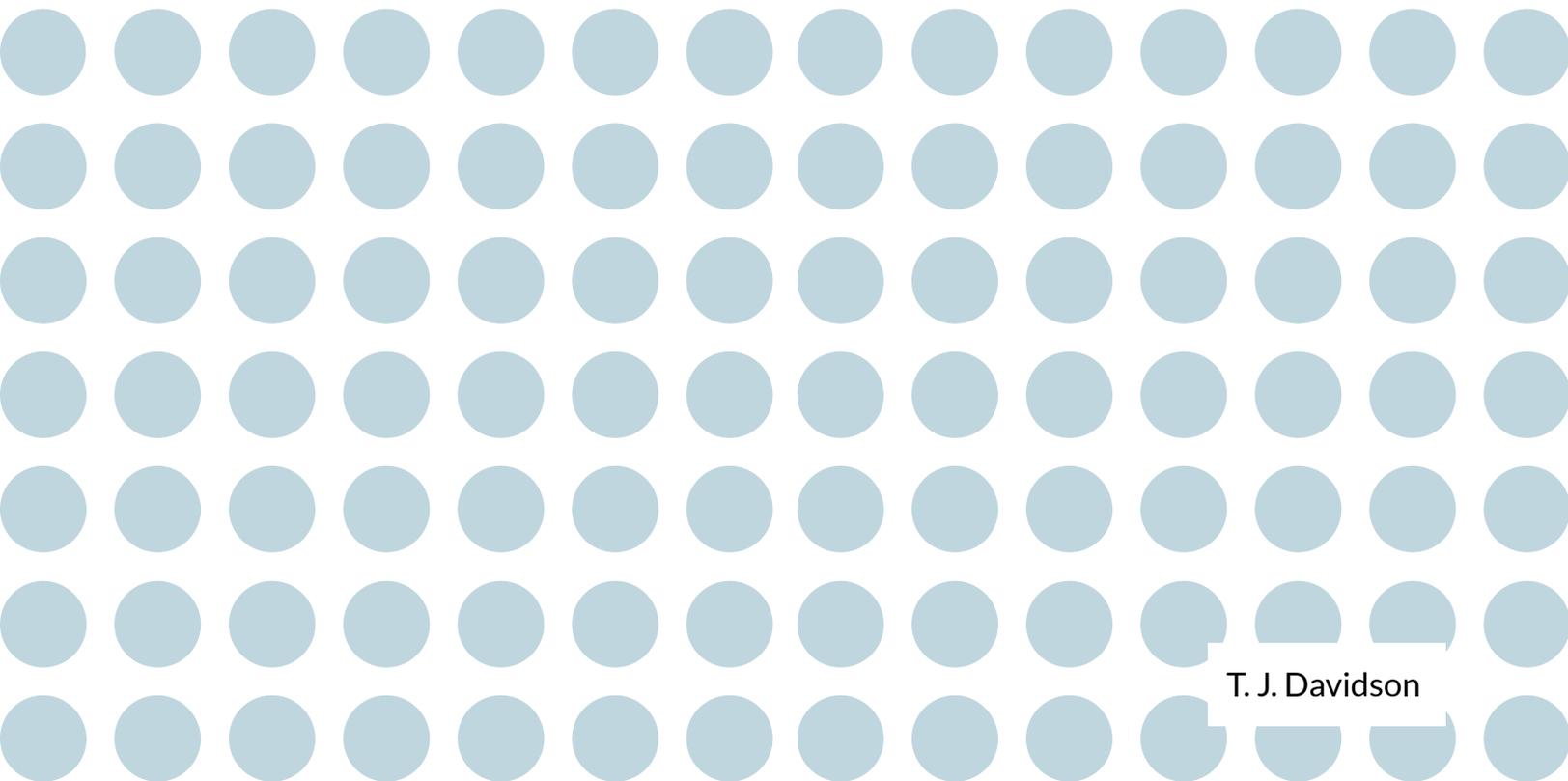


Helping Your Anxious Teen



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Material for this booklet taken from "Helping Your Anxious Teen" by Sheila Achar Josephs.
If you want to know more I encourage you to read her book.

Why Adolescents are Vulnerable

1

Brain Development - Teen anxiety can be particularly problematic because of developmental changes going on within teens. A teen's brain is in rapid development during adolescence (starting around age 11-12). However, in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for planning and impulse control are the last to mature. Consequently, a teen's emotions continually interfere with logic and problem solving.



