ENCOURAGING your TEEN to FACE FEARS

The teen years can be daunting as teens' awareness of what *could* go wrong grows. Fears change from monsters under the bed to being alone forever or not being good enough. Common fears during these years include:

- Fear of failure (not meeting expectations, not doing as well as their peers, disappointing others)
- Fear of the unknown and change (moving, finding a new friend group, adulthood)
- Fear of embarrassment or rejection (doing the 'wrong' thing, being excluded, alone, or laughed at)

We all need a certain amount of fear. It keeps us safe and makes us feel uncomfortable when we're thinking of taking a risk (like cheating on a test or driving really fast). But exaggerated fear responses and "false alarms" can cause a lot of unnecessary suffering.

If fear is affecting a teen's choices and activities, or is putting too much pressure on them, the fear is unhelpful and needs to be addressed. Helping your teen learn to take small and brave steps will set them up not only for calmer teen years but for a more fulfilling life.

What's going on?

- Fear is a built-in human characteristic. We're born with a fight, flight, freeze response that never goes away. In the right dose, fear helps us stay safe.
- Anxiety arises when we start to imagine and focus on what could go wrong.
- When fear takes hold, the parts of our brain that make us think logically shut down. This makes it hard to talk to others or solve problems.
- One of the easiest ways to make ourselves feel better is to avoid what we are afraid of. This works in the short term, but in the long term it makes things harder, as our worries continue to grow.

How you can help

Empathize. When you make an effort to listen and take your teen's fears seriously, they feel less alone. Share some of your own fears from your teen years, while staying curious about their experience. Showing that you understand their feelings is not the same as agreeing with them. You could say, "I understand why you would see it that way, and I wonder if there is another way to look at it."

Remind them of past successes. Talk about other times when your teen was initially afraid to do something but still managed to do it. Help them remember how most or all of their feared predictions didn't come true, and that they handled the situation.

Get them to put it on paper. Encourage your teen to write down or draw their fears so they become less overwhelming. Getting their fears out of their head and onto paper can help teens see the situation more objectively. You could ask:

- "What situation do you fear the most?"
- "What are you imagining could happen? And what would happen next?"
- "What has happened in the past in similar situations?"
- "What could be a positive outcome?"

Help them conquer unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes teens reach the wrong conclusions about themselves and the world (for example, "I wasn't invited, so obviously nobody likes me"). Fears can arise from these unhelpful thoughts, and teens may be unwilling to face them. By learning how to recognize and challenge (or let go of) these unhelpful thoughts, teens can have greater control over their fears. Teens need to be reminded that they don't always have to believe all their unhelpful thoughts – even the ones that *feel* true. To find out more, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource Helping Your Teen Cope with Worries and Unhelpful Thinking.

Encourage them to approach rather than avoid. Encourage your teen to find ways to gradually face their fears by taking "baby steps." For example, if your teen is afraid to approach new peers, they could first practise having confident body language and making eye contact while walking through school. Then they could ask a classmate a question, or compliment a classmate. Finally, they could ask a classmate about their plans for the weekend. Plan these steps together. To find out more, see Anxiety BC's resource on overcoming fears.

Model brave behaviour. It can be powerful for your teen to see you intentionally face scary situations in your own life. Talk to your teen about how you felt before and after.

Try some calming techniques. Fear shows up in our bodies as uncomfortable physical symptoms. Encourage your teen to be curious about where they feel fear in their body (for example, a tight throat or chest). Experiment together to help them find different ways to calm themselves. To find out more, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource Helping Your Teen Calm Their Mind and Body.

Praise effort and brave steps (rather than success). Acknowledge your teen for trying something new – using a new calming strategy, finding out more about something they're worried about, or taking a new step in spite of their fear. Tell them that you are proud of their ability to act in the face of fear, regardless of the outcome.

> ***"Push them outside their comfort zone, [and] they realize that no matter the outcome, they survived and have the strength to face any challenge."***
>
> – Debbie Reber, teen advocate

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.

HELPING your TEEN COPE with WORRIES and UNHELPFUL THINKING

It's common for teens to have worries or unhelpful thoughts once in a while. Grades, friendships, COVID-19 and the future can be sources of uncertainty and fear. Small things can become much bigger in teen minds (for example, "She didn't text me back ... she hates me ... I'm such a loser ... I'll be alone forever.")

Ups and downs are part of the demands and uncertainties of high school. When teens can focus on what is within their control and learn new ways to think about and respond to challenges, they can gradually build their confidence.

What's going on?

