

Anxiety in Teens: Why Anxiety Might Increase During Adolescence, and What Parents Can Do

During adolescence, the brain goes through a massive and magnificent redesign. This is to give children the neural firepower to make the transition from dependent little people to independent, productive, happy adults. It's an exciting time, but it doesn't always feel this way. Adolescence can be punctuated by entirely wonderful highs that come bundled in new discoveries and flourishing independence, as well as gut-wrenching lows.

Part of walking the path to adulthood means that our children might sometimes feel as though they are falling through the cracks of the smaller, safer, more predictable world they have known as children, and the bigger, more demanding, noisier world of adulthood. Until they have both feet firmly on adult ground – which will be sometime in their early 20s – the ground beneath them might feel shaky, or barely there some days.

Anxiety During Adolescence. Because When They Know More, They Can Do More.

Adolescence comes with so many changes, challenges, demands, and responsibilities. As our teens become more aware of this, it's understandable that a strong, protective brain would want to work harder to keep them safe from falling, failing, or scraping against the hard edges of their expanding world. In essence, this is what anxiety is – an attempt by the amygdala (the part of the brain involved in anxiety) to warn them that there *might* be danger and get them ready to fight the danger or flee the danger. Anything that comes with any risk at all of exclusion, separation, humiliation, judgement, failure all count as potential danger to a hardworking, protective amygdala – and adolescence is heavily set with all of them.

It's understandable then, that anxiety can intensify during adolescence. Understanding the forces that might drive this can help your teen (and you) make sense of any changes that might feel frightening, or which may fill them with a sense of panic or helplessness.

One of the ways we can strengthen our adolescents against anxiety is to give them the information they need to make brave, strong decisions. [Explaining what anxiety is](#), and what might contribute to it, can help them make braver, stronger, more deliberate decisions that will strengthen them against anxiety and generally. Here are some of the things that can inflame anxiety during adolescence.

1. Sleep. Brains love it. As much as happy things and a deep breath in.

The part of the brain most sensitive to a lack of sleep is the amygdala – the seat of anxiety and big emotions. The amygdala has the very important job of scanning the environment for threat. When it senses what *might* be a threat, it surges the body with a mighty cocktail of fight or flight neurochemicals. If there is a threat, this is excellent, but if there is no need for fight or flight action, the neurochemical fuel builds up and anxiety happens. This is where sleep comes in. A tired brain will struggle to tell the difference between a threat and a non-threat, so it will tend to hit the panic button more than it needs to.

Here's the rub. During adolescence, the hormone that makes us sleepy – melatonin – is released up to two hours later than it is in children and adults. Adolescents need at least nine hours of sleep (ten is gold) but they might not even feel like winding down until 10 or 11 pm. Combine this with early morning starts for school, and you can see where this is going to end up. The more tired they are, the more reactive their amygdala will be, and the greater the potential for anxiety.

What to do.

Chat about the link between anxiety and a lack of sleep, then ask your teen for thoughts on how to get more sleep. Here are some ideas:

- The light from screens delays the release of melatonin, so try switching to a book, music, or mindfulness at least half an hour before bed.
- Write in a gratitude journal as part of a bedtime routine. Anxiety is stirred by negative memories, but those memories don't actually need to be real-life experiences. They can be from the news, tv, social media, or something a friend says. The brain does what the brain does most, so the more those negative memories are accessed, the easier they will be accessed in the future. Gratitude helps make positive memories more accessible than the ones that might stir anxiety.
- Try mindfulness before bed. Here's one way:

Imagine your thoughts forming into clouds in front of you. Let them float around, then let them float away when they're ready. Do the same thing with the next thought. Do this for 5-10 minutes. Don't worry if your mind wanders during the exercise – that's what minds do. Gently bring it back and keep going with the exercise.

2. Friendships. The Changing Ground

One of the developmental goals of adolescence is to slowly establish independence from parents. They'll still need you, but in a different way. As teens start to explore their independence, their peers will become more important than ever – but friendships during adolescence can be a roller coaster. They can be a source of enormous joy and comfort, but they can also be fertile ground for trouble – sometimes all on the same day. When friendships feel secure they will nourish, but when they feel fragile they can build anxiety around the threat of exclusion, rejection, humiliation, judgement or loss.

