

# A PARENT'S GUIDE TO ANXIETY

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD/TEEN AGE 10-18



<b>GUIDEBOOK</b>		
<b>DIGITAL VERSION</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>PRINTABLE PDF</b>
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# Dear Parent, *it starts with you*



Parents are reporting an increase in anxiety levels for children who were already kind of anxious in their temperament, and kids who previously had not had anxiety have developed anxious behaviors. We are seeing an increase in children struggling with newfound fears, sleep, and depression.

This may sound overwhelming, but there is also good news. We do not need to be doctors or mental health professionals in order to promote mental health and well-being in our family. In fact, there are simple practices that can make a big difference in children's lives.

This guidebook empowers you to take back your confidence to parent from a heart centered place-despite the state of the world.

We have handpicked the best evidence-based ideas, resources and strategies to navigate the challenges of an uncertain world. It is our desire that this guidebook will take you from confused and unsure to attuned and confident in your parenting approach.

*Trixie + Rochelle*

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# Anxiety

IS YOUR CHILD'S ALARM SYSTEM

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# What to know about **ANXIETY**

If your child or teen is struggling with anxiety and you're not sure how best to help them, arming yourself with key facts and general knowledge about anxiety will be the start of creating a plan of action to offer you and your child some confidence and direction. The following section will allow you and your child to gain a better understanding of anxiety.

1

## **ANXIETY IS NORMAL**

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It alerts us to threats, protects us from danger and helps us reach important goals. For example, it is normal to feel anxious prior to the first day of school, or before taking an important exam.

2

## **ANXIETY ISN'T DANGEROUS**

Although anxiety feels uncomfortable, it is temporary and will eventually decrease. The body sensations we experience when we're anxious, are designed to give us important information. They're normal and part of our body's natural response mechanism.

3

## **ANXIETY SHOULDN'T BE AVOIDED**

Resist allowing your child to avoid challenges. Your child may feel better in the short-term when they stay home or opt out, but in the long-term it makes things worse as your child never gets to learn they can handle the tough stuff. While it's hard to see your child in distress, coping with anxiety is a critical life skill.

4

## **ANXIETY CAN TAKE OVER**

Although anxiety is normal, harmless, and part of everyday life, for some children it can take over. Anxiety can flood children with unpleasant physical feelings, unwanted thoughts, and result in avoidance or opting out of important routines such as playing a sport, making friends, going to school, and more.

# What does anxiety LOOK LIKE?

## Anxious Feelings

- Racing heart
- Trouble breathing
- Choking sensation
- Dizzy or lightheaded
- Sweating
- Blushing
- Heavy or tired muscles
- Trembling or shaking
- Upset stomach
- Blurry vision
- Tightness in the chest
- Numbness or tingling in hands and feet

## Anxious Thinking

- "I'll fail my exam."
- "My mom might forget to pick me up after school."
- "My teacher will yell at me and the kids will laugh."
- "That dog might bite me!"
- "The world is a dangerous place."
- "What if I fall off my bike and everyone laughs?"
- "What if I throw up at school?"
- "What if my mom or dad dies?"
- "I can't do it."

## Anxious Actions

- Not asking or answering questions in class
- Trying to be "perfect" in appearance and schoolwork
- Rechecking things to make sure they were done correctly
- Not hanging out with other kids or having few friends because of social fears
- Not sleeping in own bedroom or refusing to attend sleepovers
- Refusing to go to school (an exam, a presentation, a bully, having to talk to others, etc.)
- Refusing to participate in activities or performances (sports, dance, music, drama)
- Repeatedly asking parents to say that things will be okay
- Asking lots of questions to try to be certain about things "What will happen at the birthday party? Who will be there? What will we be doing?", etc. )

# THE ABC'S of Anxiety

Trying to eliminate all anxiety and stress from your child's life is almost impossible in our busy 21st century lives, however for some youth their worry is excessive and can cause significant disruption in the following six ways:

## A Affect

*Emotionally and physically - what they feel in their body. This can include complaints of an upset stomach, headache, or other physical ailments.*

## B Behavior

*Behaviorally - your child's action (crying, clinging, or tantruming), seeking reassurance about safety, and resistance/refusal to attend school, activities, or social events.*

## C Cognition

*Thinking - what goes through their mind like worrisome thoughts or beliefs such as "I'll mess up," "It'll be awful," "Everyone will laugh at me."*

## D Dependence

*Relying on parents/adults too much - children and teens will then fail to develop their own internal compass, determination, and resilience.*

## E Extreme

*Anxiety becomes a problem when it is excessive and extreme in relation to the situation - having a one-hour tantrum prior to attending a 30-minute gymnastics class.*

## F Functioning

*Daily coping - how your child manages with routine demands such as attending school, making friends, working, playing, eating and sleeping.*

# *Is anxiety a problem* **FOR MY CHILD?**

## **CONSIDER WHERE ANXIETY INTRUDES IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE.**

- Attending school
- School work
- Work/volunteering
- Formal activities, sports, or clubs
- Informal activities or interests
- Friendships
- Dating
- Relationships
- Interacting with adults
- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Personal hygiene
- Home life
- Independence

*\*If you identified 3 or more areas, anxiety might be a problem for your child*

## **When to seek professional help**

If you identified 3 more areas above AND you believe your child's responses to stress appear intense and disproportionate to the scenario *consistently*, we recommend you schedule an appointment with your family physician or a trained mental health professional to learn more.

