

Managing Academic Anxiety

High school

High school can be a particularly stressful and anxiety-filled time as kids get closer to transitioning into adulthood. Earning enough credits, taking more challenging classes and worrying about the future can all contribute to feelings of anxiety. While some anxiety can be helpful and motivating, anxiety can become an issue when it interferes with everyday functioning.



Anxiety is a normal feeling of nervousness, worry or uneasiness that everyone experiences throughout their lives.

Academic anxiety is a specific type of worry associated with school-related responsibilities and pressures.

Talking about academic anxiety

Communication Tip **Instead of saying ...** **Try saying ...**

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Ask open-ended questions and allow your teen to share their honest feelings.	"Are you working hard enough? Are you worried you're not going to pass?"	"How are you feeling about that class?"
Keep your cool. Try not to pass along any of your own anxiety.	"When I was in high school, I was always stressed about getting all A's."	"I know how much you've been studying."
Focus on the effort, not the score or outcome.	"I'm so proud of your high GPA."	"I'm really proud of how hard you have worked this year."

Signs of academic anxiety

While anxiety can look different in every teen, here are some general signs to watch out for:

- Complaining of frequent headaches, stomachaches or other physical pain with no known medical cause.
- Avoiding school or certain classes (e.g., refusing to get dressed or trying to miss the bus).
- Worrying about school and no longer making time for activities they used to enjoy, including social interactions.
- Showing changes in sleep or eating habits.
- Showing changes in mood, such as appearing to be "on edge," irritable or tearful.
- Acting out in class (e.g., being the class clown, getting in fights or talking back).
- Having an "I don't care" attitude about anything related to school.
- Sweating, shaking or fast breathing when thinking or talking about school.

Maintaining healthy routines

Consistent routines help teens know what to expect, allowing them to feel more secure, calm and focused.

- **Nutrition:** Drinking water and eating balanced snacks and meals helps support your teen's physical growth, helps them pay better attention in school and helps them think more clearly.
- **Sleep:** It's much easier to retain and recall information after a good night's sleep. Keep digital screens out of the bedroom, and turn off screens and electronics an hour before bed to get better-quality rest.
- **Balance:** Encourage your teen to explore other interests and hobbies outside of school so that academics are not their only focus.
- **Physical activity:** Taking breaks and being active can improve your teen's ability to focus and do well in school.

Studying smarter

Knowing how to properly study, and be organized, can help reduce anxiety. Here are some strategies you can suggest:

- Break big assignments up into smaller, more manageable pieces.
- Find a quiet space and remove distractions (such as the TV, phone, etc.).
- Use a planner or to-do lists to help with time-management.

Journaling

Sometimes, we aren't ready to talk about our thoughts and feelings, and that's OK. Journaling can be a way for your teen to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, and to de-stress. Below are some prompts they can use to help them start writing or drawing in a journal or notebook.



What is some advice you would give to a friend who is feeling anxious?



Who is the person who helps you most when you feel stressed? How do they help you?



What are three coping skills you already use to manage anxiety? What are three new skills you would like to try?



What type of music helps you feel calm and relaxed? When could listening to that music help you feel less anxious?



Journaling should be a safe way for your teen to privately explore their feelings. It may be tempting to try to find out what they are writing about, but it's important not to look at their journal unless they share it with you. Instead, have regular conversations with your child about their feelings, especially if you have any concerns about their safety or well-being.



If you are concerned your teen may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety that go beyond what is normal and tolerable, talk to your teen's pediatrician or school counselor about additional support that may be available.