



Teens + Anxiety:

Conquering Your Fear

PATIENT EDUCATION

Retrain
your
brain

Break
the cycle

DON'T LET
ANXIETY TAKE
OVER YOUR LIFE

You can do it

Face your fear

Everyone feels anxious sometimes

BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS
PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Everyone Feels Anxious Sometimes

Feeling anxious or uneasy? Do you worry a lot about everyday situations? Do you ask yourself a lot of “what if” questions? Do you feel your body reacting to these worries?

You're not alone.

**All teens experience anxious thoughts
(and so do adults!).**

- Maybe speaking in front of a group makes you anxious.
- Or you get nervous before a big test.
- Or maybe you worry about bad things happening to you or a loved one. **Most teens have felt like this.**

**Anxious feelings may be uncomfortable.
But they serve a purpose.**

They warn you that something that matters to you is at stake. You may feel “butterflies” in your stomach. Or you might have sweaty palms or shaky hands. Your face may flush and you might feel your heart beat faster. With anxiety, you may feel one or all of these things.

**Feelings like this can
help you do what you
need to do.**

While you may feel anxious, you can take a deep breath and face the challenge. And your feelings of anxiety may fade away.

However, sometimes anxiety can become overwhelming.

This information explains things you can do to keep feelings of anxiety from becoming too much.

FAST FACTS

- Anxiety is a natural part of life.
- Anxiety isn't “all in your head.”
- You can't avoid anxiety, but you can learn ways to deal with it.
- How you choose to handle what makes you anxious can make a big difference in how you feel.

The Science of Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the ways your mind and body react to an event.

Often called the “fight-or-flight” response, the anxiety response occurs automatically when you feel pressured, challenged or threatened.

At the first sign of something stressful, your brain kicks into action. Hormones surge to give you a burst of energy. These hormones can help focus concentration, speed reaction time, and increase strength and agility.

Your body gears up to react. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase as more blood is pumped through your body, prepping you to do what's required to adapt and survive.

This is called your fight, flight or freeze response. The problem is that most everyday anxiety isn't solved by fighting, fleeing or freezing. So all the extra energy, tension and hormones can build up and leave you feeling a lot of anxiety long past when you need it.

“Sometimes

I get so anxious

*I think I'm losing
it!”*

When Does Anxiety Become Too Much?

Your brain is hard-wired to respond to threats.

Anxiety is part of that response. It can be a motivating state. This means it can help you focus. It can help you get ready to take action. And anxiety can help you prepare for the future. These can be good things. In a dangerous situation, an anxiety response could save your life.

But anxiety can be triggered when it's not needed. And anxiety can stay with you long after a threat is gone.

If you stay anxious, your mind and body stay on high alert. This can cause:

- ✓ mood problems.
- ✓ headaches.
- ✓ stomachaches.
- ✓ sleep problems.

If you feel overwhelmed by anxiety on a daily basis or if you turn to negative coping strategies, such as drug or alcohol use, cutting, skipping school, eating disorders, fighting, or running away, anxiety has taken over your life.

You need to make changes to get your life back!

When anxiety gets in your way, it can lead to anxiety disorders.

Did you know there's more than one kind of anxiety?

- Generalized anxiety disorder or GAD is severe, ongoing anxiety that interferes with daily activities.
- Health anxiety or illness anxiety disorder is worrying excessively that you are or may become seriously ill.
- Panic disorder happens when repeated, unexpected panic attacks interfere with your life.
- Agoraphobia is a fear of public places or situations that might cause you to panic and make you feel trapped, helpless or embarrassed.
- Social anxiety disorder is anxiety in social situations that is so severe it disrupts your life.
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder, called OCD, is a pattern of unwanted thoughts and fears that leads you to do repetitive behaviors.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, called PTSD, is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event.

What About Panic Attacks?

When your body feels panicky you may not know what's happening. You may not know why you are reacting this way. If you don't know what's going on or how to deal with it, it can be very scary.

Understanding panic can help you deal with it.

