

WHEN WORRY TAKES OVER

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health concerns for children and teens. The good news is, it's very treatable!

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's "alarm system." It helps us notice danger and get ready to act. Sometimes the alarm goes off too often — even when we are safe. Anxiety can show up in thoughts (worry, poor focus), feelings (fear), body signs (tummy aches, sleep problems), and actions (avoidance).

What anxiety can look like

Ages 4-7

- Frequent "what if?" worries
- Crying, clinginess, or big reactions during transitions
- Difficulty separating (school, daycare, bedtime)
- Stomach aches or headaches with no medical cause

Ages 8-12

- Worries about school, friends, mistakes, or safety
- Perfectionism or trouble starting tasks
- Repeated reassurance-seeking
- Sleep problems or avoiding activities

Ages 13-21

- Social anxiety, panic symptoms, or constant worry
- Avoiding school, work, driving, or social events
- Physical symptoms (racing heart, nausea, dizziness)
- Irritability, shutdown, or "I don't care" responses
- Overthinking, checking, or needing things "just right"

The Anxiety Trap (why avoidance makes it bigger)

Avoidance brings quick relief, so the brain learns, "I escaped danger by avoiding." Over time, fear grows faster and the pressure to avoid increases. This is why anxiety shrinks when fears are faced gently, step by step.

What helps (Practical Tools You Can Start Today)

A) Name it to tame it

Try: “This is anxiety. It’s loud, but it’s not the boss.”

B) Calm the body first

Cold drinks, gum, slow breaths, deep breathing, muscle relaxation.

Try: box breathing - breathe in 4... hold 4... out 4... hold 4... (repeat 4 times)

C) Model calm Behaviours

Show how you handle stress calmly by narrating your approach to challenges.

D) Use a “coach voice” (not a “rescuer voice”)

Try: “I know this is hard. I also know you can do hard things. I’ll help you take the next step.”

E) Reduce reassurance (slowly)

Instead of answering the same worry again and again, try asking: “*What did your calm brain say last time?*” or “*Let’s make a plan for coping, not certainty.*”

F) Protect sleep + basics

Anxiety grows when we are tired, hungry, or overwhelmed. Small routines make a big difference.

Common Pitfalls

- Don’t argue with anxiety using long lectures or logic
- Don’t force big steps too fast
- Don’t let anxiety decide every plan
- Don’t delay getting help if things are getting worse

When to get extra help

Consider assessment or therapy if anxiety lasts weeks to months and interferes with daily life, leads to avoidance of important activities, includes panic attacks or major mood changes, or raises self-harm or safety concerns. Effective care often includes CBT skills, gradual exposure (brave ladder), and parent coaching.