Anxiety: Get Help

Occasional worries and stressors are normal parts of everyday life. When these worries lead to struggles at home, at school and with friendships or if they cause panic attacks, an anxiety disorder may be the cause.

The earlier you identify and treat symptoms of anxiety, the faster you interrupt the advancement of severe anxiety (which can lead to depression, thinking about or planning for suicide), and help your child feel better and thrive again. If you as a parent are experiencing any anxiety symptoms, it is just as important that you prioritize getting help for yourself as it would be to get help for your child.

Diagnosis

When a child does not outgrow the fears and worries that are typical in young children, or when there are so many fears and worries that they interfere with school, home or play activities, the child may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. For example:

- A person who has had difficulty controlling worrying for at least six months and has three or more symptoms may have general anxiety disorder.
- If someone has suffered two or more unexpected episodes of powerful physical anxiety symptoms, they may have panic disorder.
- A seven- to nine-year-old child who is unable or unwilling to leave their parent, or takes longer to calm down than other children, may have separation anxiety disorder.

If you suspect your child has an anxiety disorder, the first step is to confirm your suspicions. Talk with your child’s primary care provider about getting a comprehensive medical physical to rule out any underlying medical condition that may cause anxiety. Your child’s pediatrician may also do a mental health assessment to determine when anxiety symptoms began, what causes anxious feelings, how often they happen, and if they keep your child from doing their usual activities.

Depending on the results, the doctor may then refer your child to a mental health professional, who will try to understand your child’s thoughts and feelings, identify anxiety triggers, and teach healthy coping strategies for dealing with stressful situations. They will also develop a therapy plan that works best for your child and family. You should also partner with your child’s teacher and school to better understand what they’re seeing.

You can learn about the different types of mental health professionals here. Remember, you are your child’s biggest advocate. Partner with your doctor to find the treatment that is right for your child.

Treatment

While people with anxiety often feel out of control, anxiety disorders are highly treatable. Successful treatment for anxiety disorders includes one or more of the following:

- **Talk Therapy:** Helps identify the sources of anxiety.
- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy:** Teaches different ways to think about and react to anxiety triggers or practice social skills.
- **Medication:** Helps how the brain uses the chemicals that control mood or stress and relieves symptoms. For example, beta blockers help reduce the short-term physical symptoms of anxiety, and antidepressants are also helpful in treating anxiety disorders.
- **Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM):** Includes stress management techniques, meditation, yoga and acupuncture.
The beginning of anxiety treatment can be overwhelming and frustrating. It takes time, effort and often more than one attempt to find an affordable, qualified mental health professional who not only treats anxiety but is the right fit for your family. If medication is needed, finding the right medication type and dosage can take some trial and error, and once medication begins there can be some difficult initial side effects as the body adjusts. Once the proper course is confirmed, it can take at least four weeks to feel the full benefits of the medication.

Once the benefits of therapy and/or medications kick in and people start to feel better, many assume treatment is no longer needed, so they scale back or stop completely. **This assumption is not only untrue, but also dangerous.** Cutting off medication completely or taking it inconsistently can trigger difficult withdrawal symptoms and significantly worsen chemical imbalances and anxiety, which could lead to depression and suicide. Discontinuing therapy before getting to the root of the anxiety or learning effective strategies to navigate stressful situations or worried thoughts can cause anxiety to resurface.

It is, therefore, crucial to stick with the treatment plan and only change that plan under a doctor’s supervision. In addition, if you notice that your child’s treatment is not working for them, it is important that you work with your child and their doctor on a better course of treatment. Sometimes it also may even be necessary to switch doctors to find a better fit for your child.

**Partnering with Your Child’s School**
Schools should be included in the larger treatment plan. Your child spends most of their time at school. It is where they learn, form friendships, and experience many things. When children have trouble concentrating or miss a lot of school because they are not feeling well, refuse to go, or are unable to interact with classmates, their academic performance and emotional well-being will suffer.

Teachers, nurses, school counselors or school psychologists are often the first to observe the symptoms of an anxiety disorder in your child or know if they are struggling academically or socially. They can work with you and your child to develop individualized plans to manage their learning and schoolwork, help your child put identified coping strategies into practice, provide in-house counseling services, administer medication, and recommend other community organizations that provide peer support, services and education. Check with your PTA to see if they can help connect you to school supports and community resources.

Your child’s school can also look for signs of worsening or improving anxiety symptoms and notify you of any changes. It’s important to note that there are certain behaviors that may legally require the school to take action. For example, if a child has suicidal thoughts, the school must require that a child gets a psychiatric evaluation before they can return to school.

**If your child is having the urge to hurt themselves, immediately call 911 or take them to the nearest Emergency Room.**