

Understanding Anxiety: Why Do I Feel Anxious?

A Teen Guide to Anxiety, Stress, and Feeling Overwhelmed

Have you ever felt nervous before a test, your heart racing before a presentation, or your mind stuck on a million “what if” thoughts? Maybe you avoid certain situations because they feel too stressful, or you feel like your emotions are bigger than you can handle.

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Anxiety is one of the most common mental health experiences for teens. Everyone feels anxious sometimes. Anxiety is your brain and body’s natural alarm system designed to protect you. The problem is that sometimes your alarm system becomes too sensitive and starts warning you about things that are not actually dangerous.

Understanding anxiety is the first step toward learning how to manage it.

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, nervousness, or uneasiness that happens when your brain thinks something might be threatening, stressful, or uncertain.

Anxiety can show up in your:

Thoughts

- "What if I fail?"
- "What if people judge me?"
- "What if something goes wrong?"
- "I can't handle this."

Body

- Fast heartbeat
- Tight chest
- Shaky hands
- Feeling sick
- Muscle tension
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling restless or on edge

Actions

- Avoiding situations
- Procrastinating
- Checking things repeatedly
- Seeking reassurance
- Shutting down or withdrawing

Why Does Anxiety Feel So Real?

Your brain has a built-in protection system called the fight, flight, or freeze response. When your brain senses danger, it sends signals to help you survive.

The problem is that your brain does not only react to physical danger. It can also react to:

- School pressure
- Friend drama
- Social situations
- Family stress
- Fear of failure
- Changes and uncertainty
- Negative thoughts

Your brain is trying to protect you, but sometimes it creates an alarm when you do not actually need one.

The Anxiety Cycle

Anxiety often follows a pattern:

Something happens → You have a thought → You feel anxious → You avoid or escape → Anxiety gets stronger

Example:

Situation: You have to speak in class.

Thought: "Everyone will think I sound stupid."

Feeling: Nervous, embarrassed, scared.

Action: Avoid eye contact, skip class, or avoid presentations.

Short-term result: You feel relief.

Long-term result: Your brain learns, "That situation must have been dangerous."

Learning to face anxiety in small steps helps teach your brain that you can handle difficult moments.

My Anxiety Check-In Worksheet

1. What situations make me feel anxious?

Examples:

- School
- Tests or assignments
- Social situations
- Talking to others
- Family situations
- Changes or uncertainty

My anxiety triggers:

2. What does anxiety feel like for me?

When I feel anxious, I notice:

My thoughts:

My body sensations:

My actions or behaviours:

3. What are my common anxious thoughts?

Complete the sentence:

"I worry that..."

"What if..."

"My biggest fear is..."

4. Challenge the Anxiety Thought

Anxiety often tells us the worst-case scenario. Let's slow it down.

Anxious thought:

What evidence supports this thought?

What evidence does not support this thought?

What would I say to a friend having this thought?

A more balanced thought:

5. My Anxiety Coping Plan

When anxiety shows up, I can try:

- ☐ Slow breathing
- ☐ Grounding techniques
- ☐ Talking to someone I trust
- ☐ Taking a small step instead of avoiding
- ☐ Challenging negative thoughts
- ☐ Practicing mindfulness
- ☐ Doing something calming or enjoyable

Other strategies that help me:

Remember

Having anxiety does not mean something is wrong with you. Anxiety is a normal human emotion. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety completely. The goal is to understand it, manage it, and learn that you can handle difficult moments.

Small steps create confidence. You are capable of learning skills that help you feel more in control.

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