

# 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



To access more resources, go to [www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources](http://www.healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/8-12-resources).



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