

# TOP 10 TIPS FOR PARENTS OF ANXIOUS TEENS

## 1 Anxiety is **NOT** caused by parenting.

Parents often feel responsible, but anxiety is caused by multiple factors, such as temperament, life stressors, societal factors and genetics.

However, parents can absolutely support their teenagers in the face of anxiety by using therapeutic responses based on the knowledge and research about anxiety.

"The desire to help your child live the best lives they can live, and to overcome challenges they face, is completely separate from the notion that you as a parent caused your child's difficulties." - Eli R. Lobowitz (Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD).



## 2 Youth who are anxious **don't always put their worries and fears into words.**

It is common for teens to have physical symptoms or show behavioural changes before they are able to verbally express their anxiety.

Keep an eye out for increased stomach upset, difficulty sleeping, headaches or restlessness as physical symptoms of anxiety.

With behavioural changes, your teen may be more irritable with family members or start avoiding social situations or certain activities.

Open up a caring conversation with your teen to explore how they are feeling emotionally, if you notice any of these changes.



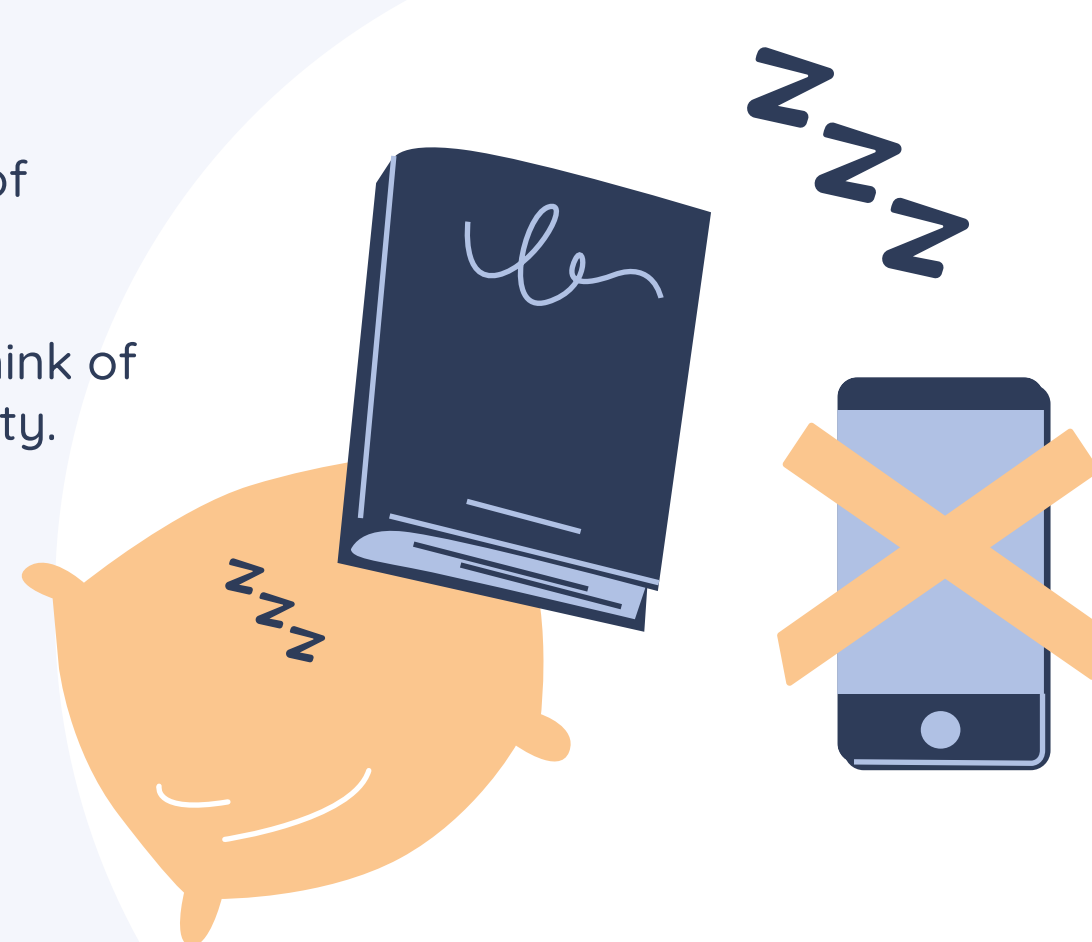
## 3 Prioritize **sleep.**

Recent studies show that teens today are getting significantly less sleep than previous generations of youth and this is negatively impacting their emotional well-being.

Teenagers need 8-10 hours of sleep a night and are more susceptible to anxiety if not well rested. Think of good sleep as an essential foundation for mental health - it can increase resilience and reduce anxiety.

- Take devices out of bedrooms.
- Shut off screens for an hour before they go to sleep.
- Aim for consistency in both the time they go to sleep and the time they wake up.
- Create a soothing, consistent bedtime routine.

For example: have a warm bath, get into cosy pyjamas, dim lights, read a book.



## 4 Excessive use of **cell phones and social media** can contribute to an increase in anxiety

Statistics show that the rates of anxiety and depression for young people, especially adolescent girls, increased significantly between 2010 and 2015. This is the time period when most people, including teens, started using smart phones and spending many hours a day on social media, with the introduction of Instagram and other similar apps.

