out negative feelings.

The main way that people handle anxiety is by avoiding anxiety inducing situations. This approach works well in the moment because it lowers the anxious feelings right away (e.g., staying home, avoid social situations). The problem is that avoiding never solves the problem of unrealistic or too intense fears and worries, and it gets in the way of normal life like going to school and having friends.

Flipping your lid

What is happening in our brains when we become anxious? Buried deep in our brain there is a structure called the Amygdala. It is the role of the Amygdala to sense a danger and tell our body to respond with flight, flight or freeze. When the Amygdala fires, it causes the parts of our brain that are responsible for rational thought (Prefrontal Cortex and Cerebral Cortex) to *flip*, allowing the Amygdala to take charge. When faced with a real danger, this automatic response is important; however, when our brains *misfire*, or perceives a threat when there is no actual danger, this is a challenge, and we need to wait for our *lid* to close in order to problem solve. This is why it is so difficult to rationalize with someone in the throws of a temper tantrum, or even to think clearly after something unexpected, like being in a car accident. Our brains go into survival mode rather than problem solving mode. To help *close the lid*, it is helpful to do such things as deep breathing, or muscle tensing and relaxing (see page 6 for strategies). (Dr. Dan Siegel - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOT_2NNoC68)

Hand Model of the Brain





Anxiety is one of the most common mental health concerns for children and adults, affecting upwards of 20% of children and adults over the lifespan.
(Anxietycanada.com)

Where does it come from?

While a certain amount of anxiety is natural and even helpful as it can push us to try our best, some people experience more anxiety than others and it interferes with normal functioning. Biological factors, family factors, exposure to trauma, and environmental factors can determine how we respond to anxiety.

Biological factors

The brain has certain chemicals that allow it to send messages back and forth, controlling what we do, think, and feel. Serotonin and Dopamine are two important neurotransmitters (mood-regulating hormones) that work together to help us feel happier, calmer, and more focused and motivated. Low or elevated levels of either hormone may negatively impact mood, appetite or sleep, and can increase feeling anxious.

Family factors

Just as a child can inherit height, eye colour or athletic ability from a parent, they can also inherit their parent's anxiety. Additionally, anxiety may be learned from a family member or caregiver who is extremely anxious around you. You are keen observers of your parent/caregiver's behaviour and how they respond to stressors. If a parent is fearful of spiders or heights, you may witness this behaviour and take on that anxiety as your own (it can be contagious!).

Trauma

Individuals who endure abuse or trauma, or witness a traumatic event, are at a higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder at some point in life.

Environmental factors

Changes in environment (such as a divorce, moving, changing schools, illness, or death in the family) may also trigger the onset of anxiety. Additionally, a medical condition, such as a severe allergy, can contribute to developing anxiety due to constant fear of being exposed to the allergen and having a reaction.

* It is important to note that what may cause anxious feelings in one person may not in another.

What can I do?

Sometimes things can feel very overwhelming. When this happens, feelings of anxiety increase, and can lead to a negative impact on your physical and mental health. Making healthy choices will help you feel better, and feel more in control of things happening around you. Here are some ideas for reducing anxiety, building coping strategies, and helping you function at your best:

When we are struggling with difficult emotions and challenging situations, it is normal to reach for coping strategies that provide immediate relief. But, some things that make us feel better quickly are unsafe or make us feel worse later. Try to notice the ways you are coping and explore whether your strategies are truly helpful or not.

Questions to ask yourself if a strategy is helpful:

1. Does this calm me down if I am worried, or help me feel better if I am sad?
2. Does this help me sleep better at night?
3. Are there any negative side effects – either right away or later?
4. Does this hurt anyone or put anyone in danger, including myself?
5. Does this help connect me to friends or family members I trust?
6. Who would I be willing to tell about this? Would I want to keep it a secret from adults I respect?
7. If this became a habit, would it be helpful?

If you think some of the ways you are coping are unhealthy or unhelpful, try some of the ideas suggested here.

From trailstowellness.org

Mindfulness

When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, try to focus your attention on what's going on around you in the current moment and focus on one moment at a time. Try to resist the urge to plan for the next day or week or unknown future. Ground yourself in the present by noticing where you are and what you are feeling, without judgement.