A panic attack is a surge of intense fear or discomfort that comes on fast, reaches a peak within minutes, and includes at least four of these symptoms:

- ☐ pounding or racing heart
- ☐ heart palpitations
- ☐ sweating
- ☐ trembling or shaking
- ☐ shortness of breath or smothering sensations
- ☐ feelings of choking
- ☐ chest pain or discomfort
- ☐ nausea or abdominal distress
- ☐ feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or faint
- ☐ chills or heat sensations
- ☐ numbness or tingling
- ☐ feelings of unreality or detachment
- ☐ fear of losing control or “going crazy”
- ☐ fear of dying



Anxiety Is a Cycle...That You Can Break

Anxiety Is Stubborn. Here Is How It Works.

Anxiety often involves something that sets off a distress cycle:

- The distress cycle example here shows how thoughts, feelings and actions work together to make anxiety worse.
- The good news is that when you interrupt your cycle of anxious thoughts, feelings and actions, you can lower your anxiety and better manage it. **This takes practice!**

Example of a distress cycle.

Situation: Class ends and you head to the lunchroom.

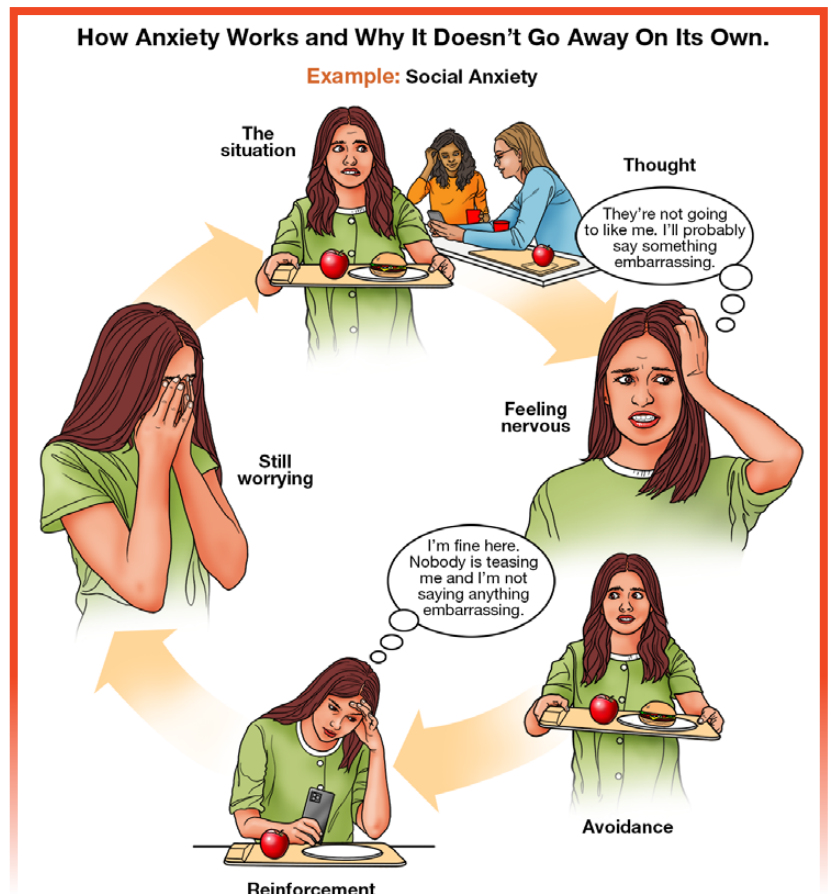
Expectations or beliefs: “They’re not going to like me. I’ll probably say something embarrassing.”

Feelings: Heart starts racing, hands get sweaty. You are feeling nervous.

Action: You decide to eat lunch on your own.

Outcome: In this case, instead of facing feelings of anxiety, **you avoided the situation.** This may seem like a good idea — you were able to survive the moment without panicking.

BUT your anxiety is reinforced by avoiding the situation. Now you’ll never know if things would have gone differently if you’d faced your fear and sat with others. And avoiding things that make you anxious makes it easier to decide to avoid in the future. That’s how anxiety takes over your life.