There is research demonstrating a correlation between greater numbers of hours spent on cell phones/ social media and higher rates of anxiety in teens.

Parents of anxious teens should work with their teenagers to establish healthy limits with their cell phone and social media to see if this helps reduce anxiety.

- Jonathan Haidt (The Anxious Generation)



## 5 Avoidance plays a key role in the **maintenance of anxiety.**

If your teen avoids certain places, situations or people consistently due to anxiety, be aware that continued avoidance can make the anxiety worse.

A tricky cycle exists for many teens with anxiety, in which they they avoid the situation that makes them anxious, leading to some initial relief. The relief feels good, so it tends to lead to more avoidance as a way to cope.

However, the anxiety returns, and often intensifies, when the teen is eventually faced with the trigger for their anxiety again. The avoidance also creates a belief that they can't cope and lowers their confidence in themselves.

Encourage your teen to bravely take steps towards the situations they are avoiding, in small steps, and with support. There are therapeutic skills you can learn to help your teen with this process.



## 6 Look out for your own **"accommodating"** of anxiety

Parents with an anxious child will often, out of an intention to love and protect them, start accommodating the anxiety.

For example, if a teen is anxious about germs, parents may start doing extra hand washing or cleaning (above and beyond what is typical) just to try to soothe their anxiety. This comes from a place of caring, but can unfortunately fuel the anxiety.

With the right support as a parent, you can learn how to respond supportively and validate their feelings, without accommodating the anxiety.

For example, a parent could say, "I can understand why you want me to wash my hands again, because you are worried about me spreading germs. I know that's hard for you." However, the parent can still go about their usual routine and resist the extra hand washing, despite pressure from their teen to do so. This ultimately supports the teen to face their anxiety, through the parent changing their own behaviour and holding back from accommodations.

## 7 A boost of **independence and freedom** can lower anxiety

Parents of anxious kids may worry even more than most parents about their child's ability to cope with more independence or freedom.

Yet, encouraging them to take on new challenges actually builds confidence and resilience. The current generation of youth are being raised in a society that pressures parents to be far more protective and involved in all aspects of their teenagers' lives, compared to previous generations. This approach can ultimately interfere in key developmental tasks that actually boost resilience against anxiety.

Invite your teen to choose a goal they are excited about. A teen with social anxiety, who keeps missing school, for example, may still be interested in attending a concert without adult supervision or navigating public transit independently to meet a friend.

Many teens with anxiety will show a significant reduction in anxiety and increase in confidence once they are given this increase in freedom.

A wonderful resource to provide more ideas related to this topic: <https://letgrow.org>



## 8 Nurture a close **connection** with your teen as the basis of your relationship.

Struggles with anxiety can create tension in the parent-teen relationship. Remember to nurture the parts of your relationship that are separate from the role anxiety is playing in your family.

To deepen the connection with your teen, try the following:

- Practice active listening and validation of their feelings.
- Express genuine interest in their favourite music, activities, or friends.
- Be intentional about spending time together without any advice giving.

Teens who are struggling with anxiety can start to feel defensive and criticized if parents are always problem solving or trying to "fix" the anxiety. When teens feel close and connected to their parents, they are ultimately more open to your loving efforts to support them.



## 9 Remember the goal is **not to take away all anxiety.**

Although you may want to completely get rid of anxiety in your teen's life, we have to remember that having some anxiety is actually normal and healthy.

Anxiety is an emotion, just like happiness, sadness or anger. It can even be helpful. Anxiety becomes problematic when it interferes with daily life and is not in proportion to the situation at hand.

For example, if your teen is slightly nervous before an important test at school, it may prompt them to study or ask for help. That is helpful and does not require intervention other than the usual parental encouragement and support.

However, a teen who is so anxious about taking tests that they have overwhelming panic attacks that prevent them from focusing, is experiencing anxiety that is obviously problematic and requires intervention.

Be sure to differentiate between having some anxiety in the healthy range, vs anxiety that needs intervention so that it does not continue to interfere with your teen's well-being.

## 10 Take **care of yourself.**

Parents of anxious teens often struggle themselves with feelings of overwhelm, because the caregiving demands can be very high. Parents should remember that it's essential to take good care of themselves both physically and emotionally, for their own sake, but also because it will help them be more grounded emotionally and able to support their child.

Take time away from parenting and engage in the activities that make you happy. Seek your own therapy if you are really struggling yourself. Share your struggles with close friends or family who can help with emotional support or practical supports.

Consider advocating for your teen by enlisting professional guidance regarding using therapeutic strategies to help them. It is excellent self-care to feel more empowered and effective in your interactions with your anxious teen.



## Thank you!

I hope this guide was helpful. As a therapist with over 20 years experience and a parent to two teens, this topic is close to my heart.

Ways we can connect:

Follow me on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joanne-doucette-586b565b/>

Instagram: @DoucetteTherapy

For consultation or speaking engagements for your organization/school: [joanne@doucettetherapy.com](mailto:joanne@doucettetherapy.com)

[www.doucettetherapy.com](http://www.doucettetherapy.com)

