



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 45

Everything You Need to Know About Teenage Anxiety Symptoms

It's not uncommon for teenagers to suffer from serious anxiety. Anxiety is difficult enough to deal with, but when you're also a teenager that is dealing with all of the issues of growing up and high school, it can become a real problem.

In this article, we'll look at the symptoms of anxiety and what they involve in teenagers.

Types and Symptoms of Anxiety in Teens

The way symptoms of particular anxiety disorders manifest in children and adolescents often differ slightly from the way the symptoms of the same disorders manifest in adults. For this reason it is important to familiarize yourself with the behaviors associated with the teenage versions of various anxiety disorders.

The descriptions below are summaries of those found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition or DSM-IV, the diagnostic reference manual used by most mental health professionals.

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** GAD is one of the most common anxiety disorders among adolescents. It is marked by intense, unrealistic and uncontrollable anxieties connected to multiple (rather than a singular) objects, ideas and/or situations. A teen with GAD is likely to express concerns about how others perceive them, the safety of family members, and have negative feelings about the future. They will often seek reassurance from friends and from adults to the uncontrollable nature of their anxiety. They may also display conforming behavior, intense self-criticism and difficulty concentrating.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)** SAD is the most common of anxiety disorders. People with SAD experience intense fear and discomfort in social situations to the degree that their functionality in such situations is impaired. Excessive blushing, shaking, stammering, sweating, rapid speech and nausea are often present. In teens in particular, SAD increases the likelihood of drug and alcohol use as a coping mechanism and can lead to depression and suicidal tendencies.

Teens with SAD may spend most of their time alone or with only one or two close friends, avoid joining clubs or doing after school activities at school and receive low grades in participation in classes even when their other scores are high. They may be shy, although not all shyness is social anxiety disorder.

- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** It is estimated that OCD affects 2-3% of children and adolescents. Adolescents with OCD will experience intrusive thoughts and images and engage in compulsive ritual actions in response to these intrusive thoughts in ways that interfere with their daily lives. It is important to diagnose this condition early on, as an estimated 10% of adolescents with OCD will attempt suicide either in their youth or as adults, so this is an important disorder to watch out for.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** PTSD, while more common in adults, does also occur in teens. There are some studies that indicate teens can actually develop brain dysfunction if they have had untreated PTSD since childhood, possibly because of the way it affects brain development. PTSD usually occurs when a person experiences a traumatic event, and in some cases if they witness a traumatic event. The symptoms include increased awareness of dangerous situations and increased stress related to them, vivid flashbacks (during waking hours and/or when asleep), heightened startle response, and panic attacks. The symptoms must last four weeks or more for the disorder to be diagnosed as PTSD. If the symptoms last 4 weeks or less, it is considered a panic disorder.
- **Panic Disorder** Panic attacks generally involve three or more of the following symptoms: a rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, shaking, dizziness, nausea, derealization and an intense fear of dying. The events may also cause health anxiety. Panic disorder in adolescents is defined by reoccurring panic attacks that may be either unpredictable (not connected to a particular environmental trigger), situationally bound (dependent on an unavoidable in the presence of the environmental trigger) or situationally predisposed (meaning that the presence of a specific environmental trigger sometimes but not always results in a panic attack). After 10 minutes the panic attack will usually have peaked and begun to subside.
- **Separation Anxiety** Separation anxiety used to only be classifiable if the teenager is under 18 years of age, but it has recently been added to the DSM-V. It is identifiable by an intense uneasiness due to either the thought or the reality of being separated from a place or people with whom they are strongly emotionally connected. It is considered a disorder based on the appropriateness of the feelings considering the teen's level of developmental advancement, and based on whether or not the feelings are interfering with their ability to visit friends or attend school.
- **General Phobias** A teen may develop a phobia as a result of a traumatic incident involving a particular stimulus, due to fears learned from parents at a young age, or for reasons that may never be entirely clear. Phobias in teens manifest in much the same way as they do in adults. Phobic teens feel intense

nervousness and fear when confronted by certain stimuli and avoid those stimuli whenever possible.

Medical treatment for anxiety disorders is generally prescribed on a case by case basis by a mental health professional. However, there are other, safer treatment options available, which will be discussed in the following section.