Genetics - Also, during puberty, certain genes that are passed on from parents are activated. If there is someone in your family prone to anxiety, this biological driven vulnerability can start to be manifest.

2

3

Fitting In - Fitting in and figuring out their identity is a teen's major concern. They are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in to society. Because of this natural part of development, one of the most common anxiety disorders is social anxiety disorder.



Higher Expectations - Academic demands are one of the most common stressors during this time. Parents and teachers have put such a high value on performing well and "making the grade" that students feel like a failure if they don't measure up to expectations. They not only feel pressure to perform well but they feel it is a measure of their worth. The extra homework, advanced classes (AP and college classes), and increasing demands of sports have all added higher levels of stress for teens. Teens are now juggling multiple high pressure responsibilities and feel as if they can't ever drop the ball.

4



Strategies that Don't Work to Reduce Anxiety



Tell Your Teen to Stop Thinking about it

As humans we can't just suppress our fears. They cannot be that easily dismissed. In fact, the opposite happens, when we tell someone to suppress a thought, it makes them think about it more. Do it yourself: Tell yourself not to think about Blue Elephants. Blue Elephants, Don't think about Blue Elephants. Ready Go! It is hard not to do. When you are told not to do something, you can't just turn your brain off.

Jumping in with Advice



Before kids want something fixed, they want to know their parents care. They may not sense your empathy if they sense a lecture coming on. When a kid shares problems and parents rush in with advice, the parent isn't taking the time to empathize with their kid. This can make a kid feel as if their feelings are not important.

Also, parents need to first listen to understand the source of a teen's anxiety. A teen might be stressing over making the basketball team, but it could be a multitude of issues that is causing the stress. For example, the stress could be from the possibility of not making the team, being split up from her friends, fear of failure and being made fun of, fear of disappointing the coach or her parents. A parent can't give good advice until they know the actual problem.



Allow Avoidance of Fear

When their teen runs into a stressful situation, it is natural to want to remove that situation. Stress gone, anxiety averted. A parent might talk to a teacher for a socially anxious teen, or a parent might hover around their teen during a social event so they will feel safe. However, while avoiding anxious situations helps in the immediate future, it can actually worsen fears in the long run.

Parent stepping in to save the day can actually reinforce teens fears. Parents are showing their teen that the teen can't handle it on their own, that they need help. This can become a negative spiral we must avoid.

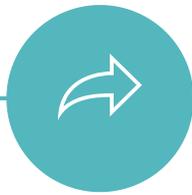


Parenting Strategies that Work



#1

Connect Before
You Correct



#2

Externalize the
Anxiety



#3

Team Up With
Your Teen



#4

Challenge
Negative
Thinking

1) Connect before you Correct

As the old saying goes, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Before jumping in with advice, empathize with your teen, let them know you are hurting because they are hurting. Also, practice active listening. Active listening shows the other person you are listening by repeating in your own words what they are saying. This shows your teen that you heard what they said and also understand what they were saying.

Empathy and active listening are important, even if you believe their worries are unfounded or exaggerated. You can deal with that concern later, but your first job is to connect.

2) Externalize the Anxiety and Talk Back to It.

Worry and Anxiety are so hard to shake because they reside deep inside our minds and hearts. It is hard to think clearly because we feel our fears are apart of who we are. A great way to reduce the power of our anxiety is to externalize it and talk back to it. We need to treat our worries like a person whispering lies into our ears. We call out the lies that it is telling us and we tell them we are no longer going to listen to them.

3) Team Up with Your Teen

Many times parents are trying to get teens to change behaviors that are related to anxiety. A parent might want their teen to attend a social event they are anxious about or try out for a team. It is easy for these situations to become the parent vs. the teen. Parents pushing a behavior and the teen digging in and resisting. Instead we need to reframe it and team up with our teen. We should let them know that we are not working against them, but





we are teaming up with them to fight anxiety together. Make their anxiety the opponent, not your teen. This also has the added benefit to take the blame off your teen. This can reduce stress and help clearly identify the problem and help them to realize that they are not the problem.

4) Help Your Teen Challenge Negative Thinking.

There are several types of faulty thinking that teens fall into that perpetuate stress, anxiety, and worry.



- All-or-Nothing Thinking - viewing situations as extreme, black and white
- Mental Filter - focusing on only the negative side of an issue or event
- Disqualifying the Positive - looking at only the negative
- Mind Reading - jumping to conclusions about what others are thinking
- Catastrophizing - fearing the worst

Notice the thoughts that trigger anxiety and then evaluate those thoughts. Do this by asking questions.