# AVOIDANCE

## *Coping*

"Avoidance coping" refers to choosing behavior based on trying to avoid or escape particular thoughts or feelings. It can involve "doing" (e.g., someone who excessively washes their hands to try to get rid of fears about contamination) or "not doing" (e.g., when someone indefinitely puts off having an awkward conversation). Avoidance coping causes anxiety to snowball because when people use avoidance coping they typically end up experiencing more of the very thing they were trying to escape.

01

### **SITUATIONAL AVOIDANCE**

The most common kind of avoidance. If a child/teen habitually avoids social activities, or leaves an event every time there is someone there they don't like, your child/teen is using situational avoidance.

02

### **COGNITIVE AVOIDANCE**

Cognitive avoidance is about avoiding internal events such as unpleasant or distressing thoughts or memories. Your child/teen may tell themselves not to think about something, or try to replace the unwelcome thoughts. Cognitive avoidance can also show up as worry and rumination.

03

### **PROTECTIVE AVOIDANCE**

This is the use of excessive safety behaviors that might include checking, cleaning, over preparing, or perfectionism. Children/teens who present with symptoms consistent with obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders often utilize protective avoidance strategies. Procrastination is also considered a form of protective avoidance.



# AVOIDANCE

## *Coping*

Avoidance is so natural and common that it can take complex forms and look completely different from one situation to the next. Avoidance isn't always maladaptive, but in many cases involving internal events, it is not sustainable in the long run and can actually make things worse. Understanding the ways your child/teen may be habitually turning away from or rejecting difficult emotions is a great place to start in helping them to develop more adaptive responses to distress.

04

### **SOMATIC AVOIDANCE**

With somatic avoidance, your child/teen may try not to experience internal sensations associated with emotional distress, such as feeling hot, being out of breath, or getting fatigued or exhausted. They might even avoid normally pleasant sensations, such as excitement about an upcoming event, because they feel similar to being anxious.

05

### **SUBSTITUTION AVOIDANCE**

Substitution avoidance is trying to replace one feeling with another. Your child/teen might replace grief with anger, or another emotion that feels more tolerable for them at the time. Numbing out is also a form of substitution avoidance (your child/teen might use food, substances, gaming, or social media as a way to distract).

# Avoiding AVOIDANCE

## 1 Start with Small Doses

The first step is to have your child/teen expose themselves to small doses of the anxiety - inducing activity in a safe context. For example, if they'd like to learn to rock climb but are afraid of heights, they could start by spending time observing other climbers.

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Repeat the activity until they start to feel the anxiety dissipate. Over time, repeated exposure to a safe, non-harmful version of whatever made them anxious can reduce the negative association and replace it with a neutral or positive association. For example, repeatedly seeing other people climb without falling may begin to overwrite their negative association with heights.

## 2 Repeat the Activity

## 3 Increase the Challenge

After your child/teen begins to feel more comfortable with small doses, try taking it up a notch. For example, they could go from watching others climb, to climbing a short distance themselves. The idea is to incrementally up the challenge until they reach their goal, whether that's to scale Mt. Everest or climb the rock wall at a community centre.

# How to Help your Child OVERCOME ANXIETY

## 01 Defuse

Name the anxiety (e.g., the worry monster, the worry dragon, the anxiety beast, etc.). Giving anxiety a personality helps your child have a target to push back against. Then encourage your child to thank their mind for trying to protect them or simply let their thoughts come and go like passing cars.



## 02 Accept

Help your child/teen name the feeling, observe it like a curious scientist, rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, commit to allowing it, breathe into it, make room for it, give it a shape and color.



## 03 Goal Set

If your child lacks skills, set goals around learning them; if their goal is too big, break it down into small chunks; if they lack resources, brainstorm how they can get them. If the goal is truly impossible, (due to health or financial issues, etc), then set a different one.



## 04 Embrace

Connect with what matters to your child/teen about this goal. Is it truly meaningful? Is it aligned with their values? Is it truly important? Is it moving their life forward in the direction they wish to go?

