

Anxiety



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural feeling that is important for survival. It alerts us to respond to signs of danger. For some people, this alert system is more sensitive and gets triggered when a person is actually **not** in a dangerous situation. This can lead to excessive or persistent worries.

People experiencing anxiety may have a lot of fear about certain situations. They may ask questions or try to get reassurance repeatedly. They may avoid everyday activities or worry about leaving or losing loved ones. Some people may have difficulty sleeping or physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, or crying. These symptoms often make it difficult to do daily activities like participating in school, having fun with friends and family, or doing other important things.



What does treatment look like?



Anxiety is very treatable. Treatment options for children and adolescents often include therapy, medication, or both.



Therapy for anxiety usually focuses on **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**, which is a type of talking therapy that explores how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related. A core component of CBT for anxiety is learning how to fight our fears by facing our fears through gradual practices in therapy and outside of therapy.



A CBT therapist is often a mental health clinician (like a psychologist, social worker, or counselor). The therapist may meet with your child alone or with the parent present depending on the child's age. Treatment typically lasts several months with weekly sessions.



Medication options typically include **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)**. Other medications may be used depending on your child's needs. Medications can be useful to lower your child's overall level of anxiety while they learn skills to manage anxiety during therapy. If your child is prescribed a medication, they should take it exactly as instructed by their doctor.

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What can I do?

FOR PARENTS:

- ✓ **Talk** to your child and create opportunities for your child to talk to you. Let them know you are there, you care, and you want to support them – no matter how they feel.
- ✓ Encourage your child's brave behaviors when they are feeling anxious by helping them **slowly approach** anxious situations in small steps.
- ✓ Be supportive by giving specific **praise for brave behaviors** and your child's effort (e.g., "I know this is hard, but you can do it." "You are being so brave right now!").
- ✓ Encourage your child's **positive coping skills and relaxation strategies** when anxious, like deep breathing.

FOR TEENS:

- ✓ **Catch** your worry thoughts and try **re-thinking** them. Ask yourself: would you say that thought to a friend? If not, what you want to tell a friend in that situation? Can you tell yourself those things instead?
- ✓ **Change it up.** If you are worried about something or avoiding something, try taking a small step towards that worry. For example, try opening a homework assignment you have been putting off or returning a friend's text even if you're feeling socially anxious.
- ✓ Each time you do something new, ask yourself how actually doing it compared to your worries about it. Was it as bad as you thought? Can you **give yourself credit for trying it**, even though it was hard?



How do I get help?

If you need more help, talk to your primary care provider or get support from a mental health provider. To find a mental health provider, call the phone number on the back of your child's insurance card and ask for a list of covered mental health providers in your area. You can also search for providers on your insurance company's website. For support finding resources for housing, food, and more, visit the [Children's National Hospital Community Resources website](#).

- ✓ Scan here for more information about how to find a mental health provider and how to get help in a crisis.



Pediatric **Health** Network

