

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Care Givers

Definition

Children and adolescents with **anxiety disorders** have extreme feelings of panic, fear, or discomfort in everyday situations. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress; however, when the anxiety becomes excessive, irrational, and overbearing where an individual has difficulty functioning, it has become a disabling disorder. Anxiety disorders may develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events.

Affecting people of all ages, anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorder in children, affecting nearly thirteen percent of young peopleⁱ and forty million American adults. Overall, nearly one quarter of the population will experience an anxiety disorder over the course of their lifetimes.ⁱⁱ

There are several common types of anxiety disorders that could affect children and adolescents:

- **Panic Disorders**
 - Characterized by unpredictable panic attacks. Common symptoms are: heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness and anxiety and these symptoms are often confused with those of a heart attack.
- **Specific Phobias**
 - Intense fear reaction to a specific object or situation (such as spiders, dogs, or heights) which often leads to avoidance behavior. The level of fear is usually inappropriate to the situation and is recognized by the sufferer as being irrational.
- **Social Phobia**
 - Extreme anxiety about being judged by others or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or ridicule and may lead to avoidance behavior.
- **Separation Anxiety Disorder**
 - Intense anxiety associated with being away from caregivers, results in youths clinging to parents or refusing to do daily activities such as going to school.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**
 - Individuals are plagued by persistent, recurring thoughts (obsessions) and engage in compulsive ritualistic behaviors in order to reduce the anxiety associated with these obsessions (e.g. constant hand washing).
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**
 - PTSD can follow an exposure to a traumatic event such as natural disasters, sexual or physical assaults, or the death of a loved one. Three main symptoms: reliving of the traumatic event, avoidance behaviors and emotional numbing, and physiological arousal such as difficulty sleeping, irritability or poor concentration.

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
 - GAD results in patients experiencing six months or more of persistent, irrational and extreme worry, causing insomnia, headaches, and irritability.

Why do we care?

Although children and adolescents with anxiety are capable of leading healthy successful lives, left undiagnosed youth with anxiety disorders can fail in school, increase family stress and disruption, and have problems making or keeping friends. To avoid these harmful consequences, early identification and treatment are essential.

What can we do about it?

- **Take your child to a mental health care professional if an anxiety disorder is suspected.**
 - Consult with teachers first so that specific school-related academic and social issues can be addressed.
- **Once diagnosed, caregivers should consult with the health care expert on how best to provide for the child's needs, which may include:**
 - Ensuring the child receives their medication on schedule.
 - Practicing relaxation techniques at home as recommended by the clinician.
 - Learning as much about your child's anxiety disorder so that you can be their advocate.
 - Consulting with teachers and school psychologists so that the child's special needs can be met in school.
- **Specific strategies that can be used at home include**
 - Be predictable.
 - Provide support and comfort, remembering to encourage all of the child's efforts.
 - Never ridicule or criticize the child for becoming anxious. Although there may be no logical danger, these feelings are real to the child.
 - While avoiding coercion, it is important not to enable the child in avoiding their fears. This can be accomplished by breaking up large tasks by into smaller, more manageable, steps.
 - Avoid constantly reaffirming to your children that everything will be ok. It is important that they learn that they are capable of reassuring themselves and devise ways to do so.
 - Do not attempt to eliminate all anxious situations for your child. Children with anxiety disorders must learn that it is normal to experience some anxiety.
 - Create a mutual plan with the child to address their needs, letting the youth set the pace for their recovery.

Key Resources/Links

1. **Massachusetts General Hospital School Psychiatry Program and MADI Resource Center** provides a wealth of information on anxiety disorders, with specific information on symptoms, treatments, and interventions for families, educators, and clinicians.

http://www.mgh.harvard.edu/madiresourcecenter/schoolpsychiatry/schoolpsychiatry_childadolescent.asp

2. **Psych Central** offers anxiety screening quizzes, detailed information on the symptoms and treatment options available for anxiety disorders, and online resources such as websites, relevant book information, and support groups. <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/anxiety>
3. **Anxiety Disorders Association of America** assists those with anxiety disorders with finding a therapist, understanding their disorder and treatment recommendations, and offers inspirational stories, support groups. It has a special section devoted to children and adolescents. <http://www.adaa.org/AboutADAA/introduction.asp>
4. **Freedom from Fear** details strategies family members can use when a relative is diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx_factsheet.asp?id=27
5. **Worry Wise Kids** lists the red flags that can alert parents to each individual anxiety disorders, details the steps parents can take if they suspect their child suffers from an anxiety disorder, and supplies parenting tips for helping anxious youths. <http://www.worrywisekids.org>
6. **National Institute of Mental Health** – Anxiety Disorder Basic Facts sheet and links to resources. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/HealthInformation/anxietymenu.cfm>
7. **Bright Futures - Tips for Parenting the Anxious Child** Free handout for parents. <http://www.brightfutures.org/mentalhealth/pdf/families/mc/tips.pdf>
8. **The Anxious Child** – Handout for parents created by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/anxious.htm>

ⁱ <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/CA-0007/default.asp#8>

ⁱⁱ http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx_factsheet.asp?id=10