



A Parent's Guide to
ANXIETY

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“Anxiety is a thin stream of fear
trickling through the mind. If
encouraged, it cuts a channel into
which all other thoughts are drained.”

— **Arthur Somers Roche**

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This Parent Guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ What is anxiety?
- ❓ Why does anxiety matter?
- ❓ What are the differences between anxiety and anxiety disorders?
- ❓ Why is anxiety on the rise in young people?
- ❓ What does Scripture say about anxiety?
- ❓ How can we help young people with anxiety?

Introduction

Perhaps you've felt it. There is a creeping dread in your stomach, a voice in your head telling you it's all going to go horribly wrong. Everyone at the party is thinking about how underdressed you are. You're going to miss a deadline at work and not only will you be fired, everyone will talk about you behind your back. Your kids are going to get sick and be hospitalized thanks to the germs at school. Or perhaps you just wake up in the morning with a pit in your stomach and a conviction that everything is right on the edge of collapse.

Everyone experiences feelings like this from time to time, but when these emotions and physical sensations continue for an extended period of time, it's often an indication that someone is struggling with chronic anxiety, or an anxiety disorder.

Feelings of anxiety and anxiety disorders are different. [Anxiousness or anxious feelings](#) come and go, do not inhibit a person's ability to function, and are usually triggered by specific circumstances. Anxiety disorders are chronic, do not always have an identifiable cause, and are severe enough to interfere with a person's ability to go about their daily life.

While everyone experiences anxiety on some level and not everyone would qualify as having an anxiety disorder, the latter is rapidly on the rise, particularly in young people—and not only teens, but in children [as young as three years old](#). The World Health Organization has found that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people worldwide who have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders [has risen by 25%](#). And that statistic only reflects those who have sought out a diagnosis; it doesn't include those struggling without one.

In this Parent Guide, we'll discuss both these temporary feelings of anxiety and longer-term anxiety disorders, as well as how parents and caring adults can walk through these issues with the rising generation.

Before we begin, we want to clarify that we at Axis are not trained mental health professionals, and this Parent Guide should not be used as a diagnostic tool or a substitute for professional psychological or psychiatric help. If you believe that your child is exhibiting symptoms of an anxiety disorder, please see a mental health professional for advice on treatment and next steps. If you believe your child is experiencing a mental health crisis and may be in danger of taking their own life, please call or text 988 for immediate help from the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, or, take your child to the nearest emergency room and explain the situation to the attendant staff.

What is anxiety?

The [American Psychological Association](#) defines anxiety, and distinguishes it from fear, in this way:

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure...Anxiety is not the same as fear, but they are often used interchangeably. Anxiety is considered a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat.

Anxiety, like fear, is very normal. It is a more intense experience than fear, but both are natural human responses to stressful circumstances and events. Anxiety disorders, however, are a much more serious issue. These can fall under [five distinct diagnoses](#):

- 1 **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**, which is exhibited by chronic, persistent anxiety that occurs seemingly without a cause.
- 2 **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**, in which a person experiences repetitive intrusive thoughts, and feels compelled to perform certain behaviors (or “rituals”) to alleviate those thoughts.
- 3 **Panic Disorder**, in which a person’s anxiety is condensed into episodes called panic attacks, when they experience intense moments of overwhelming fear accompanied by physical symptoms.
- 4 **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**, which many people develop following exposure to or the experience of a significantly harmful event such as a violent encounter or a natural disaster.
- 5 **Social Anxiety Disorder**, in which a person develops intense feelings of anxiety in situations involving other people.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, [19.1% of adults](#) in the U.S. have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, making this the most common mental disorder in the U.S.

Reflection Questions: What do you know about anxiety? When have you experienced anxiety, and how does it feel? Have you or someone you know been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder? How does that affect your or their lives?

Anxiety in kids and teens

Anxiety is not exclusive to adults. According to [McClellan Hospital](#),

Research done by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine revealed an estimated 32% of adolescents living in the U.S. experienced an anxiety disorder. Although anxiety disorders occur more often in females than males, age, ethnicity, and geography play no role in who develops anxiety. Unfortunately, only 7% of young people who need mental health help receive it.