- Anxiety likes certainty. When things feel uncertain, the anxious mind tends to think the worst. A parent is late coming home from work? *Definitely a car crash!* Students laughing as they walk by? *Definitely laughing at me!*
- Anxious minds tend to leap to conclusions based on an opinion or a guess – without considering all of the facts.
- Automatic, unhelpful patterns of thinking are often called thinking traps. Thinking traps are ways that our minds convince us of something that isn't true. They are called traps because they are easy to fall into and it takes awareness and effort to get out of them.

How you can help

Choose the right time. When teens are most anxious, it can be hard for them to understand what you are saying. Wait until they have calmed down and they are better able to hear and understand your words.

Validate their feelings. If your teen's worries are unrealistic, or they are being too hard on themselves, don't dismiss their concerns right away. Most of the time, they just need your support as they think through a tricky situation; they don't need you to do the solving. Try to pause before reassuring them (and saying, "Don't worry, you'll be fine!"). Instead, validate their feelings:

- "If I were imagining that, I would be pretty worried too."
- "I'm curious about what you think will happen. Tell me more about that."
- "I know it feels scary, and you're not sure how it will go. It makes sense that you have some worries."

Remind them of past successes. Sometimes teens get so stuck on what could go wrong that they forget about things that went well in the past. Remind them of their past successes and the courage they had when facing similar challenges.

Help them test their worries. After listening and validating, encourage your teen to step back and see what they are telling themselves about the situation that is worrying them. You can do this by being curious and gently challenging their point of view. Asking open-ended questions (instead of questions that can be answered with yes or no) helps your teen learn *how* to think, not *what* to think. For example, you could ask:

- "Is there a part of this situation that could be explained in a different way?"
- "What part of this problem is not as bad as it seems right now?"
- "What else could be true?"

The idea is not to simply stop those unhelpful thoughts right away. That can actually make the thoughts become even stronger. Instead, helping your teen challenge their negative thinking and replace unhelpful thoughts with more helpful ones will give them a coping skill for life.

Help them find ways to take action. Worry can provide a false sense of solving or fixing a problem, or preventing something from happening. Teens can worry about things that are far off in the future or about things that are actually out of their control. Help your teen focus on taking action by problem solving.

Think about your family values. Do you sometimes make negative comments about yourself, or compare yourself with others (or the way you used to be)? In your family, is it safe to make mistakes? When is something good enough – and what happens if it's not? Now may be the time to notice and talk about how your family deals with failure, mistakes and perfectionism.

Notice the good. You can help your teen (and yourself) be aware of more pleasant feelings – of joy, curiosity, delight or awe. When you are with your teen and something good happens, or you're struck by something beautiful or feel a pleasant emotion, *pause*, notice the pleasant experience and try to *extend* it. Don't rush on to the next thing. Stay in the experience for just a moment longer, so your brain has a little extra time to take in the pleasant experience.

Practise gratitude. Start a new daily ritual together to share three things you are grateful for. These things don't have to be big; they could be as simple as laughing with a friend, finishing a great book or playing with a pet.

Some final thoughts

- Teens need to hear that they aren't expected to always make good decisions, and that mistakes help us learn.
- Acknowledge that some worries will show up when things feel uncertain or unclear.
- Show you are confident that they can work through their worries and find a way to coach themselves through a difficult situation.

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.

SUPPORTING your TEEN with FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

Does your teen worry for days or weeks before a presentation or performance, imagining all the things that can go wrong? Before and during a presentation, do they experience shaking, blushing, sweating, nausea, dry mouth or a quivering voice?

Your teen is not alone: public speaking is one of the most common fears for people of all ages. People who seem relaxed and confident when they speak publicly have often just learned to use their fear to improve their performance.

What's going on?

- Fear of public speaking is considered a form of social anxiety. The underlying fear is worry about judgment by others.
- A common fear is of having your mind going blank when public speaking. This "brain freeze" is caused by to the brain's response to stress hormones.
- Other physical responses, like shaking hands or voice, dry mouth, difficulty breathing and a racing heart, can make public speaking even more distressing (especially when we focus on them).

How you can help

You are nervous because you want to do well, not because it's going to go badly. Even the best speakers get nervous, but they use their nerves to share their enthusiasm about the topic. Try to think about your nerves in a more positive light – as excitement about sharing what you know (or just excitement about the relief of having it done!).

You can download a copy of these tips for your teen here.

Your classmates are on your side. Think about a time when you saw a nervous classmate present. Did you think less of them, or did you mostly feel empathy for them? Remember that your classmates are probably feeling anxious too. They're probably not paying attention to your every word because they are thinking about their own presentation.