- Do you think it will have to happen that way?
- Is there another way it could happen?
- Is there another side of the issue?
- Is there another way to look at it?

ACTIVITY: Practice Questioning, Not Answering

- I performed badly on the SAT, so now I won't get into college.
 - = Is this the only time you can take the test for college?
- By skipping one word in my speech, I made a fool of myself.
 - = Did any parts go well?
- I will probably perform terribly at tryouts and then be cut from the team.
 - = Why do you think that?
 - = Do you think you could perform well?
- If I don't get a 4.0 GPA, I will disappoint everyone and be a failure.
 - = Why do you think that?





5) Attend to Non-Anxious Behavior

A parent should try to encourage the behaviors they want their teen to display through positive reinforcement. This is especially true when they respond to situations in healthy ways. For example: - If your teen is normally anxious acknowledge their behavior when it is calm. - If they don't normally like talking to people, encourage them when they step out of their comfort zone and talk to a stranger.

Reframing Our Worries



Choose the right time to tackle worries. Harmful anxiety and worry comes from unrealistic negative thinking. The only way to reduce the worry is to challenge the thinking. However, when teens are at the height of their anxiety, they may not be in the right frame of mind to listen to logic. It is best to wait until your teen is less stressed and more receptive to a discussion and more apt to take in new information.

The way we think about a situation affects the way we feel more than the situation itself! This is such an important concept for our teens to learn. We don't have to try to change the situation, we need to reframe how we view our situation. This is a great way to challenge unrealistic negative thinking.

A teen can make a bad grade on a test and respond in very different ways. One can think it is the end of the world and they will fail the class. The other can remember that they could have done worse, it was the hardest test of the year and the other tests will be easier, and they should still be able to get an A in the class.

A teen can get dumped by his girlfriend. He could think it is the end of the world and no girl will ever like him again or he can think of it as a great time to hang out with his friends he has not had as much time for, he will save some money, and he still has plenty of time to hang out with other girls.

In summary, the best thing for a teen to do is notice unrealistic thoughts, evaluate them, call them out, and replace them with realistic thinking. Parents need to model this for our teens all the time. Point out the positives. Look for the good in a situation. See how this situation, while maybe not expected, can still be a good experience.



Facing Your Fears

Face Your Fears one step at a time

Accept feelings of anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty

Continue facing each situation until the discomfort decreases

Experience reduced anxiety and better coping



Exposure must be done:

- On purpose
- Frequently enough; ideally, once a day
- For long enough each time to fully confront the fear
- Across different situations to really test out fears.

In an empathetic way, let your teen know that in order to help him overcome his anxiety, you won't continue to help him avoid what he fears. Although this may surprise you, too much focus on advice-giving during times of avoidance can also unintentionally give the avoidance a great deal of attention. Instead, ignore negative behavior and acknowledge each positive change in behavior. Also, make sure you don't excessively reassure him that he will be safe, which prevents him from learning this for himself.

Team up with your teen to help them overcome their anxiety. For example, you can say, "It looks like anxiety has gotten you stuck. How can I help support you to do the things that you really want to do?" Ask your teen what she would like to work on that is doable and not too anxiety-provoking. Picking the right goal will increase the chances of success.



Socially Fearful Teen

To Socially fearful teens, the spotlight is always on them! Imagine if wherever you went, a spotlight followed you and became especially larger and brighter when you made a social faux pas. Socially anxious teens believe that everyone notices how anxious they are, which feel even more embarrassing.

There are some key ways in which socially anxious teen perceive social situations that trigger anxiety.

- 1 They tend to engage in the thinking error of mind reading. They make guesses about what someone else is thinking about them.**
- 2 All or nothing thinking. Everything is seen in black or white, perfection or failure**
- 3 They overestimate the probability that social disapproval will happen and the severity of that disapproval.**

Reassurance Doesn't Help

Most parents, when seeing their teens stuck in the throes of anxiety about a social situation, tell them that it won't be so bad. Unfortunately, teens don't usually respond to positive predictions and reassurance about how a social situation will go for them. Their worries are so loud, it is like a drum constantly beating in their mind, drowning out everything else.

Poor Social Skills

Research confirms that social anxiety is not related to how socially skilled a person is; rather, those with social anxiety think they have inadequate social skills. Even if your teen has good social skills, advance practicing some behaviors, such as how to initiate and maintain a conversation at a party, can be very helpful to decrease anxiety.





1) Help Your Teen Identify Social Fears

- What would happen if people noticed that you did something wrong?
- What do you worry that people are thinking about you?
- What do you imagine or picture happening to you in this situation?