# MORE

## *Evidence-based Strategies*

### **THE FOLLOWING ARE MORE EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD/TEEN:**

- Talk to your worries - validate them... “ I know why you are here...” I feel you because... because... because....”Feelings acknowledged will dissipate.
- Move from what you CAN NOT control - to what you CAN control (however small it will keep you from cognitive looping into real action). This trains the brain to keep focus more immediate and to engage in healthy action
- Accepting uncertainty - stay as present as you can. Anxiety is typically in the future. Remind yourself that you can be okay when not feeling okay. Mantas and affirmations can be helpful here.
- Meditate - guided meditations for tension release can be very helpful. Insight timer is a free app. We don't have to wait to invest in our overall regulation- the more this is part of our every day life... the more overall regulation we will have to draw on for when life throws us a curveball.
- Regulate your body first (warm baths, deep breathing, outdoors, smells, sounds etc.) your emotions will lose intensity and your mind will slow down. Our stories follow our emotional states.
- Meet the intensity of your anxiety with a physical activity- then you will have more agency to bring it down (ie planking or jumping jacks to raise heart rate) as it provides a window for your mind to make alternate meaning for your physiological distress. Ultimately we are validating our own emotional experience.
- Write a worry script in great detail daily for a week or more- meet the need by moving towards discomfort in some way. Avoid avoidance! A worry script will help create a desensitization to the worry itself if done enough times on a specific worry.
- Visualize your self calm and collected in situations you avoid due to the feeling of anxiety. Practice the opposite action- head high, slow breathing, shoulders back, speech calm and slow and voice low...etc. Fake it til you make it work in this case!
- Watch your body language- it will shape the way you feel about things.

# Parent Prompts

## **What to Say... to help your child/teen deconstruct their faulty thinking patterns**

- "What do you think your anxiety is telling you?"
- "Are you holding on to thoughts you feel unable to say?"
- "Where is your anxiety trying to predict other emotions? Like anger or shame? What does this emotion need?"
- "What was going through your mind just before you started to feel this way?"
- "What does this say about you if it is true?"
- "What does this mean about you, your life, or your future?"
- "What is the worst thing that could happen if it is true?"
- "What does this mean about how other people feel or think about you?"

## **What to Say... to help find evidence that does not support your child/teen's anxiety**

- "When you have felt this way in the past, what did you think about that helped you feel better?"
- "If a friend had this thought, what would you tell them?"
- "When you are not feeling this way, do you think about this type of situation any differently?"
- "Are there any strengths or positives in you or the situation that you are ignoring?"
- "Are you jumping to conclusions that are not completely justified by the evidence?"
- "Are you blaming yourself for something over which you do not have complete control?"
- "Can you think of any times in your life when you did not worry and events turned out positively?"
- "Does worrying really prevent bad things from happening? Or will good and bad things just happen regardless of whether you worry?"
- "Would you be able to handle a bad situation if you had not worried beforehand?"
- "When you are worrying, are you really problem-solving? Or are you just going over the same thoughts over and over again without coming up with a solution?"
- "What are the real effects of worrying – how is it affecting your life?"

# PARENT

## Check-in

**If we don't scaffold our children, they will lose even more of their childhoods in these chaotic & uncertain times.**

To raise resilient, independent, confident kids - we teach parents a strategy called "scaffold parenting." The metaphor is that the child is the "building," and the parents are the scaffold around it (the framework that guides and protects as the child rises and grows).

The three pillars of scaffolding are support, structure and encouragement. At every stage, parents can model and teach positive, prosocial behaviors, give corrective feedback and boost self-esteem. By doing so, they allow the child to develop the strength and agency they need to become happy, successful adults.

To scaffold an anxious child, use these three pillars:

# 01

## Support

Support with empathy, validation and intervention. Assure them that you understand their fears and concerns. If a child needs a tutor or a therapist, don't wait for his or her symptoms to become severe to find help.

# 02

## Structure

Many of our structural norms have been upended by the pandemic and other challenges. A lot of house rules have fallen by the wayside (like TV and gaming restrictions). Ease a child's anxiety by reestablishing household routines and rules as much as possible.

# 03

## Encouragement

Gently encourage children/teens to set up regular time with friends. Take them on walks and encourage them to talk to the people you meet. Practice socializing with them.

# WHAT YOU NOW *know for sure*

- WORRY'S PRESENCE AND YOUR CHILD'S DISCOMFORT MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED.**
- ANXIETY IS THERE TO SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUR CHILD.**
- YOUR CHILD/TEEN'S ANXIETY MAY NEVER BE FULLY EXTINGUISHED.**
- AVOIDING AVOIDANCE WILL BE THE PATH TO HEALING.**
- FOCUS ON REGULATING THE BODY PRIOR TO CHALLENGING THE THOUGHTS.**

## *Journal Prompts*

### **PARENTS HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON:**

- Is there any way you model avoidance?
- Are there things you avoid saying or doing to avoid discomfort?
- Are there ways you may have knowingly or unknowingly encouraged your child's avoidance?



### TRIXIE

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### ROCHELLE

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*Rochelle has over 10 years of experience in corporate marketing and her graphic design work has been published in national magazines and print media. Rochelle is a successful digital entrepreneur, building multiple businesses, and was recognized with an international business building award.*



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