



# Wellness Today

For Parents & Families

## Signs of Emotional Struggles

*Early recognition is key to overcoming challenges. Signs your child may be struggling emotionally include:*

- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Mood or behavior changes including appetite and sleep
- Withdrawing or isolating
- Taking excessive risks or behaving recklessly
- Repeated unexplained body aches and pains
- Anxiety interfering with activities
- Frequent anger, irritability, criticizing, or tantrums
- Change in academic performance
- Preoccupation with death or dying
- Talking about wanting to die or being a burden

## How to Get Help

*If your child is not responding to support being offered, not improving, or worsening, seek help by consulting with a medical or mental health professional.*

## Conquering Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of nervousness or worry. It is a normal process that, in many ways, helps maintain safety. Babies for example, often experience stranger anxiety when interacting with others they are not familiar with. Separation anxiety when one or both parents leave often begins around 10 months old. Children ages 4 - 6 experience anxiety about the dark, and things not based in reality, such as monsters. Seven to 12 year olds often begin fearing situations that could occur to them or a family member, such as injury, or natural disasters occurring. Teens often fear rejection, looking foolish, and not being able to accomplish things they need.

When kids and teens have difficulty not worrying, or the worries and fears stop them from having fun, or doing normal activities they need help with anxiety. As children learn to reduce the anxiety producing discomfort and challenge the beliefs generating the fears, the intensity can be reduced and, in many cases be eliminated.

### Symptoms in Children and Teens

In children and teens it may appear slightly different from adults. Common anxiety symptoms can include:

- Excessive/uncontrollable worries
- Agitation or Restlessness
- Nausea
- Inattention or poor focus
- High expectations of self
- Physical aches or pains like headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension
- Resistance to tasks like getting ready for the day, going to school, transitioning within school or after school, activities, homework, going to bed, etc.
- Avoidance or low motivation
- Tantrums
- Crying


### Anxiety: What's Happening in Their Brain

When experiencing anxiety the “upstairs brain,” the portion that facilitates use of logic, problem solving, applying creativity, communicating emotions, and regulating emotions begins functioning less effectively. The “downstairs brain,” which is responsible for survival begins to take over. This area is often referred to as the Fight, Flight and Freeze zone of the brain; which often describes the behaviors caregivers observe when children feel anxious. The following sections describe strategies that can assist in reintegrating the brain and reducing anxiety.

## How to Get Help

If you or someone you know is struggling emotionally or behaviorally, support is available. Begin by talking with a medical doctor or a mental health professional.

Below are resources available in the community to help:

- **Hope4Utah** provides resources for parents on talking with children and teens about suicide and mental health, as well as offering practical guidance for accessing help.  
[www.hope4utah.com](http://www.hope4utah.com)
- **SafeUT**  app provides real-time crisis intervention through a phone call, chat, or submitting confidential tips to school administrators on bullying, threats, or violence.
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** offers information regarding mental health conditions and support groups for families.  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (English and Spanish) 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress. 1-800-273-8255
- **Crisis Text Line** is the free, 24/7, confidential text message service for people in crisis. Text HOME to 7417414.

## Calming

Breathing from the diaphragm rather than the chest will help increase relaxation, reduce the feeling of anxiety and increase the ability to think logically. One way to do this breathing is with “Cookie Breathing.” Imagine cookies have just come out of the oven, they smell good and you want to eat one. Slowly breathe in, moving the tummy outward for 3 seconds, as though cookies are being smelled. Before eating the hot cookie, it needs to be cooled off. Breathe out for 4 seconds with the tummy moving inward, imagining blowing on the cookies.

Sometimes when anxious, breathing can feel difficult. If it feels like not enough oxygen is being received, encourage your child to exhale a little more as the body is most likely receiving adequate oxygen, however not fully exhaling causes it to feel it is not receiving enough.

## Changing Thoughts

When in a heightened state of anxiety, negative, irrational or unhelpful thoughts often are present. These in turn amplify the feeling of anxiety because what one thinks affects how one feels. Teaching the following ways of challenging anxious thoughts when in a calmer state can increase success of changing thoughts and feelings when anxious.

Questions to ask to help challenge negative thoughts or self-talk include:

- What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?
- Have I confused a thought with a fact?
- What would I tell a friend if he or she had the same thought?
- What would a friend say about my thought?
- Am I 100% sure that \_\_\_\_\_ will happen?
- How many times has \_\_\_\_\_ happened before?
- Is \_\_\_\_\_ so important that my future depends on it?
- What is the worst that could happen?
- If it did happen, what could I do to cope with or handle it?
- Is my judgment based on the way I feel instead of facts?
- Am I confusing “possibility” with “certainty”? It may be possible, but is it likely?

## Daily Tips to Reduce Stress



Reduce caffeine intake as stimulants like energy drinks and coffee can increase anxiety



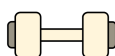
Prioritize and break down tasks into smaller doable steps



Practice taking several long, deep breaths



Take time to recharge, becoming aware of and avoiding “relaxing” activities that do not really refresh or rejuvenate.



Moderate daily exercise

*Disclaimer—The information in this newsletter is a starting place and might not be effective for every child or every situation. Mental health conditions are complex, as people differ widely in their conditions and responses, and interactions with other conditions. Interventions and treatments are best evaluated and adapted by a qualified clinician to meet individual needs. This newsletter is produced by Hope4Utah, a nonprofit organization providing trainings, resources and supports to prevent, intervene, and respond to suicides and to improve mental health. Articles contributed by Jessica Williamson, LCSW, who specializes in mental health treatment of children, teens and adults at her a private practice in South Jordan, Utah.*