



FEATURED

FIVE SIMPLE WAYS TO RESPOND TO TEENS WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

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This post is part of a feature series highlighting insights, encouragement, and inspiration from many of our speakers at this year's National Youth Workers Convention in Tampa, FL. To join us, these speakers, and thousands of other youth workers, [register today!](#)

You're worried. Your student has been sad, irritable, and doesn't seem like him or herself.

If you are reading this blog, chances are you know a teen struggling with anxiety or depression. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 1 in 5 youth has anxiety and 1 in 10 has depression.

Being a teen is tough. Teens are dealing with major physical and mental changes, heightened desire for peer acceptance, and the simultaneous pull *towards* independence and *away* from the safety and protection of family. In addition, the rapid growth in brain development makes them prone to anxiety and depression.

Anxiety is the most common mental health challenge facing teens today. More than 25 % of teens report experiencing extreme stress especially during the school year. Stress isn't all bad. It can be protective and even motivating. Sadness is also very normal. However, excessive and prolonged symptoms of anxiety and sadness can be harmful, resulting in emotional overload, chronic health problems and sometimes even suicide.

As a clinical therapist, I am in the business of treating anxiety and depression. But what if you are leading a student who is battling mental illness — but you aren't a trained clinician? *Then what?*

Figuring out what to do is hard.

Here are five strategies that can help.

Recognize Warning Signs

Youth workers are in a great position to observe teen distress. Common signs of teen anxiety include fluctuations in mood, personal appearance, or friend groups. You may notice absenteeism or a decline in small group participation. Irritability, negative thoughts – what-ifs, or avoidance of people or situations may also be indications of distress. Left untreated, anxiety and depression can get worse over time and contribute to a number of ongoing physical and emotional problems. Although these symptoms can be a part of adolescent development, trust your instincts. If you sense that something is off, then it probably is.

Manage Stress and Perfectionism

Stress is a trigger for anxiety and perfectionism. Students are under pressure to take rigorous courses, earn high grades, and participate in extracurricular activities. While many high achieving teens place that pressure on themselves, the school culture and sometimes parents), inadvertently reinforce it with demanding schedules that don't allow for needed downtime. Over time, this produces the "not good enough" feeling state, which can be a precursor to depression. Loss of control is at the base of most anxiety. Youth workers can teach students useful strategies to reduce self-judgement when situations occur outside of the teen's control. Encouraging students to keep expectations of themselves (and others) at a realistic level while focusing on the *present* can help to keep unwanted stress at bay.

Initiate and Validate

While teens may be chatty when communicating with peers, especially via text, they may not be as divulging when pressed about mental health challenges. However, if you notice personality changes, stay engaged. Be present but not intrusive; listen with empathy and respond with curiosity. Consider this conversation starter: *"It's normal to feel sad or overwhelmed sometimes. You are not alone. I'm here if you ever want to talk."* Your student may not open up initially, but make yourself available when they do. Research suggests that compassionate and validating responses by trusted adults are critical to reducing students' anxiety. Being a compassionate listener is more important than offering advice.

Be an Authentic Model

As a former high school counselor, one of the best pieces of advice I received from a veteran counselor was, *"Teens don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."* Demonstrating care means being your authentic self. Release the false belief that you must have it all together. It's actually *more* important for them to know that you aren't perfect. Sharing previous struggles may help your student better cope with his/her experience. When feeling stressed, one way of

demonstrating authenticity might be starting off small group with, *“Hey guys, I’ve had a hectic day. What about you? Let’s just all take a moment to breathe slowly before we begin.”*

Employ Coping Skills

Anxiety and sadness are a part of life. Helping students find effective ways of *responding rather than reacting* to discomfort promotes resilience. Below are a few suggestions:

- **Test the logic.** Most anxious thoughts aren’t factual. Ask the student to assess how realistic the worry is. Ask, *“What is the probability that this event will occur?”* Our imaginations can catastrophize events and propel us (mentally) into events that may never develop. Then the fear cycle follows.
- **Recognize automatic thoughts.** We all have knee-jerk thoughts. Thoughts often influence mood. Ask, *“What names do you call yourself when you’ve made a mistake?”* Would you speak to anyone else the way **you** talk to you?
- **Mental practice.** When we imagine something, our brains attempt to simulate our responses as if the situation was actually occurring. Invite students to imagine how things will be in the future when the situation improves. *“How would you be if the anxiety or sadness weren’t there? What would that look like? Smiling? Chatting? Hanging out with friends?”* Picturing a time when life feels better helps to reduce stress and uplift mood.

Anxiety and depression are treatable. Students who need more intensive services should be referred to appropriate mental health services. Remember to be patient with yourself. Don’t underestimate the difference you’re making simply by your presence!

Looking for additional tools? No worries. I’ll be sharing more strategies at the NYWC conference this year. See you in Tampa!

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