Mindful breathing

Taking deep, slow breaths (belly breathing) signals our body to release hormones that cue the brain and body to relax by slowing the heart rate and increasing focus. Breathing is a natural stress-reducer. It is like pressing the reset button, or overriding a fight, flight, or freeze response, and avoids setting off the Amygdala. This gives control back to the problem-solving parts of the brain to allow for a more planned response, instead of acting on impulse when feeling anxious (closing the lid). It also quiets the brain so it can concentrate on the present moment. The more frequently deep belly breathing is practiced, the more it will reduce the production of hormones associated with stress (cortisol), and can help change future reactions to stress.

Learning how to stay calm is a very important life skill. The purpose of calm breathing is not to avoid anxiety but can help reduce feeling overwhelmed and provide a sense of control. Deep breathing can be used anytime - it is portable and always with you!

There are many ways to focus on breathing. Begin slowly, and find a technique that works for you. Try calm breathing for at least five minutes twice a day. At first, practice while feeling relatively calm. Get comfortable with mindful breathing when feeling calm, to help you feel comfortable doing it when you feel anxious. It will soon begin to feel more natural.

When you get in that zone, it's just a supreme confidence...things just slow down. You really do not try to focus on what's going on, because you can lose it in a second. You have to really try to stay in the present, and not let anything break that rhythm.

~Kobe Bryant talking about being 'in the zone' before a basketball game. He did this through mindful breathing. It allowed him to focus only on what was important and ignore the other sounds trying to take his attention.

Benefits of deep breathing

- 70% of toxins are released simply by breathing properly. If you aren't breathing properly, the toxins do not get released.
- Releases tension. When you are afraid, stressed or nervous, your breathing pattern changes. Breathe slowly, purposefully and deeply to feel relaxed.
- Relieves emotional distress. Clear out negative or confused feelings with a deep breath.
- Eases your pain. Breathe in deeply, hold your breath and then visualize that pain leaving your body as you breathe out.
- Improves your blood. Deep breathing releases carbon dioxide and increases oxygen supply, improving blood quality.
- Elevates your mood. Breathing increases pleasure-inducing chemicals in your body.

HOW?

Count to 5. Inhale through your nose, expand your belly and feel your body being filled with healing energy.

Hold and count to 3. Feel the healing energy cycle through your body.

Exhale completely with a slightly open mouth, envision the toxins and negativities leaving your body count to 5.

Repeat until you are completely relaxed.

Calmsage.com



Exercise

Regular exercise will help you feel more energetic throughout the day, sleep better at night, think clearer, and feel more relaxed and positive.

- Exercise promotes all kinds of changes in the brain, including the release of powerful chemicals (endorphins) in your brain that make you feel good!
- Physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better so, too, will your mind.
- Exercise can also serve as a distraction, allowing you to find some quiet time to break out of the cycle of negative or worried thoughts that contribute to feeling anxiety and overwhelmed.

Aim for at least 20 minutes of physical exercise three to four times a week. It can be hard to start a regular exercise program. So, start small and work your way up. Choose an activity you enjoy!

Establish a routine

We all do best when there is some predictability and purpose to our day. Creating a daily schedule can help maintain consistency, and help you include some new coping strategies into your schedule. Learning to manage time more effectively can also help reduce stress. Establish a routine by setting times for eating, showering, doing school work/homework, exercising, relaxing, and sleeping. Don't forget to include time to do something fun and to make a social connection!

- Try to find a balance of things you need to do, want to do, and things that may be hard to do but will make you feel good later.

- Be realistic and patient with yourself. Even if you really want to stick to a routine, it can take time to change habits.
- Work with an adult who can help you decide what to focus on. They might also be able to help keep you on track and help with a reward.
- Remember if something isn't working, you can change it or wait until next week and create a whole new schedule.

Challenge your thoughts

When feeling anxious, our thoughts tend to focus on all the bad things that might happen and start to imagine the worst! Having a lot of worried thoughts can lead to feeling overwhelmed. It can help to identify your worried thoughts and examine how true or helpful the worried thoughts actually are:

Step 1: Identify your thoughts

Ask yourself: What am I worried about? Put your thought in a complete sentence.

