

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety means feeling worried and nervous. It is a normal human reaction to stressful situations or even new situations. Anxiety is both psychological and physical.

*Psychological symptoms* include worried thoughts, being unable to concentrate, being irritable, thinking the worst, and feeling afraid.

*Physical symptoms* of anxiety include racing heart, fast breathing, stomach aches or “butterflies”, headache, muscle tension, and constantly feeling tired and “on edge”.

## Isn't Anxiety Normal?

Anxiety is a normal built-in human reaction to signal that you need to be ready for action or that there is some danger. Anxiety is a signal that often helps us to pay attention, to be careful, or to recognize that there is a problem to be solved. Anxiety plays a role in the development of the conscience as children are growing up; they learn that disobeying rules makes them anxious which doesn't feel good.

It is normal to become anxious when big changes are happening: a new school, a move, changes in the family structure (new baby, new marriage, etc.), or when upsetting things happen – loss of a friend, when parents are fighting. Children also tend to worry about certain things at different ages. Preschoolers worry about the dark or being separated from their parents. Older children worry about whether they will be accepted by friends or on a team, or about tests. Teens worry about friends, their future, their health and so on.

## When is Anxiety a Problem?

Anxiety is a problem if it occurs too much of the time, or is interfering with daily life.

## Anxiety in Young People:

Children can have all the anxiety disorders that adults suffer. At least 5 per hundred children will have a significant anxiety problem such as Panic Disorder, Generalized Anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Even more will have Social Phobia, or other phobias or fears.

The challenge with childhood anxiety is that it is often not recognized. While some children may be obviously upset and worried, others will have different reactions, becoming angry, uncooperative and even aggressive.

Common symptoms of anxiety in children:

- Worries
- Tearfulness
- Clinging
- Avoidance or Withdrawal
- Separation fears
- Sleep problems
- Physical complaints
- Constant fatigue

Other symptoms of anxiety in children:

- Anger, Tantrums
- Irritability
- Oppositional attitude
- Inflexibility
- Aggression
- Inattentiveness
- Fidgety or hyperactive
- Refusal to go to school
- Excessive resistance to doing work

## What Causes Anxiety?

- Inborn, inherited tendency
- Shy or cautious temperament
- Unpredictable lifestyle
- Stressful experiences
- Learning from anxious parents
- Habit patterns of avoidance

*The tendency to anxiety is inherited, and made worse by stressful experiences.*

## Anxiety is Contagious in Families:

Anxious children affect the rest of the family. Often the anxious child is demanding, difficult to please, won't go to sleep in her own bed at night, and disrupts daily routines with refusal to cooperate or emotional outbursts. Parents may disagree about handling this, and feel unsure about whether to be more firm, or to give in. The end result is frustrated, tired parents who feel they are “walking on eggshells” around the anxious child. Often the parents are already anxious people. Anxiety is contagious within families, and it seems that everyone ends up its prisoner.

## Anxiety and Perfectionism:

Many anxious children are “perfectionistic”. They want to do things perfectly right away – or else they may refuse to do them at all. Sometimes perfectionistic children are quite paralyzed by this. They don't feel like they can start anything because they won't do it well enough anyway. They finally start, and a little thing goes wrong, and they have a catastrophic reaction. Generally, they end putting everything off or “procrastinating”. Homework piles up, chores are not done, the room is a mess, and they certainly don't look like most people's idea of a perfectionist. They may refuse to try new things. They won't ride a bike, won't go to the new preschool, and often won't do written schoolwork. This is even worse if they also have a minor problem with coordination so their work doesn't look neat.

The suggestions that follow for managing anxiety really work for these kids. An excellent book is called [Perfectionism: What's So Bad About Being Too Good](#) by Adderholdt-Williams.

## Helping Anxious Children

In most cases, the tendency to be anxious stays with a person throughout their life. So we need to help anxious children develop coping skills to manage their own anxiety eventually. This starts with parents helping them. Older children and teens can do some of this for themselves!

