



Start a Conversation about... **Anxiety**

The dictionary describes anxiety as “a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.” A certain amount of preoccupation is normal in some situations, but too much worry can lead to mental health issues, behavioral disturbances, and depression. It is no secret that young people today are anxious. One out of three teens wrestles with anxiety to some extent, a statistic that has increased significantly in the last decade.

Recent years in particular have added to the intensity of their worries. The Covid pandemic resulted in a spike of anxiety, as adolescents struggled with isolation and education disruption. A rise in social media activity has also impacted mental well-being. Teens feel pressure to succeed and make comparisons between themselves and others. They grow easily embarrassed or nervous over how they might be perceived. It is essential to be aware of the signs and symptoms of anxiety, and to consider how we can encourage youth to cope with it.

How do we deal with anxiety in teens? How can we gently address and work through the issues our students face? Warning signs of anxiety vary, and generally include excessive fears or worries about specific or general elements of daily life. Anxiety can manifest in irritability, trouble concentrating, self-consciousness, withdrawal in normal activity, sleep issues, panic attacks, and body changes. Of course, several of these signs are characteristic of adolescent years anyway. Youth leaders should aim to know our students well and recognize when they seem to act differently than usual. It is also helpful to open the conversation so teens themselves know how to recognize and cope with anxious thoughts and feelings.

As we think about best strategies for discussing anxiety, it is particularly helpful to have a “growth mindset” rather than a resigned or defeated one. We can teach students to develop new responses to challenges and look to the future with Christ-centered hope, rather than merely accepting or glamorizing anxiety. We don’t want to gloss over worry, but to show that it can be managed and overcome. Most critically, we need to point youth to Christ as the source of peace, salvation, and strength. We don’t merely grit through and improve mental health based on self-confidence, but look to the Lord as a help in times of need.

Potential Activities

- Invite guest speakers to converse with students about anxiety. Consider former or current therapists or experts who can address serious and sensitive matters with teens. Talk before and after the visitor about thoughts students have.
- Keep parents involved, and consider meetings or activities that can build and strengthen connections between parents and teens. You might have a separate parent workshop during a youth event, focusing on recognizing anxiety in teens and helping them to cope.
- Host a relaxing “pamper time” for students. This could be specific to males or females, or could be for everyone. Consider a yoga session, “spa day”, art class, or just a simple movie night. You can also try to make certain youth events more meditative and restful in God’s Word, rather than focused on just energetic activities.
- For a more active anxiety-buster, take a group to an obstacle course, escape room, or “smash room”. It might seem counterintuitive, but will allow for team-building and hopefully release some of the stress and anxiety caused by daily life. Be sure to combine this with conversations about both coping strategies and how Christ is present in our anxiety.
- Review simple Christ-centered tips for releasing and coping with anxiety. These could include posting and focusing on Bible verses (see suggestions listed) and practicing a regular prayer time, along with simple things like stretching, listening to certain music, or dietary ideas.

Discussion Questions

- What causes or increases your sense of anxiety?
- What does your body feel like when you sense that you're experiencing distress?
- Who do you trust to talk to when things are stressful?
- Are there things you have done that you find helpful for fear or worry?
- What do you think the Bible says about anxiety? Can you think of any times in Scripture when people experienced feelings of anxiety?
- What practices like Bible reading, prayer, worship, Christian music can help cope with anxiety?
- What reactions do you see in friends or family who deal with anxious thoughts?

Bible Verses to Consider

For these questions, refer to the scriptures below for guidance and direction.

Psalm 34:4-10

God will deliver us from fears and provide a refuge for all who seek and love Him.

Psalm 55:16-19

This passage provides an example of how the psalmist experienced distress and anxiety; God is ready to hear our deepest heartfelt cries.

Isaiah 35:4-7

There are several hopeful and helpful passages in Isaiah reminding us to look to the Lord and not fear. This one in particular addresses those with anxious hearts and invites them to look with hope to a day when sorrows and hardship will turn to joys and peace.

Matthew 6:25-34

This might seem easier said than done, but is a great reminder from Jesus that God calls us to trust in Him and not be anxious. Worry will not help or add to our lives. We are to seek God first and foremost, and let Him take care of our other needs. We can still plan for the future, of course, but let Him handle our anxieties.

John 14:27

Jesus promises a new and better peace than the world can offer. He knows we will have trouble, but urges us to look to Him and not be afraid.

Romans 8:38-39

We are comforted in knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus invites us to come to Him for rest. He wants to take our burdens and grant us peace and new life, helping us along the way.

1 Peter 5:7

God cares for us. He wants us to bring our cares and worries to Him, and let Him handle them for us. How can we simply cast off what brings anxiety? In prayer, we honestly share with the Lord what is burdening our minds and ask Him to help share the load.

Philippians 4:6-13

It might seem easier said than done to say "do not be anxious..." but take a close look at the antidote for anxiety: pray! In everything, by thankful prayer, we can take our needs to God. He gives us the beautiful promise that His peace will guard our hearts as we rest in Christ Jesus. Our contentment and ability rest not in our strength, but His.

Other Resources

- YouthESource has [several helpful articles and devotions involving anxiety and mental health](#) in general. Consider the Bible study "Walking in the Light", which focuses on addressing mental health issues. The article "Giving Comfort to Hurting Teens" is also a helpful resource.
- Follow the link to recognize [potential signs and symptoms of anxiety in young students](#).
- Follow the links to review [resources for parents and families](#), also: <https://discoverymood.com/blog/6-things-never-say-teens-anxiety-disorders/> and <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/anxiety-in-children-and-teens.htm>