What will make my anxiety go away for good?

Your behavior is what will change your thoughts and feelings. When you change your behavior and face your fear, your thoughts slowly change. **This is the key to managing anxiety.**

Anxious thoughts will likely always be there. And that's OK. **But by facing your fear, you can quiet your anxious thoughts and focus on getting your life back.**

If you avoid anxiety, over time it gets worse.
If you approach your fear with a plan to deal with it, it gets smaller.

Example: Map Your Distress Cycle

Map out your distress cycle

This helps you understand how your thoughts, feelings and actions can make anxiety worse.

And it can help you make a plan to change your actions, reframe your thinking and manage your emotions.

My Distress Cycle

Situation:

I have to give a presentation in my English class

But I'm still worrying:

What if my teacher makes me give the presentation when I go back to class?

Outcome:

I feel better now. Maybe my teacher will let me turn in my notes rather than present.



Action:

Avoidance. I'll plan to be sick that day, but I'll turn in the presentation.

FYI

You can have more than one anxiety disorder.

And sometimes anxiety results from a medical condition that needs treatment.

Work with your care team to make a plan to manage your anxiety that is right for you.

Thoughts:

There is no way I am going to be able to do this. I am a terrible public speaker. I will have a panic attack if I have to get up in front of everyone.

Feelings:

Panic! When I think about speaking to my class, my chest starts to feel tight, my heart races and I start to sweat.

It's Your Turn: Map Your Distress Cycle

- 1 Think about something that triggers your anxiety.
- 2 Map out your distress cycle.

My Distress Cycle

Situation:

Thoughts:

Feelings:



Action:

Outcome:

EXPOSURE THERAPY Is About Retraining Your Brain

If you want to beat your anxiety, one of the most powerful things you can do is develop the skill of facing your fears.

This is a skill you can learn.
With practice, you can retrain your brain and manage your anxiety.

It's normal to want to avoid things that make you anxious. But doing so can lock your brain into a cycle of increasing anxiety. **Remember the distress cycle!**

Each time you avoid something that makes you anxious, your belief that you just can't deal with it **grows**.

And avoiding your fear robs you of the chance to practice dealing with your anxiety. **Remember the distress cycle!**



When you gradually face your anxiety, you learn that the things you fear are not as dangerous as you think.

And you learn that you are capable of dealing with feelings of anxiety.

Think of it like this:



You have an extreme fear of light switches. You are afraid of turning on or off a light switch because you think you will get shocked.

Imagine you are in a room and you can't come out until you turn off the light. At first, you are terrified. You feel dizzy and your heart is racing. You can only think of what will happen if you touch the light switch. But eventually you turn off the light. When nothing happens, you feel mild relief.

If you keep turning off the light switch over and over again, your mind will start to adapt. You get used to turning off the light and nothing bad happens. Your brain adapts to the light switch because it learns it's safe to touch.

When you repeat the exposure, your anxiety response lessens.

Over time you retrain your brain.

8 Lots of research shows this works!

How is exposure therapy done?

Tips for doing exposure therapy:

First Step: Think about the things that make you anxious.

Because anxiety often starts with a trigger, it helps to know where those triggers come from. Some of the most common sources of anxiety for teens include:

- public speaking.
- tests and exams.
- social situations.
- a traumatic event or events.

Naming the things that cause you anxiety is an important step in taking control of your life. Write the things that set off your distress cycle here:

- **Be consistent.** Plan to do exposures every day.
- **Be clear about what you are afraid will happen.** This lets you test whether fears come true.
- **Stay positive.** Even though exposures are hard, be open to learning something new.
- **Focus and pay attention.** Rate your anxiety as you do the exposure. You may feel your anxiety go down because you realize the exposure is not as dangerous as you thought. **OR** if your anxiety stays high, give yourself credit for managing emotions.
- **Evaluate your fear.** Did it come true? If it did, was it as bad as you thought it would be?
- **Stick with it!** Keep doing the exposure until your anxiety goes down or until you can handle it.

