



Anxiety in Secondary School Kids

by Dr Jodi Richardson



Anxiety is common and treatable, but it's also something that can be scary and confusing.

It doesn't have to be. I'm hoping that this article helps you feel more in the know and better equipped to understand what's happening in an anxious mind, recognise it, support your teen and seek help if needed.

First, some stats. In Australia, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men will experience anxiety in their lifetime. That's an average of 25 per cent of the population. I'd be surprised if you didn't know someone who has it. The statistics are more comforting when it comes to secondary school kids where 7 per cent (that's around 1 in 14) are diagnosed with anxiety.

We've all experienced it. It's a completely normal reaction under dangerous or stressful circumstances. Perhaps you've narrowly avoided a car accident. Your heart pounds, your breathing becomes shallow and fast, your body floods with adrenaline to put you on red alert, your blood pressure goes up, you might perspire and glucose dumps from your muscles into your bloodstream. All of this is preparing you to face-up to the 'threat' or run like heck in the other direction. This is 'fight or flight' in action.

This reaction is a survival instinct, dating back to early times when life-threatening situations were ever present. These days we can experience anxiety when we're under pressure to meet a deadline, talking in front of our colleagues, preparing for a job interview or even just opening our email. Our lives are not in danger but our bodies react as if this were the case. The same can be true for teenagers.

Anxiety is a normal response to a threatening situation. All of these physical changes happen instinctively as a tiny part of our brain called the amygdala tells the sympathetic nervous system to take over and fire us up so we can do what we have to in order to survive.

Do you know the feeling? Perhaps it happens to you now and then. But maybe, if you're one of the two million-plus Australians (including me) who experience an anxiety disorder, your body and brain respond like that more often, more quickly and more intensely than others.

Trust me, it feels awful. I've experienced anxiety since I was a child, still do and always will. My parents didn't even know anxiety existed when I was a kid and it took me until my early twenties to be diagnosed. Now that I know, I can, and do, take action to manage it. And despite having ups and downs like everyone else, on the whole I live a rich, full and meaningful life. Your teenagers can too.

Our kids are lucky. They have great parents (that's you) who know to look out for their mental health, and who have access to lots of great resources including the family GP.

How do I know what's 'normal'?

Nervousness, stress and anxiety are normal reactions to logical circumstances. What to look out for is if your teen is reacting anxiously to situations where there's no danger present, their reaction is out of proportion to the circumstances or they can't participate in normal daily activities. Below are some of the other symptoms of anxiety in teenagers:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor memory
- Mind racing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Always tired
- Feeling edgy
- Avoidance behaviour
- Stomach pains
- Chest pain
- Shakiness
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Sweating



Okay, so how can I help?

- 1.** Maintain open lines of communication with your teen by regularly spending one-on-one time together, having fun together and making yourself available at a regular time each day for an uninterrupted chat.
- 2.** If you think your teenager is experiencing anxiety, talk to him/her and go together to see your GP to have a conversation about what's been happening.
- 3.** Help your teenager understand what's going on in their body and brain when they are experiencing anxiety. Explain that the amygdala is trying to protect them but can 'overreact' sometimes and prepare their body for 'fight or flight' when it's just not warranted. It's the amygdala that causes all of the physical symptoms like a racing heart (pumping more oxygen to the muscles, readying them for battle), light headedness (due to an imbalance between oxygen and carbon dioxide caused by fast, shallow breathing), shakiness (due to the adrenaline being pumped into their bloodstream), and nausea (resulting from the body shunting blood away from the stomach to the arms and legs so they're primed for a fight or a sprint).
- 4.** Because breathing becomes shallow and fast with anxiety, a simple yet incredibly effective way to show the amygdala that everything is okay is to take deliberate, slower breaths (in for 3, hold for 1, out for 3). After all, no-

one can do this when they really are running for their life!

5. Mindfulness is a superpower for the anxious brain (any brain in fact!) and there are lots of great ways to help teenagers learn. The Smiling Mind app is a wonderful way to introduce a regular mindfulness practice or you could take mindfulness classes together. Mindfulness reduces the size of the amygdala as well as fostering other protective changes in the brain.

6. If they are worrying excessively over something – let's say it's presenting a project to their class, a test or an exam – instead of saying, "You'll be fine, you always do so well" or "Don't worry, all the other kids will be nervous too" or similar, try this instead: "I understand how you're feeling, that's so normal, I'd feel the same way". They want to know you 'get' it and that they're not alone. You could also ask, "Is it helpful to keep thinking about it?" When they (inevitably) say "no", suggest focusing attention on something that will help, like practicing more, making cue cards, revising, doing another practice exam or doing something completely different to engage their mind in a fun and positive activity.

7. Help them to discover their values so they can take action in the direction of what really matters to them despite feeling anxious.



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