

# ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS: IS IT NORMAL TEEN STRESS: OR AN ANXIETY DISORDER?

*By Linda Hepler*



We've all experienced it: the dry mouth, butterflies-in-your-stomach, heart pounding symptoms that accompany anxiety. And whether we are six years old or sixty, the list of things we worry about is endless: health, social situations, school or job performance, disasters and war--to name just a few.

## **Simple Worry or Anxiety Disorder?**

Let's face it: life can be stressful. Yet the anxiety that results from stress is not all bad. In fact, it can be a healthy coping mechanism. Anxiety about an impending test at school, for example, is what motivates the amount of study needed to do well.

But some people worry constantly and intensely about many things. Some people even worry for no apparent reason. This ever-present anxiety can interfere with daily living. It can disturb sleep, impair the quality of life, and cause people to turn to alcohol or drugs for relaxation.

When anxiety is so uncontrollable that it interferes with life in a negative way, it is considered an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders can occur in all ages, and are the most common of mental health problems in children and adolescents. It is estimated that as many as 10 percent of all children suffer from this condition.

## **Causes of Anxiety Disorder**

Nobody knows exactly what causes anxiety disorders. Scientists agree that there is a genetic component; that is, they tend to occur within families. It is also believed that a person's life experiences contribute to anxiety disorders. For example, living through a traumatic event such as an earthquake or sexual abuse--can set a person up for this problem. And living with a parent who is anxious or fearful can teach a child to respond to life in a similar manner. But sometimes there is no apparent cause.

## **Types of Teen Anxiety Disorders**

The most common types of anxiety disorders in teens are generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by long-standing (at least six months) incessant and exaggerated worry about everyday life. There are often physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, stomach distress and fatigue.

Panic disorder is when a person suffers frequent episodes of intense fear for no apparent reason. These episodes may be accompanied by chest pain, heart pounding, dizziness, and shortness of breath. Sometimes there is a fear of dying.

Obsessive compulsive disorder is when there are repeated, uncontrollable thoughts or behaviors, such as hand-washing or counting of objects.

It is quite common for other mental health problems such as depression, substance abuse, or an eating disorder to be present at the same time as an anxiety disorder.

### **What to Do**

How can you tell if your teen has an anxiety disorder? First, remember that all teens have worries--both big and small. And while the type of worry doesn't differ between those teens with and without an anxiety disorder--the intensity and number of worries does. Is she worried enough about the volleyball game that she has trouble eating dinner, or so worried about her performance in this and many other events that she avoids participation? If it is the latter, there may be a problem.

Teens with anxiety disorders may also exhibit symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, irritability, restlessness, sleeplessness, and fatigue. If you think your teen has difficulty with anxiety, please call Hanover Township Youth and Family Services at (630) 483-5799.