

HANDOUT FOR CAREGIVERS ON CHILD & TEEN ANXIETY

To be used independently or together with the FAST-A Workbook for youth

QUICK SUMMARY

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal, helpful feeling that everyone has. It is our body's natural alarm system.

When is Anxiety a Problem?

Anxiety is a problem when it stops us from doing things we need or want to do, or when we get too upset about normal situations.

What leads to high anxiety?

The main thing that leads to high anxiety about normal situations is AVOIDANCE.

How can kids and teens overcome high anxiety when it's getting in the way?

The way to lower anxiety about normal situations is FACING FEARS. Some youth will need to learn new skills (like what to say or do) to be successful with their feared situations.

(Facing fears is also called "exposures" or "brave practice").

Facing fears helps youth to learn that:

- 1) What they fear is actually not so likely,
- 2) What they fear is actually not so dangerous, or
- 3) What they fear is something they can handle.

Accommodation: How Parents and Caregiver Help Can Sometimes Backfire

"Accommodation" means helping kids avoid the normal, safe situations they are afraid of. Helping kids avoid their fears is understandable, because it's hard to see kids get anxious, and anxious kids often act up. Accommodation sometimes helps kids face their fears (for example, they will go to a birthday party if you stay there with them) but over time it keeps kids from learning their fears are unlikely to come true, or they can handle anxious feelings and hard situations.

COMMON TRAPS QUIZ

Are You Falling Into Any of These Common Traps?

- Rescuing:** Saving a child from having to do the thing they feel anxious about.
(Example: Ordering food for them at a restaurant.)
- Avoiding:** Finding ways to steer clear of the things that are hard for the child.
(Example: crossing the street when your child sees a dog.)
- Too Much Reassurance:** Repeatedly telling your child that something will happen or not happen; never letting your child deal with uncertainty or cope with things on their own.
(Example: Responding to your child again and again that you will pick them up on time.)
- Over-Protecting:** When parents give kids too little independence, give kids too much help or support, or go overboard trying to prevent bad outcomes or distress for their child.
(Example: Walking your child inside to class every day when peers are independent.)
- Shaming:** Teasing or making fun of your child for feeling anxious.
(Example: "Stop being a baby.")
- Yelling:** Feeling so frustrated you yell at your child. This doesn't help in the long run.

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GET SOME IDEAS

What are the situations that make your child or teen anxious that they most need to learn to handle?

List some steps your child or teen could take to face this fear. Try to think of easy steps as well as harder steps. *(This could include the child facing fears together with you or on their own. It could also include caregivers/parents stopping some of the things they do that lets kids avoid their fears. Starting small makes it easier. Doing harder things leads to faster improvement.)*

List some small rewards you can give your child or teen when they face their fears. *(These could be praise, privileges, small prizes or treats that are motivating)*

Make sure kids face fears more than once to help these really sink in:

1. *What they fear is actually not so likely,*
2. *What they fear is actually not so dangerous, or*
3. *What they fear is something they can handle.*

With practice, your child will feel more confident and less anxious about what they face.

STRATEGIES THAT WILL HELP

Validation: Use words to show you understand how they feel: *“I get that this is hard for you”*

Encourage with Confidence: Tell (and show) them you know they can do hard things: *“I know it’s hard and I know you can do this!” “I love you too much to keep helping you avoid”*

Ask Questions after facing fears to help their success sink in: *“What did you learn?” “How was that different from what you expected?”*

Reward Brave Behavior: Use rewards to motivate and celebrate facing fears (it is hard!)

Model: Use your own actions to show your kids how to face fears even in the face of anxiety. Face fears with them!

Manage Your Own Distress: It’s hard to watch your child being in distress. Remind yourself: *“They can do this. Avoiding what they fear isn’t helping them in the long run.”*

Tips for Facing Fears

Expect Anxiety! Your child should feel anxious when facing fears. That is part of learning.

Build Up: Start with a smaller, easier step if you’re getting pushback or it’s seeming too hard.

Keep Practicing! It can sometimes take daily practice facing a fear for kids to begin to feel more confident.

Use Rewards to Motivate: Having a daily reward for daily practice is a good way to keep the ball rolling.

If you need support, ask your primary care provider about finding a local mental health expert.