

Seven Tips to Support Children with Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal response to stress. It gives people energy to run or face the problem. At low levels, anxiety is manageable and can be helpful. Children and youth are often *anxious* about separating from parents and coping in social situations. They *worry* about things and they can have specific fears (e.g., animals, needles, insects).

Common symptoms include **anxious thoughts**, **avoidance**, ("I don't want to"), and a **physiological response** (stress hormones and physical tension). The physical response is very real and can be distressing.



Effects of Stress Hormones	Effects of Tension
Increased heart rate	Sore muscles
Increased breathing	Numbness or tingling
Upset stomach (sore, butterflies)	Shaking or trembling
Nausea	Pale skin
Hot, flushed, sweaty skin	Cold limbs
Dizziness	

How Can We Help?

1) Talk about Feelings. Help youth to build an emotion vocabulary. If your child has the words to describe the way they feel, emotions can seem less overwhelming and more manageable. Some words to describe anxiety include: *nervous, anxious, fearful, afraid, scared, tense, worried, frightened, timid, and shy*. They can then rate their feelings on a **scale of 1 – 10** (low to high)

2) Have Bedtime Conversations. A good time to talk with young people is at the end of the day when preparing for bed. Ask them about any ***not-so-good things*** that happened during the day and ***how they felt***. Then ask about ***good things*** that happened during the day and ***how they felt***.

3) Encourage Them to Face Their Fears. The main treatment for anxiety is exposure. We want to support young people to ***face their fears***. But we don't want to overwhelm them. Begin with small steps and support them along the way. Try saying things like:

- ☛ "I know this is hard for you, but I'd like you to try your best."
- ☛ "I'll help you to try it out."
- ☛ "You're doing great!"



LIGHTHOUSE PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES

Dr. Michael Zwiers and Associates

Seven Tips to Support Children with Anxiety

- 4) **Plan Ahead.** Identify situations where anxiety might arise (e.g., new situations, changes in routines, new caregivers, trips or outings). Help to prepare young people for these events. Ask them to share any concerns or questions they may have. Talk about what might take place. Talk about how they feel. Make a plan for success.
- 5) **Teach Them to Relax.** Relaxation is natural but bad habits can sneak in. Remind them to relax their muscles. A good way to do this is to **tense the muscles for 5-10 seconds then let them go**. What does it feel like to be relaxed? Another good way to relax is to **breathe slowly and deeply**. Proper breathing triggers the body's natural relaxation response. When we breathe properly, the stomach should be pushed out for a second or two before letting it go. Another way to relax is to close your eyes and imagine that you are in a relaxing situation. **Then visualize yourself being relaxed and successful** in the anxious situation.
- 6) **Reduce Perfectionism.** Anxious people often want to get things perfect every time. Help them set realistic and achievable goals. Encourage them to try new things and take risks. Help them to value effort as much as results, especially when learning new things. Remind them that no one is perfect, then help them to focus on what they did right and what they can learn from their mistakes. Celebrate effort, improvements, and personal bests.
- 7) **Consider Their Diet.** Some food and drinks contain stimulants, which will increase agitation and anxiety. A common culprit is *Caffeine* which is found in coffee, tea, pop (usually colas), and chocolate (as well as some pain relievers and decongestants). Relaxing drinks that can help to settle people down include warm milk (which releases a substance called Tryptophan a natural relaxant), and some herbal teas (e.g., peppermint and chamomile).

NOTE: Stimulant medication and steroids can also increase anxiety.

A Few Helpful Resources:

- ★ Anxiety Canada has some excellent free online resources: <https://maps.anxietycanada.com/>
- ★ Dr. Katarina Manassis has written a helpful book for parents called **Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child**

When Should A Specialist Be Involved?

Sometimes our best efforts and supports may not be enough, and youth need to see a specialist. People who treat anxiety disorders come from many professions, including physicians, psychologists, and counsellors. Sometimes medication is needed, but this can only be prescribed by physicians (e.g., pediatricians, family doctors, child psychiatrists). If you are not familiar with a mental health specialist in your area, talk to your family doctor or pediatrician.

Anxiety is very common. Thankfully, it is also highly treatable!