"I'm worried I won't be able to _____"

"I don't think I can cope with _____"

"My friends or family will _____"

Step 2: Examine the facts - Try to determine if your thought is fully true, partially true, or not really reasonable. Also, even if your thought is true, try to evaluate how helpful or productive it is.

Ask yourself: How do I know this is true? What is the evidence? Is there any evidence that this thought is not true? Even if this is true, is thinking about this helpful to me right now?

Step 3: Try to come up with a believable, but less worried thought.

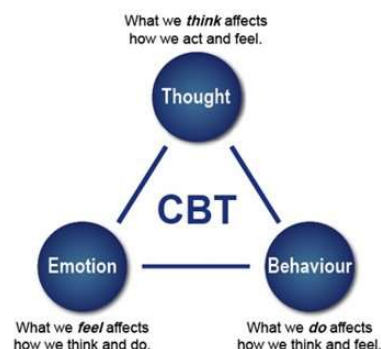
Ask yourself: What would I tell a friend who was having the same thought? If my worried thought came true, how would I cope?

From trailstowellness.org



Sometimes you will need more....

If the intensity, duration and level of disruption become concerning, it may be time to seek professional help or 'clinical intervention.' This means you may need to meet with a doctor, psychologist or social worker to learn how to deal with your anxiety such that it does not *take over* your life and stop you from engaging in activities that are typical for someone your age. The most common type of therapy used to treat anxiety is called **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy**, often called CBT. This is a type of talk therapy that teaches you new ways of thinking and behaving that can help you to control your anxiety in the long-run. It teaches you to change your thoughts and actions. It helps you to understand that in any given situation, you will have thoughts and feelings that cause you to behave in a certain way. Those thoughts, feelings and actions all interact and influence each other. CBT helps you to change your behaviour or your thoughts, and thus your behaviours. If you can change the way you think and behave, then it will also change how you feel.



Helpful Resources

Websites

Anxiety Canada - anxietycanada.ca
Anxiety Coach - anxietycoach.com
Children's Mental Health Ontario - cmho.org
Hamilton Health Sciences - hamiltonhealthsciences.ca
Psychology Foundation of Canada - psychologyfoundationofcanada.com
Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK) - rockonline.ca
School Mental Health Ontario - smho-smso.ca
Teen Mental Health - teenmentalhealth.org
Understood - understood.org
Worry Wise Kids - worrywisekids.org
<https://mindyourmind.ca/>
kids help line
Children's mental health Ontario <https://cmho.org/youth-resources/>
TRAILS to wellness - <https://trailstowellness.org/>
Bounce Back Ontario - <https://bouncebackontario.ca/>
Mind Beacon - <https://info.mindbeacon.com/>

Videos

Managing Stress – Brainsmart BBC - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/hnpQrMqDoqE>
How Stress Affects your body- Sharon Horesh Bergquist - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/v-t1Z5-oPtU>
How Stress Affects your Brain – Madhumita Murgia - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/WuyPuH9ojCE>
Fight Flight Freeze: Anxiety Explained for Teens - <https://www.youtube.com/embed/rpolpKTWrp4>
Breathe in and out with a visual aide - Bubble - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxayUBd6T7M>
Triangle - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdbbtgf05Ek>

Apps:

Mindyourmind - <https://mindyourmind.ca/>
MindShift™ CBT Free Evidence-Based Anxiety Relief

CRISIS: Call 911 / Visit your local hospital emergency room	
URGENT: Kids Help Phone  <small>24/7 counselling and information for youth:</small> • 1-800-668-6868 • kidshelpphone.ca	COAST <small>Mental health crisis outreach and support for all ages.</small> • 905-972-8338 • coasthamilton.ca
NON-URGENT: HWDSB Helps.	<small>Get help or share anonymous tips using...</small> • Text to 905-963-0066 (standard rates apply) • The HWDSB Helps app for iOS and Android. • Web chat - www.hwdsb.on.ca/wehelp