Most of your anxiety is not visible. You may feel like your nervousness is obvious. Your classmates probably can't tell how anxious you are, so fake it till you make it! You are the only one who knows how nervous you are on the inside.

Your nerves will settle as your presentation progresses. Anxiety is often worst right before you start. Most people find that once they get started, their anxiety begins to decrease and they feel steadier and more confident as they continue.

Tell someone. Let your teacher, school counsellor, parent or a friend know that you're nervous about speaking in front of others. Sometimes talking about your nerves can make them easier to overcome. You'll probably hear that other people have felt the same, and you might just receive some helpful advice!

Be prepared. Practise delivering your speech several times before your actual presentation. Use gradual, concrete steps, like doing your speech in front of a mirror, videotaping it, and then doing it in front of a small group to help you gain confidence. Recruit family, friends or even your pet for an audience! See this Presentation Rehearsal Checklist for more prep ideas.

Visualize confidence. Visualize yourself calmly delivering your presentation with confidence. Elite athletes use this strategy to improve their performance in competitions. Acting as if you are confident can often help you feel more confident. Listen to Public Speaking to help you with this.

Find a friendly face. When you're giving your presentation, look for a friend, a classmate or an adult in the audience who seems friendly. Imagine that you are speaking only to that person.

Set realistic expectations. Public speaking is hard to master. Even experienced speakers like politicians and actors make mistakes. Instead of trying to give a perfect speech, remind yourself that mistakes will happen. Talk yourself through it with phrases like, "If I lose my place, I will calmly scan my notes and then continue," or "Small mistakes are going to happen and won't ruin my presentation."

Use relaxation techniques beforehand. It's helpful to regularly take time to calm down and relax in the days leading up to your presentation. Two of the most helpful relaxation techniques are Calm Breathing and Tense and Release. For more options, search YouTube for "calm breathing exercises" or download phone apps with guided relaxation tracks. During your presentation, take a few of these calm breaths and remind yourself that you are safely connected to the ground, which is firm and steady beneath your feet.

Some final thoughts

- Encouraging your teen to use these tools will help them build their public speaking confidence. Being a confident public speaker is a valued skill in many types of work.
- Don't forget to celebrate your teens' efforts, even if they are a small step. (To find out more, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource Encouraging Your Teen to Face Fears.) Consider planning a small celebration to acknowledge their bravery and show that you're proud. Let your teen choose something that will feel like a reward (for example, ordering in their favourite meal, or planning a fun activity to end a stressful day).

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.

HELPING your TEEN PROCRASTINATE LESS

We all put off tasks once in a while. With so many other things pulling at teens' attention these days, it's no wonder that more boring or difficult tasks can be harder for them to start. For most teens, putting things off is usually not about being lazy. Instead, procrastination is a way to avoid facing the unpleasant emotions they would have to face by starting the task, like anxiety, frustration, boredom and self-doubt.

What's going on?

Teens may procrastinate because:

- They want to avoid the uncomfortable feelings they might have when doing the task
- They feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start
- They are struggling with perfectionism
- They have unrealistic expectations and are overwhelmed by the amount of energy it will take to do something "perfectly"

> ***"Procrastination makes easy things hard and harder things harder."***
> – Mason Cooley

How you can help

Start the conversation.

- Share this funny TEDtalk on procrastination.
- Play a podcast about conquering procrastination (for example, Procrastination with Cristina Roman on The Teen Life Coach podcast).
- Share how you are currently trying to stop procrastinating with a task. (You can ask them for advice!)
- Leave this EASE 8–12 student resource, Getting Ahead of Procrastination, on your teen's desk or the kitchen counter.
- Send your teen a link to Procrastination: Crash Course Study Skills #6, a video about ways to overcome procrastination.

Break tasks into small steps. Helping your teen break a task into small steps can make it feel more manageable for them and reduce their anxiety about getting started. For example, the first steps of a project might be brainstorming possible topics, then narrowing it down to two or three possibilities and doing some research. Also, you can help your teen create deadlines for each of the steps. Setting smaller goals, in the form of steps and deadlines, will help your teen feel some success early on.

Help them estimate time. If your teen has trouble estimating how much time it will takes to complete a task, ask them to write down how long they *think* it will take to complete a step. Then have them time how long it *actually* takes them.

Suggest using the five-minute plan. If your teen can't seem to get started, suggest that they just work on it for five minutes. At the end of the five minutes, they can switch to something else if they want. Your teen will likely have enough momentum to keep going. You can also encourage your teen to use the Pomodoro system. There are many free Pomodoro websites and phone apps your teen can use.

