

Teen anxiety: How to recognize it, and what to do about it

• By [Mari-Jane Williams](#)

Stress? Anxiety? Regular teen angst? (Big Stock)

Teens have a reputation—deserved or not—for being difficult, moody and belligerent. Those same behaviors can be a warning sign that your teen is battling anxiety, said Reid Wilson, director of the [Anxiety Disorders Treatment Center](#) in Chapel Hill, N.C. and the author of “[Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children.](#)”

So how can a parent distinguish between run-of-the-mill teen angst and the real problems that can be masked by assumptions about what passes for normal?

If your teen is withdrawing from friends and activities, worrying excessively about her grades or spending three hours on a project that should take 45 minutes, because it just HAS to be perfect, she may have a problem with anxiety, Wilson said. If your child is putting too much emphasis on a particular goal, whether it's a specific score on the SATs or having to get into one particular college or her life will be ruined, that is also a red flag.

I recently spoke with Wilson about what parents can do if their teens are showing signs of anxiety. Here are some of his suggestions:

Curb your own anxiety. Sixty-five percent of teens who have anxiety have a parent who is anxious, Wilson said. So it's important to keep your fears in check when you're dealing with your teen. Be careful of your body language and word choice, he said. You may very well be wracked with fear when he starts driving, but don't share that with him.

Model good behavior. As you overcome anxieties, talk to your child about it. Tell her about a time at work when you were worried, but took a risk. Explain how you worked through your fears so she will have that example to follow.

Resist the urge to fix their problems. No one wants to see their child suffering, but if you step in and fix what is worrying him, he won't learn how to work through his anxieties, Wilson said. When your teen asks you what he should do, Wilson said, try to

reflect the question back to him so you are helping him work through the problem instead of solving it for him.

“You don’t want to take down their hurdles,” Wilson said. “You want to teach them how to jump over them.”

Encourage flexibility. Teach your child how to determine when rules are important and must be followed, and when they can be modified. This can help her combat perfectionism. The goal, Wilson said, is not to raise an obedient child, but one who is able to think independently and make good choices that are not driven by worry or fear.

Get professional help. If, despite your efforts, worry still seems to be getting the best of your teen, Wilson suggests consulting a therapist who specializes in anxiety disorders. And if your child resists, you can always go speak to someone about how you can support him through his challenges.



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