

A Therapist's Guide to Helping Teens Manage Anxiety

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WHAT EXACTLY IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is the body's natural response to perceived danger. It activates our fight-or-flight system—even when there's no real threat.

For teens, anxiety can be triggered by social situations, academic pressure, family dynamics, or simply the chaos of adolescence.

Anxiety is not a character flaw, weakness, or lack of motivation. It's a signal that the nervous system is overwhelmed.



VALIDATE, DON'T "FIX"

Many well-meaning adults try to offer advice too quickly:

- "You're overthinking it!"
- "What are you so worried about? It's going to be fine."
- "Don't stress. Just breathe."



Though they may be well-intentioned, these phrases can leave teens feeling dismissed. What they often need first is validation—*acknowledgement that their experience makes sense and that they're not alone.*

- "It sounds like that was incredibly overwhelming."
- "I can see why your brain went there."
- "It makes sense that you feel this way. We can work through this together."

TALK ABOUT IT

One of the most powerful things adults can do is normalize conversations about anxiety. When we talk about anxiety like it's something that's common and treatable (because it is), we reduce shame.

Encourage teens to:

- Name their anxiety
 - "This is just my anxious brain talking."
- Externalize it
 - "Even though I am having this thought, that does not make it true. I am not my thoughts."
- Notice patterns without judgment
 - "I tend to feel more anxious on Sunday nights—what might help?"



TEACH NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION BASICS

Teens often need help connecting what they're feeling to what's happening in their bodies.

Here are a few self-soothing strategies they can try:

- **Box breathing** (inhale for 4 (seconds), hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4)
- **Progressive muscle relaxation**
- **Cold water or ice** for sensory grounding
- **Movement**—like walking or stretching—before trying to focus



DON'T WAIT FOR CRISIS

So many parents reach out for help when things have already hit a breaking point. That's completely understandable, but there's so much value in supporting teens before anxiety becomes unmanageable.

If you notice changes in sleep, appetite, motivation, or emotional outbursts—it may be time to check in. Asking “How’s your anxiety been lately?” can be more helpful than “What’s wrong?” because it gives teens a familiar framework.

You can also share examples from your own life to help teens feel less alone in their experience (i.e., “I’ve noticed that when I am feeling more anxious and overwhelmed, I struggle to fall asleep at night.”)



If you're a parent, educator, or therapist looking to support the teens in your life, I hope this guide gives you a place to start. And if you're a teen reading this: know that you're not alone, and help is always within reach.

Follow me @mindrisepsychology on Instagram for more tools, guides, and honest conversations about supporting kids and teens through mental health challenges.