Expect roadblocks. Your teen might be able to start on a task but give up if something small or unexpected gets in their way, like forgetting their textbook at school. Encourage them to ask themselves these questions before they start on the task, as it can save time in the long run:

- How much time do I have to complete this task?
- Do I have all the materials I need to complete it?
- What possible roadblocks will make it harder for me to complete it on time?
- What time of day do I have the most focus for this type of task?

Make two lists. Help your teen make a quick list of reasons to get started or complete the task sooner (for example, "I'll be able to relax on Sunday"), and a list of what might happen if they wait until the last minute ("I'll feel panicked and won't sleep well"). Encourage them to keep the list where they can see it and refer to it often.

Change the environment. If your teen can't study or work at home, find a place where they can work, like a coffee shop, a library or a relative's quiet place.

Set up small rewards. Plan a fun activity or treat together (like watching a movie or making cookies) when a larger task is completed. Reward smaller steps on the way with smaller rewards. Encourage your teen to set up their own rewards as well; even something small can help, like a jellybean after each tricky math problem.

Acknowledge and praise. Notice when your teen makes a step in the right direction, even if it's a small step. Try not to remind them of, or focus on, mistakes. Instead, focus on what is going well.

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.

SUPPORTING your TEEN with TEST ANXIETY

Is anxiety getting in the way of your teen's ability to do their best on a test? Do they worry about failing their exams? Experience physical symptoms like a racing heart or upset stomach? Complain of feeling so anxious that they can't remember the material?

Some anxiety can help us prepare and keep us mentally alert, actually improving our performance. But too much anxiety can affect our memory and cause us to make mistakes, reducing our performance.

What's going on?

Your teen's test anxiety could be fueled by:

- Feeling (or being) unprepared
- Memories of doing poorly on tests in the past
- Unhelpful thoughts and worries
- Pressure from family (real or imagined)
- Fear of failure
- Learning challenges

How you can help

Listen. One of the hardest things about being anxious is the feelings of isolation and frustration that can come with it. Give your teen the space they need to share their feelings and their worries. Try not to jump in and fix the problem. Instead, let your teen do most of the talking.

Empathize. Expressing empathy by listening and taking your teen seriously is one of the best ways to help them feel seen and heard – and be more likely to listen to suggestions. But remember: Empathizing with their experience is not the same as agreeing with their behaviour or version of things. For example, you could say:

- "It looks like you have a lot on your mind."
- "That's a lot to juggle all at once."
- "I understand why you have some worries about tomorrow. It's important to you."
- "Tests can be scary. I'm here to help if you need me."

Don't downplay their worries. One of the hardest things for adults to remember is how BIG everything feels in high school. It may be tempting to downplay their worries ("It's not a big deal. It's only worth 10% of your grade!"). But they may have reasons to feel anxious that you are not aware of, like comparing themselves with peers, disappointing others, or fearing judgment or embarrassment.

Reassure but be realistic. Remind your teen that a test is just a chance to show what they know (not what they *don't* know). It is a tool for the teacher to assess students' understanding of the topic. And teachers want students to do well! A test cannot measure all of your teen's many strengths and talents, and it's not a good measure of how or what they will do in the future. After all, many people are very successful in their work without having had high grades in high school.

Learn about test anxiety. There are many good resources on test anxiety and how to deal with it, including:

- Strategies for Dialing Down Test Anxiety (EASE 8–12 student resource PDF)
- Test Anxiety (workbook from HeretoHelp, also available as a downloadable PDF)
- Test Anxiety: Crash Course Study Skills #8 (video)

Find coping strategies. Everyone has different things that help them calm down and focus, so it might take a few tries to find the strategy that works best for your teen. Spend some time with your teen practising different calming exercises before test day, so if they are anxious on test day, they will know how to calm themselves. For some calming exercises to try, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource Helping Your Teen Calm Their Mind and Body.

Remind them that attitude is important. Some teens feel they are going to fail before they even enter the classroom. Help your teen become aware of their self-talk (what they are telling themselves). You could ask, "What are you telling yourself about the test?" or "What do you think will happen?" Making a list of their worries and their unhelpful self-talk can help them see things more objectively. For more ideas, see the EASE at Home 8–12 resource Helping Your Teen Cope with Worries and Unhelpful Thinking.

> Just because you *think* something doesn't mean it's true – even if it *feels* true.

Encourage regular downtime and sleep. Although it's hard for an anxious student to make time for sleep, downtime and sleep are essential for learning and remembering. Not getting enough sleep can affect performance and increase anxiety. To work at their best, our brains need regular breaks throughout the day. A short walk outside, stretching, listening to a guided meditation or music – even looking out the window of the bus or car on the way to school – can help.