2) Help Your Teen View the Situation Differently

Questions help your teen begin to challenge the negative thinking that gave rise to these fears.

- Is it necessary to perform perfectly, or could it be that people aren't expecting that?
- Could your worries be exaggerating how foolish you might look?
- Could you be magnifying the importance of this one event for how others might view you?
- Is there a possibility that people will not be watching you as closely as you think?

3) Identify Long Standing Beliefs

Dysfunctional beliefs are the engine that drives anxious, irrational thoughts. For example, perfectionism - the belief that it is unacceptable to perform less than flawlessly - runs rampant in socially anxious teens. Here are some dysfunctional beliefs socially fearful teens have expressed:

- I don't do anything right.
- I am the most boring person in this world.
- People will reject me if I don't do things perfectly every time.
- People are watching to see if I make any mistakes.

Asking questions about the meaning of situations is like peeling layers of an onion. Eventually teens will express the core beliefs they truly hold.



4) Create more healthy beliefs

- Would your friend have the same negative opinion of you as you do of yourself?
- What are some experiences that actually contradict your beliefs about yourself?
- Are there people in the world who are not as judgmental as you think?

Teens think that everyone is looking at them and always judging them. This belief is hard to budge. Help your teen to see the fallacy of this belief and ask her, “Were you judging the whole time how your friend acted and whether she made even the slightest mistake?” “Do you see how your belief that everyone is judging you critically all the time might be too extreme?”

5) Use self talk to face challenging situations

Have you noticed that people who are not very socially fearful tell themselves something that will help them get through particularly challenging times? “I just have to get through my jitters when I first start to talk, then it will be alright.” Teen who are socially anxious do the opposite; they think of a multitude of ways that something in the future will not work out. Socially anxious teens need to make coping statements to help. Such as:

- It is natural to be anxious, but the anxiety won’t hurt me
- This is going to feel tough, but I can get through it.
- People may notice a few of my mistakes, but they’ll also notice things I do well.

Some teens find it useful to write a few of these statements on an index card and call it their coping card. They can pull it out whenever they need it to get them through a socially anxious situation.



My Perfectionist Teen

Positive Striving and Perfectionism has to do with the standards by which your teen judges competence and self-worth.

The Perfectionist...	Positive Strivers...
Has unrealistic goals and standards for personal performance	Set standards for excellence that are high but achievable
Cannot tolerate a less-than-perfect performance	Enjoy challenging themselves regardless of the outcome
Dwells on failure as a sign of inadequacy	Are resilient to failure and disappointment
Views making mistakes as unacceptable	Use mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning
Holds rigid rules and beliefs about how to behave	Change their level of effort depending on the importance of the task
Tied to Self-worth	Seen as activities they do, not who they are

Faulty Thinking

- All-or-Nothing Thinking - Hallmark of Perfectionism is all-or-nothing thinking - a tendency to see things in extreme black-and-white terms.
- Mental Filter - Focus exclusively on one negative result, no matter how small
- Mind Reading - Other people are always judging their performance
- Catastrophizing - Fearing that imperfection will result in intolerable disaster





Your teen should treat her perfectionistic thoughts like most worries - as something to be evaluated and then replaced with more realistic thoughts. Ask general but challenging questions about successful people to help counter false ideas. For example:

- “Is it true that successful people never make mistakes?”
- If a successful person made a mistake, would that make them unsuccessful?”
- “Is it possible that your performance was worthwhile, even great, even if some people didn’t like it.”



Setting Future Goals

Perfectionist often set completely unrealistic goals, which invariably increases their risk that they will fail to meet them. You can gently question whether her goals have a good chance of being accomplished. To many perfectionist teens set goals too high that the task seems undoable, which reduces motivation. To help decrease how daunting the goal feels, you can ask, “Even though this task is challenging, what are some ways that it is still doable and going well?”

Reviewing Past Performance

The questions that follow are all designed to overcome black-and-white thinking and catastrophizing that perfectionists use to judge their performance.

- Is there a way to judge your performance as not all bad, but also positive?
- How would a friend view your performance?- How could the result not be so “make or break” for you?
- Are you magnifying the criticism and minimizing the approval?
- Could people be not as disappointed with you as you fear?



By stepping back and evaluating her thoughts in this way, your teen will better be able to proceed through challenging situations without getting caught up in acute anxiety and panic



My Irritable, Stressed-Out Teen

The biological changes teens are going through make them naturally moody. Their sleep problems add up over time. And they tend to hide the impact of stress and anxiety on them until it comes out.