Friendships can be further complicated by the very real potential for adolescents to misinterpret emotional information from others. An abundance of [research](#) has established that the adolescent brain interprets emotional expressions differently to the adult brain. We humans are complicated. It isn't always easy to read what other people might be thinking or feeling but this can be especially tough during adolescence. When adolescents read emotional expressions in others, the most active part of the brain is the amygdala – the impulsive, instinctive part of the brain that will tend to misread non-threats as threats. In contrast, when adults interpret facial expressions, they will tend to engage the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that plans, considers consequences, and calms emotional reactions for long enough to check things out. With greater importance on peers and a greater vulnerability to misinterpreting the social cues or emotions or intentions of those peers, the potential for conflict, exclusion, or friendships that break or cause breakage is heightened and can become hearty fuel for anxiety.

What to do.

- If you can, encourage activities (sports, drama, hobbies) out of school so they can build friendships that might be more protected from schoolyard politics or a safe alternative when school friends are causing heartache.
- Validate that adolescence can be a lonely, tough place sometimes, but that it won't always be like this.
- It can stir all sorts of things in you as a parent when your child is hurting, but whenever you can, let them speak without needing to 'fix it' or change how their feeling. Of course you might want to scoop them up and hold them close and change every messy detail about what they're going through, but the risk with this is that they might feel a greater need to censor their words or the feelings to protect you from the harshness of it all.

3. 'What do I think of me? Well, that depends on what you think of me.' The 'looking glass self'.

During adolescence, the sense of self gets a mighty workout. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to what other people think of them, or what they *think* other people might be thinking about them. Being sensitive to

the opinions of others is an important part of shaping who our teens become. They will explore the adults they want to be, and along the way they will learn, adjust and grow according to the way the world responds to them. This can be a healthy, nurturing process, but not always.

From early adolescence, children will be more likely to compare themselves to others. They will also become more aware that other people might judge or compare them, and they will tend to place more importance on these thoughts and judgements. This will influence the way they see themselves, for better or worse. The part of the self-concept that is fed by our beliefs about how others see us is known as ‘the looking glass self’, and it has a heavy hand during adolescence.

The looking glass self can feed joy, contentment, pride, embarrassment, shame or guilt. [Research](#) has shown that for adolescents, their self-concepts can be strengthened when they imagine that other people are thinking positively about them. On the other hand, when teens imagine (rightly or wrongly) that others are assessing them negatively, this can feed anxiety.

What to do.

- Wherever you can, encourage (or support) your teen in finding the things that they love doing. Anything they are strong in – a language, sport, raising a pet, drama, music, art, cooking – will help to build their self-concept in positive ways.

4. Gut Health

The gut and the brain are profoundly connected. [The brain in our gut](#), which is also affectionately known as our ‘second brain’, is made up of more [200-600 million neurons](#), arranged in the intricately folded tissue that lines the gastrointestinal tract. It sends information to the brain, but when the gut environment is out of balance (good bacteria vs. bad bacteria), the information that gets sent back to the brain can negatively affect mood, stress, anxiety and general mental health.

Diet, sleep, and stress all affect the gut. Separately each of these can cause enough trouble, but adolescence is often the time when our teens will find themselves with less sleep, more stress, and turning more towards faster, processed foods and away from healthier options. It’s a perfect gut storm.

What to do.

Talk to them about the gut-brain link and the importance of sleep, lowering their stress (when they can), and healthy eating – as in more fruit, vegetables, [happy gut foods](#) (fermented foods, probiotics, foods with live and active cultures), and less processed food. [Researchers](#) have found that people who eat more fermented foods (which contain probiotics) have fewer symptoms of social anxiety.

5. What lights them up from the inside out? Has the focus on winning stripped the love from it all?

During adolescence, the focus on academics can intensify, and extra-curricular activities which started out as fun can become more competitive and geared towards a more important goal. Anxiety is driven by future thinking, and by imagining potentially disastrous consequences of failure, loss, or missing out on an important selection. Competition is great, but so is having space to do things for the love of it all not just for the win. The risk is that the very things that may have once replenished them, can be stripped back to bare and become a source of stress or anxiety.

