



Anxiety and depression – a guide to helping young people

Anxiety, depression and their link

Many emotional issues and mental health conditions can exist side by side, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that anxiety and depression are linked and can occur at the same time in the same individual; this is called co-morbidity. In fact, not only are anxiety and depression the most common mental health conditions, they are also the two most co-morbid with one another.

Anxiety and depression are not the same conditions, but they often share symptoms, and occur together. It is not uncommon for young people with depression to experience anxiety and those with anxiety to become depressed.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to traumatic or stressful situations and is perfectly healthy in this context, but if a person is anxious most of the time and it affects their day-to-day lives, they may be suffering from an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders include Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), panic attacks, and phobias, and are characterised by emotional, physical, and behavioural symptoms that create unpleasant feelings of:

- Fear
- Worry
- Panic
- Racing thoughts
- A feeling of impending doom

These emotions are frequently accompanied by physical symptoms including:

- Exhaustion
- Muscle tension and aches
- Headaches
- Trembling
- Irritability
- Sweating

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Anxious behaviours include:

- Withdrawing from things we used to enjoy
- Seeking to avoid people or certain places
- Lack of concentration
- Being really irritable with others
- Sleeping poorly
- Feeling increasingly depressed
- Eating more or less

What is depression?

It is common for young people to experience emotional ups and downs during their teenage years and in young adulthood. But when they feel down, stressed and sad for longer periods of two weeks or more, and find this has an impact on their everyday lives, they could be suffering from depression.

Depression is typically characterised by extended periods of low energy and mood, low self-esteem, and loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities. Symptoms include:

- Regularly feeling sad and tearful
- Having a lack interest in things previously enjoyed
- Feeling tired, low on energy or exhausted
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling irritable or upset easily
- Being overly self-critical
- Eating more or less than usual
- Suffering from unusual aches and pains or illness
- Trouble sleeping - difficulties in getting off to sleep or waking up much earlier than usual
- Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem
- Wanting to withdraw from the world
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Finding it hard to cope generally with life
- Feeling really anxious
- Developing self-harming issues
- Thinking about suicide and death

As we can see, there is a lot of overlap between symptoms of both conditions. It's important to remember that both can be treated and managed, whether they are suffered together at the same time, or individually.

What causes anxiety and depression?

Often, the two conditions are triggered by similar events, such as:

- Suffering trauma in childhood or as a teenager
- Abuse
- Illness
- Bereavement
- Genetic factors

Helping young people – Tips for self-managing symptoms of anxiety and depression:

- Talking to a trusted friend/parent/carer or teacher; the more people who are aware of the problem, the more likely it is to get help
- Encourage them to keep a mood diary outlining times when they feel bad and noting down any triggers they notice for down periods or anxious behaviours
- Trying to eat regularly even if they are small meals
- Exercising a little even if they don't feel like it; it is proven to have a positive impact on mental health
- Taking time to do some things they enjoy, even if they can only manage this for short periods of time at first
- Keep talking once they open up; make them aware there is no need to suffer in silence or feel stigma about their issues
- Encourage them speak to a doctor about their feelings, or offer to help them do so if it is too daunting

Getting outside help and treatment

A GP may feel it is appropriate to refer a young person to the local mental health team, for talking therapies such as counselling, and/or seek medication routes aimed at relieving their symptoms. This will depend on an individual's experiences, how long they have been unwell and what is deemed appropriate for their presenting symptoms. Remind them that their medical record is confidential and they'll have the opportunity to look at their issues and work through them in their own time and in a safe environment. No one needs to know they are seeking help if they don't wish them to. But equally, mental health issues are nothing to be ashamed of.

Further information on anxiety and depression can be found in the individual factsheets on these conditions.