

Anxiety and Depression: A Guide for Preteens and Teens on How to Cope

By Dr. Karen Prentice

In the last two years my partners and I have noticed a dramatic increase in the number of children and teens we are seeing for stress, insomnia, anxiety and depression. What is going on? Why are so many of you having trouble? How many more are out there that we don't know about?

- According to the CDC 13% of children between the ages of 8 to 15 years-old have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- 2% of school-aged children and 8% of teens are depressed.
- 8% of children and adolescents have a diagnosed anxiety disorder.

In hopes of helping as best I could, I recently completed a course on Integrative Approaches to Anxiety and Depression. I now feel compelled to share the information with you, but I have a few disclaimers:

Disclaimer 1:

Emergency-If you feel suicidal or have any desire to hurt yourself or others, please tell someone right away-talk to your mom or dad or teacher or call us here. Call 911 if you need to, but please call someone. If you are not sure, please call us so we can talk to you and help you figure out what the best plan of action is.

Disclaimer 2:

The information in this article is not intended to be used in place of seeing your doctor or a qualified mental health provider. An evaluation is the first step. Please call your doctor or ask your mom or dad to make an appointment for you. We can see you, talk to you and rule out any medical causes that could be causing or contributing to your anxiety or depression. After the initial evaluation, we may want to have you see a psychiatrist, psychologist, and or counsellor.

Disclaimer 3:

If you are already getting counselling or being treated by a psychiatrist with medication, **PLEASE CONTINUE WITH YOUR CURRENT THERAPY.** The following advice is not intended to replace your current therapy but simply meant to complement or enhance anything you are already doing. Of course if you have any questions or need help, please call us.

Treatment for Anxiety and/or Depression

1. **Medical Evaluation**-The first step to treating anxiety and depression is to have a medical evaluation. This will include a thorough history and physical and perhaps laboratory tests to rule out any medical causes such as thyroid disease, anemia or vitamin deficiencies. Your doctor will also help you identify any medications, supplements or herbal products that may be causing or contributing to your difficulties.
2. **Medications or Nutritional Supplements**-If your doctor finds any medical issues or nutritional deficiencies, they will either refer you to the proper specialist and/or advise you on what supplements you should take. Things your doctor might try include a multivitamin, vitamin D3, and omega 3 fatty acids to include EPA and DHA. Ask your doctor if these are right for you.
3. **Counseling**-Your doctor may advise that you to see a counselor, psychiatrist, or psychologist. Please refer to our website for a list of qualified mental health providers.

What Can You Do to Help?

Take control of your health and wellbeing. I want to empower you to make positive changes in your life to improve your health and overall wellbeing. Consider your definition of wellness or wellbeing, and look at every aspect of your life: not only your body, but your mind and spirit.

What Your Body Needs to Achieve Wellness:

1. **Spirituality/Faith**-Most of us do not consider spirituality and faith as a part of wellness. Medical studies tell us that people who have a faith belief system are less likely to suffer from self-destructive behaviors such as smoking; drug and alcohol abuse; and suicide. Studies also show that spirituality and faith help promote good health by boosting our immune system, reducing depression and anxiety and aiding with high blood pressure. Being part of a congregation, whatever your religious preference, gives you a supportive environment to learn and grow in.
2. **Social Support/Family and Friends**- According to Greek Philosophy, humanity can be differentiated from other forms of living creatures by the deep need to associate and affiliate with others. We need friendship, family, and a sense of belonging. Critical to this is human touch. A hug or a touch on the shoulder can lower blood pressure, decrease pain and elevate mood. Spend time with your family and friends. Hug your mom, dad, little brother and sister and even your dog!
3. **Family Meals**-Studies show that families who share 3-4 meals together per week are happier and healthier. Children and teens who regularly enjoy family meals have a lower rate of teen pregnancy and drug and alcohol use and perform better in school. In addition, families who have regular meals together eat more nutritious foods, are less likely to suffer from being overweight, and have fewer eating disorders. It may not always be possible, but consider helping your mom and dad in the kitchen and enjoy time together putting the meal on the table and eating it. Encourage everyone to shut off all their electronics during meal time so you can enjoy each other.
4. **Sleep**-A good night's sleep helps the body grow, restore itself, heal, and lets the body have the strength to fight off illness and infection. Children and adults who suffer from insomnia and sleep disorders do not clear brain waste metabolites as well as those who sleep all night. This can lead to decreased concentration, stress, anxiety and illness. Let your doctor know if you are having trouble with sleep.
5. **Exercise**-An hour a day of an exercise that you enjoy not only helps your body stay strong and at a healthy weight, but studies show exercise is critical for good mental health. Exercise can improve depression, anxiety and help children and adults with ADHD focus better. People who exercise regularly have fewer illnesses and infections. Try to do something fun that involves exercise about an hour a day. It does not have to be an hour straight! You can do a 20 or 30 minute activity and later go walk the dog for 15 minutes then swim or ride a bike for 10 or 15 minutes. Make it fun so you stay with it. If you can find something to do outside, combining both time in nature and exercise is even more beneficial to your overall wellbeing both physical and mental. Doing an activity or sport with a friend or your family is a great stress reliever. Look on our website for our "Get Fit" handout for fun activities to do in Phoenix
6. **Nature**-Most of us are nature deprived. Studies show spending time in nature helps us to calm down mentally, enjoy some vitamin D, and have improved self-esteem and overall wellbeing. For more information about nature deprivation and the benefits of being in nature, read *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv.

