

## Supporting Young People who Experience Anxiety and Low Mood

### Stages of Adolescent brain development:

Stages	Early (10-14)	Mid (15-17)
<b>Intellectual/ Cognition</b>	Concrete thought dominates Cause-effect relationships underdeveloped	Very self-absorbed Growth in abstract thought Reverts to concrete thinking under stress
<b>Autonomy</b>	Challenges Authority "anti-parent" Mood Swings Argumentative and disobedient	Conflict with family Ambivalence about emerging independence
<b>Identity Development</b>	Questions about being "normal" Goals change frequently Feels "no one understands" Desire for privacy	Experimentation; sex, drugs, risk-taking behaviors Strong peer allegiances

### What is anxiety?

All young people experience anxiety at some point in their lives, it is a normal response that helps us face challenges in life. A moderate amount of anxiety helps us to do well. Too much or too little anxiety keeps our performance lower. Young people who experience anxiety can have a low tolerance to feeling worried or scared. Immediately on sensing this feeling they try to escape or avoid it and the associated trigger/event.

The adolescents' avoidant response to anxiety could be due the adolescent brain having an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex – area that is responsible for logical thinking, self-awareness and impulse control. Adolescents tend to use an alternative part of the brain called the Amydala (part of the Limbic system which is the emotional centre of the brain). This makes adolescents more prone to behave "emotionally" or with "gut reaction" and makes them more impulsive.

### What is depression?

**Depression** is a mood disorder characterised by low mood, a feeling of sadness, and a general loss of interest in everyday situations. It can have an impact on thoughts and result in poor concentration or frequent self-criticism. It can have an impact on behaviour, including a tendency to withdraw from others. It can also have an impact on our physiological state such as chronic fatigue or unexplained aches and pains.

### What you might notice:

- Changes to sleep pattern
- Physical health complaints e.g. headaches, stomach aches
- Shaky, sweaty, restless
- Appearing low, sad or more tearful
- Worrying much more than usual
- Being more withdrawn / not talking as much
- Not wanting to see friends or play
- Being angry, argumentative, getting into fights
- Changes to appetite - eat more or less, or switch between these two
- Wanting to run away or talking about not wanting to be alive or hating their lives
- Not achieving so well at school
- Losing confidence – avoiding doing things they used to do e.g. clubs, activities

### What can parents do to help?

#### Responding to distress:

- **Don't be afraid** to approach your adolescent and ask if they are OK or if something is bothering them. They might not always respond immediately but sometimes enough to know that you are there when they are ready to talk.
- **Listening** is the **best support** you could offer. It is so important to listen non-judgementally, often what is said triggers a response in our own minds and we go off on our own trail of thought. We need to enable young person to speak freely and not feel judged. Creating this environment means young people are more likely to approach you when they have a problem.
- **Wonder aloud** about what might be happening for your adolescent. Summarise what is said by your adolescent. Check in that you have understood what they have said.
- **Name feelings** around events if they approach you to talk.
- Look beyond behaviour, **be curious** about what is happening for them.
- **Model emotion regulation.** Teach young people that all emotions are ok, including emotions perceived as 'negative'. Try and lead by example, you can't ask young person to control their emotions while you yourself are not controlling yours.

#### Talking tips:

- **Seize the moment** It might be over a meal or during a break or change of activity. These informal spaces can be great opportunities to talk about serious topics in a more relaxed atmosphere (as long as it's private).

- **Start small** You don't need to set aside hours to chat. Just opening up the conversation makes a big difference.
- **Explain that we all have difficult times in our lives.** Mental health is about our range of emotions and how we cope with our lives. Our mental health does fluctuate, just like our physical health - over the course of our lives, or even from day-to-day.
- **Mental health is positive too.** Mental health isn't just about mental distress, it is also about wellbeing. You could chat about things that help with all of our wellbeing, like talking to someone they trust, exercise, chill out or 'me' time.
- **Talk their language.** Young people will most likely be familiar with the idea of feeling stressed, upset, low or worried. Start with the language they use and helpfully expand on it e.g. "you said you've been feeling stressed, when you spoke about how it feels, I wondered if it's like a mix of angry and upset?"
- **Do not personalise.** People often find it easier to think and talk openly about a hypothetical situation rather than their own feelings and experiences. So, instead of asking them direct questions about themselves, you could ask 'how someone might feel who is upset about XYZ.'
- **Show you're happy to talk and listen.** Above all, let children know that if they are worried about something or feeling sad more often – they can come and talk to you about it and you will be there to support them.
- **Learn together.** It's OK not to know or understand things. You could always suggest that it's something you can learn about together.

### **When to seek support**

Anxiety and low mood becomes a problem and may require additional support when:

- It is causing a significant amount of distress to the child and the worries are irrational, uncontrollable and disruptive.
- The anxiety or low mood is significantly interfering with the young person's ability to engage with day to day life
- The anxiety or low mood is leading the child to avoid certain places or specific situations.

### **How to seek support**

If you continue to have concerns about your child's behaviour, speak to their school and speak to your GP. They can support you to self refer to **Single Point of Access (SPA)** for additional support. You can contact SPA by calling **020 8547 5008**. If it is appropriate they will be able to offer referrals on to:

- Parent courses
- Family Support Workers
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

**There are many great resources that you can use at home.**

**We recommend:**

**Mind Ed (UK):** free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults.  
<https://www.minded.org.uk/>

**Kids Matter (Aus):** developed by mental health professionals and education staff in response to the high rates of school-age children with mental health difficulties and the problems they face getting help. [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)

**Royal College of Psychiatrists:** free factsheets are available on a range of emotional and mental health difficulties

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/youthinfo/mhgpfactsheetsindex.aspx>

**Family Lives** (previously parent line). Family Support Workers confidential helpline on 0808 800 2222 (24/7) <http://www.familylives.org.uk/>

Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world – Mark Williams & Danny Penman

<http://franticworld.com/what-is-mindfulness/>.

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

<https://www.headspace.com/>

<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

<https://www.afclocaloffer.org.uk/pages/home/health/emotional-health-service>

[http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/TCS\\_FIVE\\_WAYS\\_TO\\_WELLBEING\\_CHILDREN.pdf](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/TCS_FIVE_WAYS_TO_WELLBEING_CHILDREN.pdf)

<http://www.relaxkids.com/>

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