

# 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 learn these [automatic and coping thoughts](#) and [Healthy Thinking Strategies](#).

**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](#) and [Ease Perfectionism: Managing Our Own High Expectations](#) (Headspace, video, 4:27).

**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.