

# Facts For Families

# Anxiety Disorders

Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders experience extreme feelings of panic, fear or discomfort in everyday situations. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress, but if the child's anxiety becomes excessive, irrational and he/she avoids feared situations that interfere with daily life, it may be an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorders in children, affecting nearly 13 percent of young people.\* Overall, nearly one quarter of the population will experience an anxiety disorder over the course of their lifetimes.\*\*

## Common types of anxiety disorders

### **Panic Disorders**

Characterized by unpredictable panic attacks and an intense fear of future attacks. Common symptoms are heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness and anxiety. These symptoms are often confused with those of a heart attack.

### **Specific Phobias**

Intense fear reaction to a specific object or situation (such as spiders, dogs or heights) that often leads to avoidance behavior. The level of fear is usually inappropriate to the situation.

### **Social Phobia**

Extreme anxiety about being judged by others or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or ridicule and may lead to avoidance behavior.

### **Separation Anxiety Disorder**

Intense anxiety associated with being away from caregivers and results in youth clinging to parents or refusing to do daily activities such as going to school or sleepovers.

### **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

Individuals are plagued by persistent, recurring thoughts (obsessions) and engage in compulsive

ritualistic behaviors in order to reduce the anxiety associated with these obsessions. (e.g. constant hand washing).

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

PTSD can follow an exposure to a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, sexual or physical assault or witnessing the death of a loved one. Three main symptoms are reliving a traumatic event, avoidance behaviors and emotional numbing and physiological problems such as difficulty sleeping, irritability or poor concentration.

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

Experiencing six months or more of persistent, irrational and extreme worry about many different things, causing insomnia, headaches and irritability.

## How it affects my child

Children and adolescents with anxiety are capable of leading healthy, successful lives. If anxiety is left undiagnosed, youth may fail in school, experience an increase in family stress and disruption and have problems making or keeping friends. To avoid these harmful consequences, early identification and treatment are essential.

## What can we do about it?

**Take your child to a mental health professional if an anxiety disorder is suspected.** Consult with his/her teachers and school so that social issues can be monitored and addressed.

**Once diagnosed, caregivers should consult with a health care expert on how best to provide for the child's needs, which may include**

- Practicing relaxation techniques at home.
- Encouraging your child to approach, rather than avoid, feared situations so that he or she can experience success and see that nothing bad is going to happen.
- Learning about your child's anxiety disorder so that you can be their advocate.
- Consulting with teachers and school psychologists so that the child's special needs can be met in school.
- Exploring medication, for a period of time, to relieve anxiety. Ensure that your child receives their medication at the same time every day.

**Specific strategies that can be used at home include**

- Be predictable.
- Provide support and comfort, remembering to encourage all of the child's efforts.
- Never ridicule or criticize the child for becoming anxious. Although there may be no logical danger, these feelings are real to the child.
- While avoiding coercion, break up fearful tasks into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Avoid constantly reaffirming to your child that everything will be okay. It is important that he/she learn that they are capable of reassuring themselves and devise ways to do so.
- Do not attempt to eliminate all anxious situations for your child. Children with anxiety disorders must learn that it is normal to experience some anxiety.

- Create a mutual plan with the child to address their needs, letting them set the pace for their recovery.

\*<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/CA-0007/default.asp#8>  
\*\*[http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx\\_factsheet.asp?id=10](http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx_factsheet.asp?id=10)

## Resources/Links

### Bright Futures

"Bright Futures- Tips for Parenting the Anxious Child"

<http://bit.ly/brightfuturestips>

### Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center

410-531-6677

The Grassroots hotline is available 24 hours a day. Grassroots provides support for individuals in crisis or anyone needing help connecting with resources in the community. Walk-in counseling is also available.

[www.grassrootscrisis.org](http://www.grassrootscrisis.org)

### HCPSS – Supporting Student's Mental Health

This HCPSS page provides an overview of the supports offered by the school system to promote mental health and wellness. The site also includes information about age-appropriate behavior, when you should follow up with a mental health professional and a list of local resources.

<http://bit.ly/hcpssmh>

### Worry Wise Kids

This site lists the red flags that can alert parents to each individual anxiety disorder, details the steps parents can take if they suspect their child suffers from an anxiety disorder and supplies parenting tips for helping anxious youth.

[www.worrywisekids.org](http://www.worrywisekids.org)