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# Youth and Anxiety: How to Help

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## **The Surgeon General's Report indicates that anxiety is the #1 mental health condition people seek help for today**

Seven out of ten people who are sitting in a doctor's office are there for anxiety and stress-related symptoms. Approximately 43% of people who suffer with [anxiety](#) are also suffering with depression and abuse chemicals to cope with their anxiety. 19 Million Americans each year are diagnosed with excessive anxiety and estimates are that only 1/3 of people needlessly suffering are properly diagnosed and treated. 13% of youth ages 6 to 19 are compromised academically and/or socially due to excessive anxiety. Persons with anxiety disorders are three to five times more likely to go to the doctor and six times more likely to be hospitalized.

It is a fact of life that our youth are living in an increasingly anxiety ridden atmosphere, most dramatically illustrated in the World Trade Center disaster, threats of terrorism, and previously manifested in such tragedies as the Columbine and Pittsburgh school shootings. Youth (and adults) live in a world in which nothing seems to be guaranteed with certainty but the love of our God. That explains the increasing prevalence of anxiety in our world... and the daily opportunities for caring, healing and witness among youth who are struggling to understand, cope and live with hope.

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## **How to recognize anxiety**

Any physical symptom that doesn't have an organic cause is anxiety or stress related. Symptoms or manifestations of anxiety may include:

- "Panic attacks"
- Worry
- Obsessive thoughts
- Stomach problems
- Chest pain
- Sleep disturbance
- Phobias
- Raging thoughts
- Racing heart
- Difficulty relaxing
- Muscle twitches
- Depressive symptoms
- Hair pulling
- Face picking
- Nail biting
- Cutting

- Sweating
  - High blood pressure
  - Compulsive behavior
  - Shyness
  - Dizziness
  - Difficulty catching breath
  - Other ritualistic behavior
  - Alcohol abuse
  - Drug abuse
  - Test anxiety
  - Social withdrawal
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## What contributes to anxiety in youth?

- Peer pressure and belonging
  - Poor modeling or family stress
  - Academic and extracurricular pressure
  - Raging hormones leading to questions about sexuality
  - Complexion problems
  - Career decisions
  - Drug and alcohol pressure
  - Punitive spiritual beliefs
  - Questions in applying our spiritual beliefs to situational ethics
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## Here are some things that adults who work with youth can do to help young people who are suffering with anxiety and depression:

1. **Youth don't need a "fix" nearly as much as they need to be listened to.**  
This conveys a loving and grace-filled reception that is likely missing in their life in general or in their relationship to themselves. Anxiety and depression is not about what we **are feeling** as much as it is about what we are **not feeling** or have learned **not** to express. As a result, listening without judging is the greatest gift we can give to someone.
2. **Every time we go into a situation we do an unconscious evaluation of our capacity to deal with that situation.**  
If we determine that we have what it takes to deal with the situation, we feel relaxed and comfortable. If we determine that we do not have what it takes to deal with it, we feel anxiety. **Shame** is what colors our interpretation that we don't have what it takes. The truth is that anxiety sufferers are very capable and sensitive people who have the capacity to learn the skills to do most anything, but since they don't feel capable or adequate they scare themselves and often develop physical symptoms in reaction to their interpretation of their inadequacy. Furthermore, they may attempt to cope with that sense of inadequacy by developing excessive anxiety, avoiding, developing compulsive rituals by escaping through drugs and alcohol, or by becoming depressed.
3. **Teaching specific skills in deep breathing and relaxation can be helpful in better managing one's anxiety and depression.**  
These skills can be adapted to relaxing in social situations or even for test anxiety and other performance situations like athletics, drama, speech, music, etc.
4. **Exploring their concept of God can be helpful.**  
Often a person's concept of God may be punitive, perfectionistic and authoritarian which does not allow their spirituality to be the calming, reassuring solace it is intended to be.

The power of God's grace and forgiveness is that we do not have to perform perfectly in this world in order to be loved, belong, be competent or have value. The promise youth [and adults] hunger for is found in [Romans 8:31-35, 37-39](#) and [John 3:16-17](#).

5. **Don't play doctor or therapist.**

A young person experiencing anxiety or depression should be connected with a physician, therapist or counselor who can make professional decisions, do referrals or create a plan of treatment for the individual, and in some cases, family. Honor issues of respect and confidentiality no matter what your role is in helping and supporting the young person.

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## Resources for anxiety and depression

- The [Anxiety Disorders Association of America](#) (ADAA) (phone: 301-231-9350) lists resource people in the United States and internationally that can provide efficient and effective care for anxiety and stress related conditions. The website also lists books and other resources for anxiety and depression sufferers.
  - [Have a Heart's Depression Resource](#)
  - [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
  - [Suicide and Suicide Prevention](#) (an extensive list of links and resources)
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