

## Patient and Family Education

# Treatment for Anxiety in Children and Teens

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**The best treatment for anxiety combines several approaches:**

- Stress reduction
- Physical exercise
- Lower stress at home and school
- Therapy for the child
- Medication
- Learn more about anxiety
- Treat anxiety in parents and other family members

### **Stress Reduction**

- Talk with your child about stress. Everyone feels stress sometimes. It is ok to feel anxious in certain situations.
- Be a model for your child. Learn techniques that help you and talk with your child about them. Let your child see how you cope with stress.
- Use stress management techniques such as deep breathing, relaxation, and positive imagery. Help your child to use these before stressful events, such tests in school, or after upsetting events.

### **Physical Exercise**

Regular daily exercise should be part of any treatment plan for anxiety. Exercise lowers stress and improves coping. Plan for at least one hour of exercise each day. Many children like variety. Fun is important!

- Think of activities that your child likes.
- Physical activity or active play; try simple activities like walking, biking, and swimming. These can become life-long pleasures. Just being active in green spaces has been shown to help with improving anxiety.
- Group activities are good for socialization and being on a team is fun.
- Family activities bring families together. Play catch. Go for a walk. Kick a soccer ball. Be creative.

### **Lower Stress at Home**

Anxious children respond to stress around them, especially at home. Lowering stress at home can make a big difference:

- Work with your spouse or partner to settle differences of opinion calmly, without angry words, yelling, or violence. If you can't do this on your own, seek help.

- Make a family rule that nobody hurts anybody else. Hurting can be physical (hitting, pinching) or emotional (teasing, put-downs). Enforce the rule.
- Have a family meeting each week to talk together about how you are doing as a family. Is everyone feeling safe? Does everyone get a chance to speak and be heard?

## **Lower Stress at School**

School is often stressful. Try these strategies:

- Ask your child about bullying. It could be physical (pushing, threatening) or emotional (excluding a child, teasing). Ask about what happens at recess, at lunch, and in the hallways. Talk with the principal about the school’s anti-bullying plan. Make sure the plan is being implemented.
- Having an adult outside the classroom who can provide problem-solving or anxiety management strategies. Most schools have counselors who do this.
- Taking tests in a quiet, private environment might reduce anxiety.
- Ask your child’s teacher. Teachers often have helpful ideas. If your child has one, these can be written into the student’s 504 Plan or Individualized Educational Plan.

## **Anxiety in Parents and Other Family Members**

Anxiety problems run in families. If your child has anxiety, there is a good chance that you have had anxiety at some point in your life, or maybe your child’s other parent. Think about your child’s siblings, aunts and uncles on both sides, and grandparents; anxiety is also likely to show up in these relatives.

When parents have anxiety problems themselves, it makes it harder for them to help their children deal with anxiety. Anxiety has a tendency to “rub off.” When children see their parents responding with anxiety, they become more anxious. On the other hand, when parents cope with things with calm confidence, children feel reassured and their anxiety tends to go down.

If you know that you have an anxiety problem, get treatment for it. Parents often put off taking care of their own needs because they are too busy looking after everyone else. But leaving your own anxiety untreated can make everything more difficult. It’s better to make the time to get the help you need for yourself; then you will be better able to help your child. The same applies if the problem is in your spouse or partner. Support each other in getting your own anxiety problems under control, and you will find that your child’s problems will be much easier to manage.

## **Therapy for Anxiety**

For most children, the best therapy is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). In CBT, the therapist helps the child change his or her thinking about what is stressing them. Cognitive (thinking) changes lead to changes in emotional and behavioral responses. Several different CBT programs have been proven to work. The best known is called “Coping Cat.”

All CBT programs include several different parts. These include:

- explaining anxiety in a way children can understand it;
- relaxation techniques;
- teaching ways of thinking that challenge the anxiety thoughts; and
- gradually exposing the child to the things that (used to) make him or her very anxious.

## Not all therapy is CBT

For therapy to be **most** effective it **typically** needs to happen at least every other week and it often takes about 2-3 months to see improvements. Therapy should involve “homework” where you and your child are practicing skills and strategies at home between sessions. Usually it takes at least 3 sessions for kids to get comfortable enough with a therapist to know if they are a good fit, and for children with more significant anxiety it may take longer. You may need to change therapists before you find the right one for your child.

**It is important to remember that addressing anxiety is difficult and will not always feel comfortable to your child. Supporting them in continuing with practicing strategies is likely to lead to long-term improvement.**

## Medication for Anxiety

Medication alone is almost never the answer. Think about medication when you are already using the techniques above, and things still need to get better. Medication and counseling *together* are more effective than either alone. Your therapist may recommend after meeting with you and your child that a trial of medication should be considered.

Before you give your child medication, be sure you can answer the following questions:

- What do you hope will get better? Try to be specific. For example, “My child will have more days when he can go to school without upset, or can feel comfortable taking a walk with me.”
- When can I expect these changes to happen? Most anxiety medications take about a month before you can see real differences; but some take less time and others may take more.
- What side-effects should I look for? What mild side effects are common? What are the less common but more severe side effects to be aware of? What should I do if I see side effects?

If you decide on medication, make a specific plan for how you will give it *every day*. It is often very hard to give medication every single day.

The medications that are most often used for all types of anxiety belong to a family of medications called SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors). These medicines are also antidepressants. SSRIs include fluoxetine (brand name is Prozac), escitalopram (brand name is Lexapro), and sertraline (brand name is Zoloft).

Benefits usually appear in 2 - 4 weeks, and get stronger over time. You might see less worry, more calmness, and easier separations. The doses should start low and increase slowly to minimize side effects. As with all medications, the goal is to use the *lowest* dose that works. If you think the medication is not working, or you are concerned about side effects, call the doctor. Don't just stop these medications; that may cause worse side effects.

Common side effects of SSRIs include stomach aches, constipation, diarrhea, weight gain or loss, sweating, dry mouth, headaches, irritability, sleeping much more or much less, restlessness or tremor (shaking), sexual side effects, and increased hyperactivity. More serious side effects include increased risk for self-injury and self-injurious behavior, mania, withdrawal effects.

## Learn More about Anxiety

### Websites:

[www.worrywisekids.org](http://www.worrywisekids.org)

### Videos:

The 5-4-3-2-1 Method: A Grounding Exercise to Manage Anxiety

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30VMIEmA114>

*You Are Not Your Thoughts*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QXmmP4psbA>>

### Books for Parents and Children

*Freeing Your Child From Anxiety: Powerful, practical solutions to overcome your child's fears, worries, and phobias* (By: Tamar E. Chansky)

*Growing up Brave: Expert strategies for helping your child overcome fear, stress, and anxiety*  
(By: Donna B. Pincus)

*Helping Your Anxious Child: A step-by-step guide for parents 3rd Edition (2022)*  
(By: Ronald M Rapee, et al)

*The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry*  
(By: Lisa Schab – read on own or with a counselor)

*The Worry Workbook for Teens: Effective CBT Strategies to Break the Cycle of Chronic Worry and Anxiety* (By: Jamie A. Micco)

*What to Do When You Worry Too Much* (By: Dawn Huebner - best for 6-12 year olds)

*Wilma Jean the Worry Machine* (By: Julia Cook - best for young children)

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This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your health care provider's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.