

Keys to Helping

Socially-Anxious Teenagers

by Carrie Masia, PhD



The problem of social anxiety disorder in teenagers

It comes as a surprise to many parents and educators that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health problem in children. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's report on mental health, 13% of children and adolescents suffer from anxiety disorders, which is 1 in 8 children aged 9 to 17. Social anxiety is the most common anxiety disorder in teenagers, and is associated with significant impairment in functioning and long-term negative outcomes, such as depression and alcohol abuse. Unfortunately, many teenagers with social anxiety go undetected and without appropriate treatment. Being able to identify the warning signs in youngsters is important to early detection and intervention efforts.

A typical case of a teenager with social anxiety disorder

Sean is a quiet 17-year-old who is easily "lost in the crowd." His grades are above average and he is compliant and well-behaved in class. He keeps to himself and does not speak to many peers. He has one or two friends he made in first grade. Sean avoids being around his peers and seems to be intensely uncomfortable in situations where there are large numbers of students, such as in the cafeteria or gym class. He has not joined any school clubs, and goes home immediately after school. The teacher has encouraged him to speak up, but he withdraws more or becomes angry.

What treatment approach is most effective for social anxiety disorder?

The scientific literature supports the use of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) for treating social anxiety disorder. CBT uses practical and logical strategies directed at changing the factors that maintain anxiety, such as negative thoughts or expectations, physical symptoms, avoidance, and the reactions and responses of adults to an anxious child. Children learn to think more realistically about fears and to confront the feared social situations. Training in social skills such as initiating conversations, inviting others to get together, and being assertive is also incorporated into treatment.

What can schools do to assist socially anxious teenagers?

- Provide education and training for school personnel that would increase awareness of anxiety disorders, identify specific criteria to determine need for intervention, recognize anxiety as a legitimate disorder rather than willful misbehavior, teach appropriate skills to manage anxiety in school, and educate parents of children with anxiety about the problem.
- Establish helping partnerships between parents and school personnel. It is critical that both be involved so that progress made in one place is not undone in the other. A school counselor can organize all involved individuals.
- Maintain a physically and emotionally supportive environment for anxious teenagers at school by: (1) being inclusive in class activities and ensuring opportunities for shy children to participate, (2) using structured classroom activities or assigning partners so that shy children are not left out, (3) assigning a classroom buddy who provides support and assistance, (4) providing structured social activities and assisting the initiation of social interactions, and (5) rewarding efforts to initiate social interaction.
- Define specific problem-focused interventions that help address specific goals and increase confidence. For example, a student might be encouraged to ask two questions in class, ask two others what they did over the weekend, or start a conversation in the cafeteria about the food.
- Make appropriate and timely referrals to mental health professionals.

How can parents help to manage social anxiety in their children?

- Reward brave, nonanxious behavior: Provide praise and attention and small rewards.
- Prevent avoidance: Refuse to engage in your child's behaviors that allow him or her to avoid the situations that elicit fear. For example, refrain from ordering your child's food, speaking for your child in stores, making telephone calls for your child, or taking care of other things that your child is avoiding due to social anxiety. Gradually encourage your child to handle social tasks on his or her own to foster more independence and confidence.
- Prompt your child to cope constructively. Encourage your child to come up with his or her own solutions. Help your child to brainstorm ways to handle the anxiety and to decide independently how to cope more constructively. Prompt your child to use the cognitive and behavioral skills being learned in treatment.
- Limit reassurance: Anxious children will constantly ask for reassurance that things will turn out satisfactorily or that they will be all right. This prevents them from learning how to cope with anxiety on their own and maintains the belief that they are unable to do so.

Help your child to use a problem solving approach: Summarize what your child has said; help your child brainstorm possible ways in which the anxiety may be reduced; make sure not to take over the task for your child or tell him or her what to do; go through each

COMMON SIGNS OF SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER

- Intense fear of social and performance situations
- Avoidance of social situations, or enduring them with intense distress
- Fear of situations such as unstructured interactions with peers, initiating conversations, performing in front of others, inviting others to get together, talking on the telephone, or eating in front of others
- Minimal interaction and conversation with peers
- Appears isolated and on the fringes of the group
- May sit alone in the library or cafeteria, "hang back"
- Excessive shyness
- Concern about negative evaluation, humiliation, or embarrassment
- Difficulty with public speaking, reading aloud, being called on in class
- Anticipation of a social event may provoke a panic attack

idea that the child has generated and ask questions such as "What do you think would happen if you did this? Do you think that would help to reduce your anxiety in the long-run? What would be the worst that would happen? What is the likelihood that it would happen?" Praise your child for discussing possible solutions and outcomes. Prompt your child to select the strategy that allows him or her to approach feared situations rather than avoid them and is most likely to have a positive outcome. 🍷

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Carrie Masia, PhD is an Assistant Professor at the NYU Child Study Center in the Institute for the Study of Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders. She is an expert in the assessment and treatment of child and adolescent anxiety disorders. Dr. Masia recently received a five-year grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to implement early identification and intervention for anxiety in schools and pediatric settings.

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