Second Step: Map your distress cycle

Map out what usually happens when you are faced with a trigger. Understanding your distress cycle can help you find ways to change your actions, reframe your thinking and manage your emotions.



Third Step: Create an exposure list

As you start exposure therapy, choose an item from your list of things that cause you mild or moderate stress.

Thinking of the trigger you chose, make a list of 5 to 10 things that make you feel anxious. Rate your level of anxiety for each item on a scale from 0, which means no anxiety, to 10, which means maximum anxiety. List the items in order from least anxiety to most anxiety. **See the example!**

Last Step: Start facing your fear

Start by taking small steps to face your fear. As you accomplish small goals that give you confidence, you build strength to handle more difficult situations. Your goal is to practice facing your fear at least five days each week for at least 15 to 20 minutes a day.

Example: Create an Exposure List

To start, choose something that sets off your distress cycle that causes you a mild to moderate level of distress. Over time, work toward things that cause you more distress.

Example: I have to give a presentation to my English class

Make a list of 5 to 10 things that you can do to face your fear that make you feel anxious. List the items in order from least anxiety to most anxiety.

Activity



***Write down the title of the presentation.
Write the introduction.***



***Read the introduction aloud.
Read the introduction in front of a friend.***



During English class, raise your hand and ask a question.



Finish drafting the presentation. Read your presentation aloud.



Present in front of a friend while you imagine presenting to your class.



Present to your class.

It's Your Turn: Create an Exposure List

To start, choose a situation that causes you a mild to moderate level of distress. You will work toward topics that cause you more distress.

The fear I am facing is...

Think about how you can face your fear. Make a list of 5 to 10 things that you can do that make you feel anxious as you think about approaching this situation. Think about your level of anxiety for each thing you come up with. List the items in order from least anxiety to most anxiety.

Activity













Face Your Fear

Face it. While there is no “magic bullet” for dealing with anxiety, facing your fears and worries can help you take control.

Your **ACTIONS** will **CHANGE** your **THOUGHTS**.

Start by taking small steps to face your fear. Begin doing the things on your exposure list. Start with the first activity and work through the list.

- **TIP:** Pick a time and a place to practice your exposure exercises. Practice **EVERY DAY**.
- **TIP:** Try to stay in the situation long enough to lower your anxiety. Don't try to avoid or escape the situation.

As you accomplish small goals, think about what you are doing differently to face your fear. Give yourself credit for small steps! Each time you face a fear, you build strength to handle more difficult situations. You learn you can control your fear.



Practice, Practice, Practice!

Don't get down on yourself. Stay positive.

As you are working on your exposures, stay healthy!

- Eat well and say no to caffeine
- Make time for exercise
- Spend time with friends
- Limit social media
- Get a good night's sleep

When you interrupt your cycle of anxious thoughts, feelings and actions, you can lower your anxiety and better manage it. **This takes practice!**

Your goal is to practice facing your fear every day. Try for 15 to 20 minutes each day.

At the start and end of each practice session, rate your level of anxiety on a scale from 0 (no anxiety) to 10 (maximum anxiety).

Keep practicing the exposure until it becomes easy to tolerate. Then move onto the next one.

If exposure therapy is too difficult to try on your own, consider working with a therapist or school counselor to do exposure therapy.

A therapist can help you make a plan. But remember you are in control of the exposures.



The Final Word



If you aren't handling your anxiety well — if you're trying to cope by turning to drugs, alcohol, smoking, cutting, skipping school, eating disorders, fighting or running away — **it's time to ask for help.**

Of course, dealing with anxiety by facing your fears can be challenging.

Significant difficulties with anxiety may require working with a professional — just like athletes work with coaches to improve their game — to learn how to change behaviors and manage anxiety.

The strategies highlighted here can work for you. Give them a try.

But if your anxiety won't go away, talk to your parents, doctor or other trusted adult about seeing a health care professional.



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Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal Mayo Clinic patient of more than 40 years and a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family's activities in oil, gas and ranching. Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.

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