

Coronavirus Survival Guide for Parents: Anxiety

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health diagnoses in children, affecting upwards of 20% of children and adolescents over the lifespan. Some children may have an Anxiety Disorder—more than just your average worries—and may need help from a specialist. Parents play an essential role in helping their child or teen manage anxiety, as parents need to empower their children by giving them strategies to use on a daily basis to combat anxiety.

Given the current COVID-19 Pandemic, even children who are not normally anxious, are picking up on the cues around them and are understandably anxious about the Pandemic and its impact on their world. A structured, calm and grounded home environment is one that is predictable, which is essential right now in a world which seems unpredictable and frightening.

Your anxious child needs to have structure and a sense of normalcy. When your child has day-to-day routines and a schedule to follow, this creates structure in their lives. Consistent house rules, expectations, and a schedule, help maintain a predictable environment. This knowledge creates a sense of security; this is especially critical if your child has a developmental disability, mood disorder or ADHD. The basics such as a daily schedule, a good night's sleep, regular meal times and a healthy diet, outdoor play time, and exercise, are essential. See separate handout on Structure During COVID-19.

When coping skills and using strategies are rewarded and practiced in the home, children and teens can learn to face their fears, take reasonable risks, and ultimately gain confidence. To empower your child to work through his worries, you have to help him learn a variety of coping skills.

The anxious thought cycle seems overwhelming because it causes feelings of helplessness. When anxiety spikes, children get caught in a cycle of “what ifs” and “I can’ts.” Anxious kids tend to engage in a variety of cognitive distortions such as black and white thinking and overgeneralizing, such as “It will NEVER--”, “It is ALWAYS--”. Carving out regular time to work on positive reframing empowers your anxious child to take control over his anxious thoughts. It works like this:

1. Name a worry floating around in your brain right now.
2. What is the worry telling you?

3. Let's break it down and see if that worry is 100% right.
4. How can we take that worry thought and reframe it into a positive thought?

One thing that helps anxious kids is having a concrete list of strategies to use in a moment of anxiety. Things such as drawing or painting, or journaling can be powerful tools to express emotions. www.worrywisekids.org has an amazing array of fun, helpful tools to utilize to keep your child's worries at bay, and even suggests building a literal worry box (to lock things away in) and a tool box (to grab in an emergency when you need it). With time on everyone's hands right now, these could be great art projects to engage in as a family.

Several other best practice guidelines for the home will also help during times of crisis such as now. Talk with your children, ask them open ended questions about their worries and try to listen. Listen patiently and open-mindedly, without exaggerated worry yourself. Turn off the television and news with its 24 hour cycle of doom-and-gloom, which adds to everyone's agitation and fears. Read together. Play games. Get outside and exercise. Cook dinner, and then bake cookies. Curl up on the couch with a great light-hearted movie and popcorn. Keep (or make) a wonderful bedtime routine including warm baths, and reading together. Try to manage your own anxiety and keep your tone as positive as possible.

Finally, there are other methods that seem simple but can be powerful when practiced regularly. Studies show Mindfulness and other practices can actually change your brain for the better. The scientific evidence to date suggests that mindfulness meditation—a mind-body practice which cultivates abilities to maintain focused and clear attention, and develop increased awareness of the present—may help reduce symptoms of stress, including anxiety and depression. A 2014 systematic review and meta-analysis of 47 trials in 3,515 participants found that mindfulness meditation programs had moderate evidence of improved anxiety. Another systematic review and meta-analysis of 36 randomized controlled trials examining the efficacy of meditation for anxiety symptoms found that 25 of the studies reviewed reported statistically superior outcomes in the meditation group compared to the control. There are many apps and online tools as well as simple guides for Deep breathing and Progressive muscle relaxation.

Specifically for COVID-19, the Australian WHO/UNICEF has developed a helpful resource to talk with your children about this: <https://www.unicef.org.au/blog/news-and-insights/march-2020/how-to-talk-to-your-children-about-coronavirus>

Other good Anxiety resources for kids:

*[Sometimes I'm Scared](#) by Marc Nemiroff and Jane Annunziata

*[Wilma Jean the Worry Machine](#) by Julia Cook and Anita DuFalla

*[What to Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids](#) by James Crist

*[When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live With Anxiety](#) by Kari Dunn Buron

*[What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety](#) by Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews

*The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook for Kids: Help for Children to Cope with Stress, Anxiety, and Transitions by Lawrence Shapiro PhD, Robin Sprague, and Matthew McKay PhD

Anxiety resources for teens:

*My Anxious Mind: A Teen's Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic by Michael Tompkins, Katherine Martinez, and Michael Sloan

*The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry by Lisa Schab LCSW

*Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens: Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills for Helping You Manage Mood by Sheri Can Dijk MSW

*The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal With Stress by Gina Biegel MA LMFT

Anxiety resources for parents:

*Step Guide for Parents by Ronald Rapee PhD, Ann Wignall D Psych, Susan Spence PhD, and Heide Lyneham PhD

*Your Anxious Child: How Parents and Teachers Can Relieve Anxiety in Children by John Dacey and Lisa Fiore

*Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias by Tamar Chansky PhD

*Anxiety-Free Kids: An Interactive Guide for Parents and Children by Bonnie Zucker

*Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety: A Guide for Caregivers by Eli Lebowitz and Haim Omer

Online resources for Anxiety:

* www.worrywisekids.org

* www.kidshealth.org

* Anxiety and Depression Association of America www.adaa.org

* Children's Anxiety Institute www.childrenwithanxiety.com

* National Mental Health Association www.nmha.org

* www.anxietybc.com

* Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders in Children: Information for Parents www.nasponline.org/resources/intonline/anxiety_huberty.pdf