

COVID-19: ANXIETY IN KIDS AND TEENS

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Fear and Worry

Emotions such as fear and worry are commonly felt by children and adolescents as a normal part of growing up. In fact, fear is a normal response to any threat felt in the environment. However, when these emotions get in the way of your child's daily life and disrupt his/her routine, this could be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotion that involves feeling nervous, scared, afraid, or worried. Usually, we feel anxious when we think something bad is about to happen. Anxiety is usually focused on the future.

When is Anxiety a Problem for a Child?

Everyone experiences worries, however, some children/adolescents begin to feel anxious or worried so intensely that it makes them really uncomfortable and can start to interfere with their lives. It can affect how they think and processes information, their emotions, and even how their body reacts.

A child or adolescent may have an anxiety disorder if they:

- Have an extreme response to a situation or event that they believe is threatening
- If the intensity of the reaction is out of proportion to the actual danger. This can include a heightened physical response such as increased heart rate, stomachaches, or rapid breathing
- If they avoid the situations or events that cause them to worry. Avoidance creates further difficulties for the child in that they miss opportunities to build age-appropriate skills, which can make them feel more anxious and lead to more

Tips for helping your anxious child/teen during Covid19:

- Although social distancing should be followed, teen's communication and contact with peers should be encouraged. They rely on peers for social support and staying touch with friends during this time via electronics is important. Parents may loosen rules during this time, permitting more time with phones than previously. Parents who empathize with a teen's sense of frustration over the disruption of these relationships can be helpful
- Structure with school and schedules is helpful in creating a "new normal". It can be tempting to extend sleep/wake times and stay in pajamas all day, but having routine helps to keep us on track and focused.
- Take one day at a time. Reassure your child that for today, he/she is ok. Let them know that event will have a beginning, middle and end. The best way to approach it by focusing on today. A daily mindfulness activity can be helpful in learning to focus on the present.
- Monitor your own stress level. Children pay close attention to parents' mood and anxiety levels. Children/teens rely on parents for safety and reassurance during times of crisis and when parent's anxiety escalates, children worry more.
- Limit time watching/listening to news. Information seeking in times of crisis is a natural response. However, news can be overwhelming and actually increase anxiety levels. Plan to watch/listen/read news once day and limit social media feeds.
- Get moving inside or outside if possible. There are many free resources for exercise routines on YouTube. If weather permits, walk, run or bike in your neighborhood while maintaining social distance.
- Be aware that thinking patterns can quickly lead to worst case scenarios. Work on challenging anxious thoughts with facts and things you **can** control