What to do:

Adolescence is a busy time, but it’s important that they don’t become so over-scheduled or invested in an outcome, that they stop having fun. Their hearts, minds, and spirits all need to be nourished. Encourage them to make time for the things that make them happy – as in happy from the inside out, not just because they’re winning, kicking goals or passing the exam. It’s all about balance.

6. Perceived pressure from school/parents/the world.

During adolescence, the focus can shift from what makes you happy now, to what are you going to do when you finish school/college/exams. Planning for the future is important, but when it happens too much it can feed anxiety. Anxiety is a sign of a brain that is spending too much time in the future. This is when the 'what-ifs' can start to circle, land too heavily on our teens and feed anxiety like it's a ravenous thing. 'What if I don't get into university/college?' 'What if I don't get a job – ever.' 'What if I let my parents down?' 'What if I let me down?' 'What if I fail at precisely everything?'

What to do.

Let them know they don't need to have it all figured out. Often, it's the redirects and the reroutes that are the reason we end up where we need to be. They just need to put one foot, and then the other. This is their time for learning. The 'knowing' will come in time – and it's okay if this takes time.

7. Social media

Social media has a spectacular capacity to pull even the strongest humans out of their own lane. Social media gives our teens a constant source of information about what their peers are doing. This can flourish self-doubt like nothing else – Should I be more like them? Less like me? Should I be doing more? Should I be doing differently? Look what they're involved in, and they look so happy – and successful! Maybe I should be doing something like that too.

What to do.

The key is perspective. Remind them that a photo represents one single moment in time – a moment – not a day, not a weekend, and certainly not a life. Help them to understand that there is a massive filter across social media that tends to polish lives and people until they glisten. Boundaries are just as important in the digital world as they are in the real one. Too much of anything that causes a crumpling, is too much. Remind them that staying healthy and strong is about doing more of what nourishes not only our bodies but their hearts, minds, and spirits as well.

8. Body Image

With the internet, our teens have the world at their fingertips every minute of every day – and it can be brutal. They are growing up in a world of selfies, filters, and photoshop. It is a world that can be relentless in its push to equate beauty with success, or beauty with happiness, or beauty with being important enough, powerful enough, wanted enough. All of this comes to them at a time when their bodies are changing. Our teens are being blasted with messages about how they should look, but for too many of them, the only message they're taking is, 'I'm not enough' – not pretty enough, strong enough, important enough, powerful enough.

What to do.

Call them strong, brave, powerful, intelligent – all of those things, but call them beautiful too – when they laugh, when they light up, when you see that spark in them. Just let them know that you see it. Absolutely, our children are so much more than how they look – absolutely – but these aren't the qualities that are being called into question through their social media feeds, billboards, ads – almost everywhere they are. Somewhere along the way, the definition of 'beautiful' became astoundingly inadequate, and it's hurting our children. It's making them doubt their worth and their potential, and we have to push back.

What we need to do is to redefine the concept of 'beautiful', and we can do this by making sure they hear a definition of 'beautiful' that includes them. Beauty is diverse and imperfect. 'Beautiful' isn't the problem. The definition is. We don't want to give our children the idea that how they look is any measure of who they are, but if we have the opportunity to strengthen them with a more empowering, ample, inclusive definition of

'beautiful', let's take it. If we don't acknowledge the beauty in them, the world around them will continue unchallenged to saturate them with a filtered, photoshopped, glossed up version of 'beauty' that threatens to diminish them. The more we can give them the message that 'beautiful' includes them, the more armoured they will be against the world that would have them believe otherwise.

And finally ...

It is likely that there will be times, maybe many times, during adolescence when our teens will feel sideswiped by anxiety. Adolescence can be hard and lonely and uncertain – but we get it because we've been there too. However tough things get, they have it in them to be tougher. Sometimes we'll just need to know it enough for them.

Most importantly, don't underestimate the power of you. It won't always be obvious, but the presence of you has a profound capacity to help them feel safe, seen and soothed. You don't need to have the words or the magic to make things better because sometimes, all they need is you.

by Karen Young (BSc)(Psych)(Hons)MastGestTher

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