



Anxiety – a Parent Guide by Nicola Morgan



I sure wish I had understood anxiety better at a younger age and especially as I hit my teens and university years. It is only once we know what's going on in our brains and bodies when we feel anxious, and how we can help ourselves or offer support to others, that we are empowered to take positive action. I am so delighted Nicola Morgan has agreed to share her knowledge on this all important topic with us.

Francesca Geens, Creator, The HappySelf Journal

Parents are often anxious about anxiety. We worry about our children and suffer when they suffer. Adolescence brings new fears as we hear statistics about teenage mental illness. But some anxiety is natural and inevitable. We must understand it properly and teach healthy coping mechanisms so that anxiety remains a minor part of our young people's lives, something they – and we – need not fear.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is simply the stress response: our brain detects a threat and prepares for immediate action. Cortisol and adrenaline increase heart rate and breathing and direct focus onto the threat. This is an ancient response, evolved for dangers such as lions or enemies with spears. It's a survival and success tool. Without it, we might lie back and never push ourselves.

So, what's the problem?

Lions and enemies with spears are not common today! But modern "threats" are everywhere. Think how often these apply to your young people or yourself:

- ▶ Competition: tests, exams, matches, races.
- ▶ Performance and other people: even answering a question in class or speaking in front of others. We are all somewhat self-conscious, teenagers typically more than others. People with introverted personalities also react more strongly to such situations.
- ▶ Self-esteem: criticism, undermining remarks, self-doubt, failure, comparison with others. Simply receiving criticism raises cortisol.
- ▶ Fear: "What if ?" Such thoughts can be triggered by stories we hear or just thoughts in our head.
- ▶ Challenges: when we think we might fail or find something difficult.

We are not built to withstand frequent stresses and two problems can arise:

- 1) Feeling panicky or anxious now:** adrenaline causes feelings from mild nervousness to full panic. Adrenaline is useful just before a test but not when we want to relax or sleep.
- 2) Longer term effects:** cortisol has a habit of building up, harming sleep, mood, concentration and even immune system. This can lower performance and enjoyment of life.





Is anxiety serious?

Anxiety has a wide range:

- 1) A natural, useful stress response preparing the body for super-performance: something to recognise but not prevent.
- 2) A tendency to worry more than is useful: anything from moderate over-thinking to something that lowers wellbeing, health, performance and enjoyment.
- 3) An anxiety disorder: a diagnosable medical condition. This includes specific anxieties such as phobias and often accompanies other illnesses such as eating disorders.

Many – perhaps most – people fall in the second category, either sometimes or often. This is where this guide will help most, both you and your children or teenagers.

If your young person (or you) might be in the third category, seek medical help. It's still sensible to follow all the advice in this guide but it's unlikely to be enough. A common, very effective therapy is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which develops healthier thought patterns. There is help: please access it through your doctor.

What symptoms should I look for?

It's useful for you *and* young people to recognise signs of anxiety. Then you (and they) can use coping mechanisms early, rather than letting the problem get worse. It also helps young people feel in control of their health.

Common stress symptoms vary greatly and can include: headaches, stomach-aches, dizziness, tight chest, muscle pains (especially in shoulders, chest, neck, jaw and face), sleep difficulty, mood swings, tiredness, poor concentration, feeling that you can't breathe or swallow. Do reassure your child or teenager that these are common signs of stress and are extremely unlikely to be serious.

Because such symptoms *can* have other causes, however, it's important to get them checked.

How adults can help an anxious young person

Model – How do *you* behave when anxious? We learn from the people around us. Acknowledge when you're feeling stressed and show how you're tackling it. You don't have to say what you're stressed about: in fact, it's best not to, to avoid triggering anxious thoughts in your child.

Don't catastrophise – At times of trouble in the world – whether a pandemic, climate emergency or a political situation you detest or fear – be careful about your words. Is it helpful to fuel fears by sounding as though you think the world is ending? Is this how to build the "can-do" mindset you'd like them to have?

Communicate – Make sure your young person knows they can talk to you (or another adult) if they want to. When they do, *listen* more than talk. And put your phone away!

