

# **Managing Teenage Anxiety**

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# Pair Activity invitation: parent/s with son/daughter

- 1) Parents please briefly share with your young person:
  - a) some of your own experiences with anxiety at 14/15 years old
  - b) your concerns about anxiety for them
  
- 2) Young person: What, if any, connections do you see between a) and b)?

# What is anxiety?

**What is anxiety?** Anxiety is a form of fear - of being overwhelmed and of being unable to meet life's demands. It is concerned with the future.

## **What are the symptoms of anxiety?**

- **Physical: FIGHT, FLIGHT or FREEZE.** Arousal of the sympathetic nervous system – tight chest, feeling faint or sick, tense muscles, excessive sweating; insomnia; digestive trouble.
- **Emotional:** feelings of dread, worry, panic, disconnection
- **Behavioural:** nail-biting/skin-picking; repetitive, ritualistic behaviours; self-harm.

- **What is reasonable level of anxiety?**

Appropriate before a test, a presentation or important match.

- **How much anxiety is too much?**

- When social relationships, sleep patterns, eating habits are affected. When someone seems to be 'stuck' on anxious mode.

# What is different about adolescent anxiety?

1. Anxiety is central to the vital task of transitioning from childhood to adulthood: there will be doubt – can I do it?

- Other cultures arguably have stronger frameworks to contain these anxieties than we do

Eg: The males of tribal Okiek of Kenya (Kratz, 1990) undergo various rituals between the ages of 14 and 16, including circumcision. They live secluded from adults of the opposite sex for up to 24 weeks, are painted with white clay and charcoal to appear wild, and esoteric knowledge is imparted to them by elders.

2. The teenage brain is undergoing huge changes and the cerebral cortex is not mature until around 25

(image of the triune brain (Maclean, 1967))



**Survival Brain**

- Reptilian

**Emotional Brain**

- Limbic

**Thinking Brain**

- Neo-cortex

3. Young people tend to live within systems in which they are relatively powerless

## a) School

- Ofsted demands;
- teacher demands;
- exam demands;
- friendship demands;
- attendance demands...

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## b) Family

At this stage of the 'Family Lifecycle' families can be under a lot of stress:

- parental financial and work stress
- pressure of newly questioning, critical, angry or sad young person
- needs of older relatives or younger children
- trying to be more flexible to allow for growing adolescent independence, whilst maintaining authoritative parenting and close contact



# Risk factors for anxiety

- Being of an anxious disposition/genetics
- Coming from a family where there is/has been anxiety
- Past experiences of trauma and loss

# What do you need to minimise anxiety?

- Multiple good quality relationships with family and friends
- Physical exercise, to get rid of adrenaline
- Practices that allow a focus on the present: mindfulness; being with nature; music; art or a craft
- Family attitudes that see the world and its people as fundamentally positive

# Any more?

- Music,
- meditation,
- deep breathing,
- watching comedy
- Journaling – writing about the strong feelings
- ...What do people do in your family to relax?

# Supporting your anxious teenager (i)

**Be present**, even if they are often not. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and

a) Respond to their experience with **empathy** (not just sympathy)

b) - and with the the capacity to **contain their anxiety** (that means having taken care of yourself first – see previous slide)

- An example of maybe how not to re self-harm

# Teenager:

“ Mum/Dad, I feel so miserable about taking my exams, I might fail. It feels just too much to learn and I really don't understand a lot of the maths. I'm so scared of failing, letting myself down, feeling like I'm a failure.”\*

\*This exchange is taken from *Conversations that Matter: Talking with children and teenagers in ways that help*, Margot Sunderland (Worth, 2015)

# Mum/Dad replies:

- **A:** “Never mind. Look, what you need to do is just keep up that revision. Discipline yourself to do an hour every night – no TV or Facebook for that time. I will help you.”

or

- **B:** “Ah, sorry to hear you are feeling so wretched about the pressure, all those subjects must sometimes feel like a huge mountain to climb, you’re worried about failing, and you’re feeling just awful at the moment.”

**Which of A or B would you go for, and why?**

# Supporting your anxious teenager ii

**Explore solutions** with them:

- *How* to cope with the party rather than whether to go: ‘I hear that you’re worried about this. What can you do that’s going to help?’
- - With honesty in reference to your own experiences – young people tend to assume that their parent/carer have fully solved their own past problems, where of course that is not always the case.
- - Learn about anxiety with your son or daughter. The physical symptoms they are experiencing are real: the body is in fight-flight mode and it will help them to understand that. Practise breathing and relaxation techniques.

# Resources

- The NHS Choices webpage on 'Anxiety in Children' is a useful and practical place to start, with sensible sections on 'How to support your anxious child' and 'When should we get help'.
- For the young person, I like the Hey Sigmund blog at [heysigmund.com](https://heysigmund.com). There's a good post called 'Anxiety in Teens – How to help a Teenager Deal with Anxiety' which is actually written for them. The neuroscience is good.
- Young Minds has a free parent helpline on 0808 802 5544 (Monday-Friday 9.30am-4pm) for help and advice around children's mental health issues.
- **Headspace** is an app that clients of mine have found useful.