

Health Tips for Parents

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How can I help my child handle anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural human emotion and a normal reaction to life's stresses. However, when the worry and fear associated with anxiety interfere with a child's usual activities, he or she may have an anxiety disorder.



“All children and adolescents experience some anxiety around different aspects of their lives,” says R. Lindsey Bergman, PhD, associate clinical professor, Health Sciences at the UCLA



Child Anxiety Resilience Education and Support (CARES) Center, “and the level of anxiety tends to vary according to their age.”

These “normal” types of anxieties and fears – which may sometimes be more frequent – usually do not tend to interfere with daily life. Anxiety becomes a problem (disorder) when it lasts for a long time each time, and is so intense that it interferes with a child's ability to function socially, academically, physically and emotionally.

A child who has an anxiety disorder will likely show a fairly stable pattern of changes in mood (irritable or unhappy), cognition (difficulty

concentrating or being easily distracted), behavior (avoidance of feared situations, withdrawal or trouble relaxing) and/or physical changes (difficulty sleeping, tense muscles, multiple physical complaints, headaches or stomach aches).

Biological, familial and environmental factors can contribute to anxiety disorders which are typically treated by either CBT and/or medication. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a structured, goal-focused, and time-limited intervention that involves exposing the child to their fear in a graded, step-by-step manner while teaching the child how to cope with their fear and distress. CBT is delivered alone or in combination with medication and/or mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is the practice of focusing awareness on the present situation without judgement and it can help with tolerating feelings of anxiety and distress. The medications shown in research studies to be most effective for both adult and child anxiety are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs).

Tips to help an anxious child:

- Gently encourage your child to do things he/she is anxious about instead of avoiding it
- Praise and support your child's efforts for attempting to approach a feared situation
- Try to help your child manage anxiety
- Give your child opportunities to observe you handling your own stressful or anxious difficulties in positive and healthy ways
- Teach your child resilience to cope with, adapt to and overcome challenges



UCLA CARES Center

“It is important for parents to understand when ‘normal’ types of anxiety may start becoming a challenge for children and to seek the right resources. UCLA's CARES Center offers online resources and programs to help families build resilience and overcome the challenges related to childhood stress and anxiety,” says Dr. Bergman.

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