Signs of Anxious Irritability	Signs of Normal Teenage Irritability
Appears upset over the smallest of things.	Demonstrates periodic frustration with daily stressors.
Acts irritable for frequent and long periods of time.	Has occasional moodiness but maintains a sense of humor.
Is easily overwhelmed during social interactions and often withdraws into isolation.	Sometimes dislikes talking to parents and siblings and wants to be alone.
Frequently snaps at others.	Occasionally is sarcastic or snaps at requests.
Appears tense and nervous.	Is more irritable at times of high stress and later calms down
	Appears content and joyful on many occasions.

Is My Teen Depressed

Another common cause of irritable behavior is depressed mood, which can range from mildly irritable or low mood all the way to full-blown severe depression. Learning about the signs of depression will help you to determine when irritability in your anxious teen might be partly depression-based and, if so, to take steps to alleviate the depression.





Signs of Depression

- Is Irritable or has low mood for lengthy periods of time
 - Feels sad and hopeless about the future
- Loses interest in and motivation for previously enjoyable activities
 - Has a change in sleep, appetite, weight, or energy
 - Withdraws from social interactions
- Has feelings of worthlessness and, in the worst case, thoughts about dying
- Has reduced functioning across home, school, and extracurricular activities.

Reducing Irritable Behavior in an Anxious Teen

Sometimes parents tiptoe around their teen, trying to avoid the next outburst. However, when they do this their teen never learns positive coping strategies, and the extra support needed to manage irritability often leaves parents feeling frustrated and resentful. Despite the challenges involved, parents have much to offer to their anxious, irritable teens.



It is helpful to consider irritable behavior in an anxious teen as the *endpoint* in a sequence of events. Tracking episodes of anxiety and irritability over time will help you determine whether a particular pattern emerges. Start with common triggers such as:

- Hungry
- Excessively busy
- Sleep Deprivation
- Tired
- Not enough downtime

Once you have identified key triggers that lead to anxiety, it is useful to try to change those triggers in order to lessen your teen's irritability.

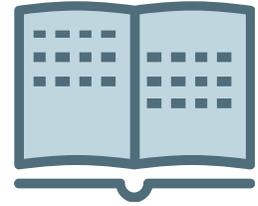
A surprisingly powerful intervention in and of itself is to monitor our behavior over time. Studies show that by simply doing that, we can decrease how often a problematic behavior occurs.





My Stress Log

- **Triggers of Stress:** What event or situation stressed me out?
- **Thought:** How did I perceive the situation that led me to feel stress?
- **Feeling:** How anxious or stressed-out did I feel?
- **Behavior:** What did I do when I was stressed?
- **What Helped?:** What worked to reduce my stress and anxiety?
- **What Else Can I Think?** Change thoughts if they are unrealistic.
- **What Else Can I Do?** Change coping behaviors if they are not working.



Do not try to force your teen to complete the log; this tends to defeat the purpose. Instead, make sure the control stays with your teen. An empathetic talk about the benefits of checking in with yourself in this way is a more effective way to encourage participation.

Decrease Subjective Stress

For those teens reticent to volunteer information about how they are doing, a useful strategy to try is the *weekly chat*. With older teens, I have called this a coffee break. It is time specifically reserved for positive communication and support. During this chat, you can gently inquire as to what was stressful during the past week, how your teen handled it, and what is concerning about the coming week. To make it especially effective, try to engage in active listening, which means to restate in your own words what you have heard your teen say, and use Socratic questioning to reduce subjective stress.



Enhance Family Coping

Any plan to address irritability and stress can't neglect the impact of family functioning on teens. General stress and anxiety management are supported or hampered by the overall atmosphere at home.

Also, teens with anxiety rarely do well when there are unpredictable household rules, frequent family discord, or too chaotic environment. Here are some ideas for reducing stress, enhancing communication, and maintaining a positive household structure for your teen?





Enhance Family Coping

- Establish rules and routines that ensure a fair level of predictability
- Each parent should consistently apply the same rules and routines as the other
- Allow frequent opportunities for positive communication that is not centered around stressful topics such as grades, chores, or household rules.
- When you all need to discuss a high-conflict topic, set up a time to talk with your teen rather than communicating at unpredictable or stressful times
- Establish small moments of bonding between parents and children with a focus on empathy and positive attention.
- Strive to give siblings equal amounts of attention over time.
- Recognize and respect that in the teen years children need an increased level of privacy and independence
- Each person in the house needs rest and downtime to recharge and reduce irritability.