Help balance their schedule. Finding balance can be especially hard in high school. Help your teen figure out how much time they will need for studying. Then help them find room in their schedule for that time, which might mean cancelling a few activities. Making some extra time in their schedule can help relieve stress and reduce the need to cram at the last minute. Mapping out a schedule on paper can also help them feel more in control. And don't forget to find downtime in your own schedule as well, so you can set a good example for your teen!

Remind them about supports. If your teen has access to supports or accommodations for tests (like having extra time or being in a quiet private space), ask if they will be using these supports. If they will, discuss how and when they will advocate for themselves.

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.

HELPING your TEEN to CALM THEIR MIND and BODY

Getting teens to slow down can be a challenge in today's fast-paced digital world, and being told to "just relax" can make an anxious teen feel worse. But you can turn those words, "just relax," into a powerful tool for your teen by teaching them the skills to do that. When a teen learns ways to calm down and think more clearly, they will be better able to manage their stress and life's challenges.

Actively relaxing does not mean using a distraction, like watching TV or scrolling through social media, to "zone out." It means taking intentional steps to bring the mind and body into a more relaxed state. Making regular time for relaxation can help make life a little easier for your whole family.

How you can help

Encourage practice. It is common for a teen to try a relaxation exercise once and report that it wasn't helpful. As with any new skills, relaxation exercises need to be practised before they start to feel more natural. Encourage your teen to try each exercise a few times.

Practise with them. Your teen may also prefer to try relaxation exercises with someone other than you, like another trusted adult or a friend, and that's okay.

Get creative together. Try different ways to relax. The important thing is that your teen feels empowered and knows they have many different tools to draw from.

REMEMBER: The way you manage stress yourself has a big influence on your teen.

Relaxation exercises for your teen to try

Breathing exercises

When we are anxious, we take short and shallow breaths in our upper chest, which can make us feel even more anxious. Research shows that breathing more slowly and deeply is one of the quickest ways to manage stress and calm ourselves. Teach your teen to take deep, slow breaths when they're feeling anxious. Just a few deep breaths can provide an instant calming effect that can help reduce stress. To find out more, see the EASE 8–12 student resource Breathing Exercises to Calm Your Mind and Body.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Stress and anxiety can cause our muscles to tighten in places like our shoulders, neck and jaw. And it's a feedback loop: the tighter these muscles feel, the more stressed out we feel. Letting go of that tension through progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) can be a simple way to let go of stress. PMR involves tensing and relaxing one group of muscles at a time. By the time your teen is done, all of their muscles should be relaxed. You can find guided PMR exercises on many free videos and phone apps, and on websites like Anxiety Canada.

Mindfulness meditation

Learning how to slow down through mindfulness-based exercises or meditation can help us both physically and emotionally. These practices are meant to help clear our minds of unwanted thoughts and encourage us to focus on the present moment. This can bring us into a more relaxed state. Many short guided meditations and mindfulness exercises are available on free apps like Breathr and the web page Guided Mindfulness Meditations by Dr. Vo, both from Kelty Mental Health. Pediatrician Dr. Dzung X. Vo has also written a book for teens, called The Mindful Teen.

Guided imagery

Have you ever closed your eyes and imagined yourself lying on a warm sandy beach, or somewhere familiar where you feel calm and safe? Using imagery (or visualization) can be a powerful tool for letting go of physical and mental tension. Most people prefer to have a voice guiding them through a visualization. Many free audio and video resources are available, including these audio meditations from AboutKidsHealth.

Yoga and gentle stretching

Yoga and gentle stretching exercises offer many physical and mental health benefits, such as improved posture, greater flexibility and a sense of inner calm. Stretching and moving can trigger "feel-good" chemicals in your teen's brain that can make them feel better. Maybe you can attend a yoga class with your teen or use some free online yoga or gentle stretch videos, like Yoga for Teens.

Other soothing tools for teens (and for you)

- Playing music or a podcast
- Using squishy balls, worry rings and fidget gadgets – reduce tension and channel stress into something physical
- Writing or drawing worries – get them out of their head and see things more objectively
- Sleeping with weighted blankets – the extra weight on the body can release the "happy chemical" (serotonin) in the brain, and can sometimes help with sleep
- Pampering with a bath or shower, or rubbing a scented lotion on their hands
- Doing whatever brings your teen joy or purpose (like baking, crafting or volunteering) – contributing to the community can be especially good for mental health

Resources

To access more resources, go to www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources.