Anxiety: What Families Can Do

Families can provide strong mental health support and help their child with anxiety disorder by:

Being Aware
While most adults possess the self-awareness to recognize anxious thoughts, they may not realize at first that they have an anxiety disorder or do not want to admit it. It is important for adults to model appropriate action for their children, so if you are experiencing anxiety, seek help.

For many children, actions speak louder than words, so parents must pay close attention to their behavior and look for any signs that they are not OK and if their behavior is an expression of a deeper fear or anxiety. Trust your instincts. You know your child best.

Knowing the signs and symptoms to look for; identifying any big changes in how you feel or in your child's behavior; and being aware of how current events or a specific situation may be impacting you or your child will help you determine if you or your child has an anxiety disorder.

Talking It Out
Some children do not know how to identify their feelings. They may also be embarrassed of their feelings, or afraid parents will find their worries silly, or they may think expressing them is inappropriate due to their family's cultural beliefs and behaviors. Many also think talking about anxiety will only make the person experiencing it feel worse. The opposite is actually true. Talking about it helps people understand that anxiety is normal, that everyone experiences it, and that there are a lot of ways to cope with fears and worries and feel better. These conversations can also strengthen your bond with your child, build trust, help them understand their feelings do not make them flawed, let them know they are not alone and that they are loved, supported and cared for.

Additionally, parents who have experienced an anxiety disorder should consider talking honestly to their kids about their experiences versus hiding it. This sharing helps children see firsthand from you that anxiety disorders can be successfully controlled and shows your child that you are a relatable person who struggles sometimes too.

Getting Help
Early treatment may help prevent anxiety from turning into depression. It may also prevent children from developing low self-esteem or future issues with substance abuse, body image, school performance or social situations. Treatment will help your child feel better and thrive again.

Anxiety disorders can initially be misdiagnosed as ADHD or hyperthyroidism. A primary care physician will use data gathered during a routine physical, a review of your family history and a mental health evaluation to confirm a specific anxiety disorder diagnosis. Based on the results, your child may then be referred to a mental health professional for further evaluation and treatment. Remember, you are your child’s biggest advocate. Don’t be afraid to ask questions or provide information that should inform your child’s diagnosis and treatment plan.

The Anxiety: Get Help resource reviews in more detail what you can expect during diagnosis and treatment. You are your child’s biggest champion, so be sure to remain actively engaged throughout the process!
Helping Them Cope
It is natural for parents to want to protect their children from negative experiences and emotions. However, avoidance feeds into anxiety, is unrealistic and makes it hard to live a happy, productive, engaged, successful, fulfilling life. A more effective approach is to teach your child healthy coping skills and to stick with their treatment plan.

Strategies to Promote Healthy Coping Skills
There are lots of strategies that may help children work through their anxious thoughts, learn to tolerate discomfort, prevent fixating on the future and increase their self-confidence. Parents and their children need to select the strategy that works best for them based on their interests.

Open Conversation
- Help your child identify what they are anxious about, and why. Respect your child’s fears, but do not amplify them.
- Express realistic expectations. There is no guarantee that your child will always be protected from difficult situations or embarrassment despite their best efforts to prepare.
- Talk together though possible outcomes and what would happen if your child’s fears came true. Remind them of what tools they can use to deal with whatever happens.
- Remind them that you are there to help and support them every step of the way.
- Limit the amount of time your child talks about their anxiety with you. Set aside 10 minutes a day for focused “worry time” or create a worry box for them to write down their feelings.

De-stressing Activities
- Do physical activities like sports, exercise or playing outdoors.
- Get together as a family and color, journal, paint or do something else creative.
- Play with stress balls and fidget spinners to keep hands busy.
- Listen to music.
- Try deep breathing, yoga or meditation.

Gentle Exposure to Nonthreatening Versions of Fears
- If your child is afraid of thunderstorms, play the sound of thunder on your phone for one minute.
- If your child is afraid of dogs, introduce them to a gentle dog.
- If your child is afraid of leaving you, leave them inside with a loving family member or friend while you go outside for 5 minutes.

Skill- and Resilience-building
- Break down situations or projects that are overwhelming into smaller, achievable tasks.
- Help your child establish a predictable daily routine.
- Keep the time period before a worrying situation short. The hardest time for people with anxiety is really the time period before the event or before the task is accomplished. Keeping that period as short as possible allows less time to worry.
- Encourage your child to engage in necessary activities and situations, even if they feel worried about the outcome. The more positive experiences they have, the more their self-confidence will grow, and their fear will subside.

Tips to Maintaining a Treatment Plan
Family engagement is crucial to a successful treatment plan for anxiety disorders. Families can help their child stick to their treatment plan by:
- Offering support, understanding, patience and encouragement.
• Reminding them that the treatment will help to ease their anxiety.
• Setting reminders to take prescribed medications.
• Making sure they have transportation to therapy appointments.
• Providing healthy foods and exercising together.
• Seeking out peer groups or other support services in your community.
• Watching for signs that prescribed treatment is not working or needs to be adjusted.
• Communicating frequently with doctors, teachers and school mental health services personnel.

**Being a Good Role Model**
Children learn from watching their parents. If you are an adult with anxiety, it is important to role model good mental health behavior by sticking to your own treatment plan as prescribed, being honest about how you are feeling, even when you are struggling, and practicing healthy coping strategies.

**Prioritizing Healthy Lifestyles**
We must take care of our minds like we take care of our bodies. When we have a chronic physical condition like diabetes or obesity, we treat the condition, make lifestyle changes, and remain aware of any changes in how we feel. The same is true for our mental health. It is important to be proactive about good mental health, give it constant attention, and make changes to our lifestyle or behaviors to ensure our minds stay healthy and strong.