**1. Assessment:** Have a child's general health checked by the doctor. Untreated allergies, anemia, ear infections or other problems make it harder for anxious children to cope. The doctor can also check out whether panic attacks or obsessive compulsive disorder, which need very specific treatment, are present. For some kinds of anxiety, medicine may be suggested, but in most cases treatment includes learning new coping skills.

**2. Look after the basics:** No one copes well when they are tired or hungry. Anxious children often forget to eat, don't feel hungry, and don't get enough sleep. Establish bedtime routine (see below), and offer frequent, nutritious snacks. Anxious children rarely eat a large full meal. They are better to "graze" as long as the snacks cover the basic food groups in a day.

**3. Establish routines:** Routines reduce anxiety. But anxiety tends to disrupt routines. So you need to work hard to build regular patterns so life is more predictable. Have the child help plan the routine. Making an attractive schedule for the fridge gives a sense of control and order. This is not the kind of child who copes well with a disorganized, "spontaneous" family style. Help the child adjust to changes by gradually introducing them and preparing them in advance.

**4. Bedtime routines** are especially important. Start at least an hour before the planned bedtime, build in a story, a chat time, some warm milk or snack. A warm bath ahead of time may help. The ritual helps the child gradually relax. It is important that parents not get into the habit of sleeping with the child or having them fall asleep in the parents' bed as this becomes a habit which is hard to break. Settle them with some quiet music or a story tape, and check in briefly at planned intervals (5 min. for young child, 10-15 min. with older) so they don't need to worry about where people are. A good routine can take several weeks to establish, but everyone will feel better once it is in place.

**5. Plan time for homework and projects:** This needs to be a regular part of the schedule, as anxious children tend to procrastinate. Because anxious children become overwhelmed, breaking the job up into small chunks, setting a specific time to work, and rewarding yourself for each bit done are tools they need to learn. Often the hardest part is getting started, so knowing that the TV program is on afterwards, or having computer time to look forward to can help to start.

**6. Firm, consistent parenting:** Anxious children feel calmer when life is predictable, when they know what is expected of them, and what the consequences will be. Setting limits is a challenge for parents, however, when the child becomes so upset. With practice, everyone can feel more secure, and children are relieved to have adults in charge.

**7. Tools to relax:** Teach the child a way of relaxing by mental imagery, progressive muscular relaxation, described in the booklets, "Taming the Worry Dragon". To order phone (604)875-3549.

**8. Tools to cope with worrying:** Some simple ways of "locking up" worries in an imaginary box, or setting a scheduled "worry" time are some tools to control the amount of energy worry takes up. Other ideas are to mentally "pull the plug" on the worry, "take out the worry disk so it's not using up all the RAM", "caging the worry dragon", or whatever image suits a child's interests. Fortunately, most anxious children have a talent for "creative worrying" which can be harnessed for creative problem-solving instead.

**9. Taking risks:** Anxious children need to try some experiments like making phone calls, talking to a new friend, and encouraging themselves through positive "self-talk" instead of imagining the worst. Parents can model these tools by using them too.

**10. Physical exercise:** This is helpful not only in relieving stress, but also in triggering a physical "relaxation response". Anxious children often feel "tired all the time" because they are always exhausting themselves with worry, so they don't feel like exercising. But exercise will improve energy and reduce worry. Try to find something fun to do together rather than making this a chore.

### Does Anxiety Go Away?

Anxiety can get better or be better controlled, but the tendency stays with people. If it is not managed, other problems like depression can occur. That's why it is so important to develop tools to master it. The good news is that anxious children can become very skilled and confident at managing their anxiety, and this is an achievement which helps them cope with future life challenges with extra skill.

### For more information:

See the booklet: "Taming the Dragons" for more ideas. To order, phone (604)875-3549. Contact your local Mental Health Center for counseling and parent support.



**HELPING**

**ANXIOUS**

**CHILDREN**

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*Adapted from Children's Mood and Anxiety Disorders  
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