7. **Nutrition**-I could write a book about the benefits of a healthy diet-actually, I already did, to be published fall, 2015! Most of us know that if we keep a healthy weight and eat healthy foods we can reduce our risks for heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Did you know that eating a healthy diet can also improve your mental wellbeing? It makes sense. The following is a general run-down of our daily nutritional requirements.

- **4-5 Servings of Vegetables per day (organic if possible)**
- **3-4 Servings of Fresh Fruit per day (organic if possible)**
- **3-4 Servings of a Dairy or Calcium/Vitamin D Rich Food per day**
- **5 Servings of Whole Grains such as brown rice or quinoa per day**
- **3 Servings of a Protein food per day such as beans, nut butter, fish, chicken or tofu**

Serving size varies with age, sex, activity level and growth phase that you are in. Use the Myplate method when eating with half of your plate fruits and vegetables and ¼ of the plate protein food and ¼ of the plate a whole grain. Refer to the Pediatric Anti-inflammatory Food Pyramid by Dr. Weil found on our website, for examples of healthy foods. For more information and recipes, check out my book, *An Apple a Day the Doctor's Way* coming soon.

8. **Water**-Drink at least 8-10 glasses of water per day.
9. **Positive Thoughts**-Focus on good things and positive thoughts. Appreciate what makes you unique and wonderful. Find activities that bring you joy and make you feel confident. Write those activities down, and when you are “blue” do one of those positive activities. Set small goals for yourself and when you accomplish your goal, celebrate. For example, when I finish my math sheet I will play a game or call a friend or watch 20 minutes of my favorite TV show. Have your parent’s help you find “treats” you enjoy to reward yourself and fun activities you can all do together. Some preteens and teens get so sad they cannot think of any activities to give them joy. That’s where friends and family come in. Don’t be afraid or ashamed to ask for help.

What Your Body Doesn’t Need:

1. **Negative Foods/Drinks/Drugs**-Avoid processed foods, preservatives, nitrates, artificial sweeteners such as Splenda, Aspartame and Nutrasweet, food dyes especially Red Dye #40 and Yellow Dye #5, and caffeine. Avoid sugar drinks such as soda, juice and Gatorade and avoid high sugar foods. Read food labels carefully and if the food contains ingredients that you don’t recognize-avoid it! Avoid alcohol, smoking and drug use.
2. **Negative Activities**-To paraphrase one of my favorite bible verses, “whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things.” Monitor what you are watching or playing. Stick with “G” movies and if you are a preteen or teen “PG” but skip the “R” rated movies. For video games or online games, stick with “E” rated games so you can keep your brain filled with positive happy things.

Remember that too much of even a good thing is a bad thing. The following is the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation for screen time for everyone:

- Children less than years old: no screen time
 - Children Greater Than 2 years old: Only 1-2 hours per day of combined electronic time including iPhone, iPad, T.V., computers or video games.
- 3. Negative Thoughts**-Avoid self-put downs and appreciate what makes you special. Write positive comments and encouraging poems or verses on 3x5 cards. Carry them with you and tape them to your bathroom mirror. Avoid bullying and if you are bullied please let someone know.

You may find the following workbooks helpful: *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edmund Bourne PhD and *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety* by Georg H. Eifert and John P. Forsyth PhD.