Safe Anti-Anxiety Treatments for Teens

As with anxiety symptoms, anxiety treatment recommendations for teen sufferers are slightly different from those generally prescribed for adults. Because teens' brains are still developing, it is best to avoid medications whenever possible and to begin by trying non-medical techniques for relieving anxiety, including:

- **Exercise** Exercise is the most important activity a teenager can do. Lots of teens think the idea of exercise is silly, since fitness isn't exactly a teenager problem. But exercise does more than build muscles. It also releases chemicals in the brain that improve mood and relaxation, and tires muscles to decrease anxiety symptoms. It's one of the most valuable tools for controlling anxiety a person can integrate into their lives.
- **A Healthy Diet** A healthy body is often the key to a healthier mind. A healthy heart, lungs and muscles lessen the strain that anxiety causes the body, and allow a teenager to participate comfortably in healthy stress-relieving leisure activities such as running, biking, hiking or swimming. Additionally, a healthy body improves self-image, which is a fragile thing during teenage years.
- **Positive Feedback** Letting a teen know that they are worthwhile and can do whatever they set their minds to will help them to retain a sense of worth as a person when mood swings and teenage drama get them down. Even when they do something stupid due to a lack of judgment, it is good to be as supportive as possible.
- **A Supportive Attitude** Even when a teen's desires and dreams seem unreasonable or far-fetched, bear in mind that the logic and judgment centers of their brains have yet to develop and that they are more likely to want to do the opposite of what you say that follow through with doing something you casually approve of. This type of attitude will limit stress on the teen by making them feel as though they have someone on their side, and also limit strain in familial relationships.
- **Meditation** Meditation is a great way for teens to get time to themselves and also a method of teaching them to discipline their minds and bodies to work for rather than against them. Learning controlled breathing techniques and how to relax their minds at will help them to cope with all the stresses they face on a daily basis and provide them with a drug and risk-free method of escaping reality.
- **Joining a Club** Finding a club to join is a good idea even for teens that are not as comfortable in social situations. Clubs allow teens to engage in activities they are passionate about, with people who share the same interests, rather than forcing them to assimilate to fit in socially and have friends. Having people to talk

to and stuff to do, whether it's knitting, reading, playing chess or protecting animal rights, is a reliable way to relieve stress and promote positivity and purpose.

- **Self-Help Books or Groups** Self-help books are a more private way of seeking help, while groups offer support from peers going through similar challenges. These types of resources can provide a teen with tips and philosophies to help them to cope better with their anxiety symptoms and to prevent anxiety from controlling their lives.
- **Therapy** Therapy provides a teen with someone to talk to about their anxiety on a regular basis and to offer them support and help when they have trouble finding it elsewhere. It teaches coping mechanisms to teens for dealing with the causes of their anxiety and helps to uncover unhelpful the negative beliefs and thought patterns the teen may harbor that lead them to feel anxiety. Altering these beliefs and unhealthy thought patterns is often a crucial step towards defeating teenage anxiety.
- **Keeping a Journal** Keeping a daily journal is a great way to facilitate the process of uncovering negative beliefs and thought patterns that contribute to anxiety, as well as providing teens with a healthy, creative and productive outlet for their thoughts and feelings.

Ensuring that a teen has positive and supportive family relations and that they have healthy outlets for their minds and bodies to work out the stress can have a huge impact on limiting how deeply teenage anxiety will affect them.

It is also important to bear in mind that if a teen does not feel that their condition is impeding their life, that they should not be treated as though they are sick unless they are endangering themselves or others. Teenagers are likely at an age where they need to feel control, and if they're forced into therapy they may rebel.

An Effective Anxiety Treatment for Teens

If the above methods have been tried and the teen still isn't responding, it may be time to consult a psychologist for a medication recommendation. Medications are necessary in some cases where chemical imbalances have become too severe to balance out on their own, and their necessity, if it arises, should not be looked upon as a weakness of character or a failing of any person involved.

The sooner severe, life-impeding anxiety is addressed, the sooner a teen can move on to living the healthy and fulfilling life they want for themselves without anxiety holding them back.

Article from the CalmClinic

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