Distract – When in a negative thought pattern, we need something to distract us, something requiring substantial concentration. For example: a family game; an exciting film; baking; planning a special meal; reading an engaging book; or a challenge, such as a treasure hunt or obstacle course.



Use the right words – It's important not to dismiss fears as silly but to empathise and acknowledge their feelings. Depending on age and context, you might say:

- ▶ "I'm sorry you're feeling like this. But how you feel will change."
- ▶ "I think your mind has made this a bigger worry than it needs to be."
- ▶ "I understand you're worried but it's so unlikely to happen." (If that's true.)
- ▶ "Remember how you worried last time and how you were fine the next day?"
- ▶ "A worry is just a thought you've repeated in your head. Let's repeat a different thought instead."
- ▶ "Let's spend a few minutes discussing that and then put the worry away and think about something else."

Strategies for young people themselves

- ▶ **Belly-breathing** – Everyone should learn this trick, ready for moments when adrenaline levels are high. It's all about relaxing the stomach and making the abdomen move during breathing, rather than the upper chest. You'll find instructions and a free audio on my website or look for "belly-breathing" on YouTube.
- ▶ **Hobbies and distractions** – Anything that engages the mind means we don't have headspace to worry.
- ▶ **Have fun** – Laughter is a brilliant antidote to anxiety. Watch a funny film, have a laugh with friends, do something silly.
- ▶ **Ask for help** – Make sure you know where you can go. (Parents, don't be upset if it's not always you.)
- ▶ **Write it down** – Expressing feelings in words is therapeutic and grounding. You could either keep a journal (and HappySelf Journals are perfect for this) or write a worry on a piece of paper which you then rip into tiny pieces. Satisfying!
- ▶ **Prioritise sleep** – Anxiety makes sleep difficult but there are lots of tricks to sleep better. See my website for resources
- ▶ **Physical activity** – One of the best-known ways to reduce anxiety. Exercise earlier in the day also helps night-time sleep. (Don't overdo exercise, though, and do eat and drink afterwards.)
- ▶ **Mindfulness** – This simple meditation really helps some people. You'll find resources online and in bookshops.

When to get professional help:



If someone talks or thinks about ending their life or how they might do it



If someone is too anxious to face normal activities such as school, going outside, meeting friends, eating



If anxiety seems out of control and is affecting quality of life



You might like to know

I'm an anxious person! I learnt the hard way how to live a healthy and positive life. My work is about teaching young people everything I wish I'd known, so they don't have to wait till they're my age to fulfil their potential. Anxiety is not pleasant but it's natural, necessary and does not have to be an enemy. You can keep it under control so it does its job and you and your family can thrive.

In short:

To help a young person suffering from anxiety:



1) Suggest positive coping mechanisms – and use them yourself



2) Facilitate a healthy life-style – and follow it yourself



3) Listen to their fears; help them understand anxiety and how they can control it so that it doesn't harm them

Resources for further help

Nicola Morgan's books which address anxiety and provide positive strategies and mindsets:

The Teenage Guide to Stress; Positively Teenage; Body Brilliant; The Teenage Guide to Friends; Exam Attack; The Awesome Power of Sleep

Nicola's website has information and resources, including a free belly-breathing audio: www.nicolamorgan.com

Young Minds: <https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Headspace: <https://www.headspace.com/>

Anxiety Survival Guide for Teens: CBT Skills to Overcome Fear, Worry, and Panic – by Jennifer Shannon

Mindfulness for Teens in 10 Minutes a Day: Exercises to Feel Calm, Stay Focused & Be Your Best – by Jennie Marie Battistin



About the author:

Nicola Morgan, The Teenage Brain Woman, is a multi-award-winning author whose work on young brains, psychology and mental health is loved by teenagers, schools and families around the world. She gives talks for teenage and adult audiences and has created unique teaching materials for schools. A former teacher, dyslexia specialist and novelist, when not writing in a rural garden office, Nicola keeps herself healthy as a passionate vegetable gardener, decent cook and determined runner.



Join Nicola's community:

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