Not only do clinical studies reveal anxiety and anxiety disorders on the rise, this trend is reflected in teen and youth culture itself, particularly on the internet. On TikTok alone, as of this writing #anxiety has around 21 billion video views. The past several years have been undeniably traumatic, with many children and teens experiencing prolonged interruptions from school, extracurricular activities, and in-person gatherings due to COVID-19. Teens have taken to the internet to express the painful reality of having to miss their senior prom or graduation. Even very young children have been impacted by COVID-19 and the world that has emerged in its aftermath. [Elementary school kids](#) who formed significant memories during the pandemic, [toddlers](#) who began to develop independence during quarantine, and [even babies who were born](#) during lockdown and mask mandates [are all at higher risk for developing pediatric anxiety](#) than children who grew up before COVID-19.

Add that to the string of stressful life events that were already impacting Gen Z and Gen Alpha: the majority of Gen Z were born just before or during the aftermath of 9/11, both generations are growing up in a world of internet comparison and online bullying, and many attend school every day with fears that their school might be the target of the next mass shooter.

No wonder kids are experiencing so much anxiety.

Reflection Questions: What are some things you think cause anxiety for teens in general? What about your kids; are there any specific things you can think of that might cause them to experience anxiety?

Anxiety in scripture

The word “fear” is mentioned 500 times in the Bible (not including the many “fear not”s). The word “anxiety,” specifically, is mentioned between 7 and 8 times depending on which translation you read. That’s substantial, considering all of Scripture was penned long before the idea of diagnostics or clinical psychology even existed.

One of the most significant uses of the word “anxiety” is found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, recounted in Matthew 6. In Greek, the word used in these verses is “merimnaō,” meaning “to be troubled with cares.” In many translations, the word “anxiety” is replaced with “worry,” which actually comes from the [Old High German word “wurgen,”](#) meaning “to strangle.”

All this etymology is important because it helps us realize that Scripture speaks directly to the experience of anxiety in all its forms. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to our feelings of anxiety, the stressors we let seep into our lives and turn our eyes from God. He exhorts us not just to “get over it,” to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and move on, but to release the worries we cling to *because* we trust that God is aware of and will bring us the things we require to live and do His work. We can put our needs in the hands of God because “your heavenly Father knows you need them” ([Matthew 6:32](#)). We are safe to release ourselves from the bondage to anxiety to which we so willingly submit.

Though Scripture may not speak as directly to anxiety disorders as it does to our anxious feelings, that does not mean those disorders are ignored or invalidated by the Word of God. Quite the opposite. One of the verses that deals directly with physical (and mental) afflictions is [2 Corinthians 12:7](#), when Paul speaks of his famous “thorn in the flesh.” Biblical scholars have many theories about what this “thorn” might be, but we can understand from the context of the passage that it was something that impacted Paul’s life, that interfered with his day to day activities, which changed him and made him different from others who didn’t have the same affliction. It might have very well been an anxiety disorder. But regardless, we know that Paul identified it, ultimately, as a gift.

We want to tread carefully here. There are many different schools of thought about the relationship between God and suffering. Does God cause our suffering, or is he somehow unable to prevent it? To avoid advocating for any line of reasoning that would present God as cruel or weak, we present instead two truths of Scripture: the world is broken by sin *and* God is good. We know that suffering is an intrinsic part of life, and yet, God’s goodness can be displayed even through our pain.

Sometimes this means that God's tender heart and Jesus' human empathy is shown to us in a private and personal way. Sometimes we are convicted by the Holy Spirit of our spiritual weakness when the physical strength that hides it is stripped away. Or maybe we suffer so that when we choose to praise God in spite of our suffering, His glory is on full display. For Paul, we know that he identified his "thorn" as keeping him from becoming conceited, and more importantly, as demonstrating this truth: "[Christ's grace is sufficient for you, for [His] power is made perfect in weakness." ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#))

Reflection Questions: Does anything else in Scripture come to mind when you think about anxiety and fear? What are ways you push into God when you are feeling anxious? How has God shown Himself to you through the painful things that have happened in your life?

How to walk with a young person struggling with anxiety

[Awana](#), a ministry that helps connect kids with the Bible and equips parents to disciple their kids, emphasizes that even when/if you pursue professional help for your children in the area of anxiety, you must also help your child bring their fears and questions to God. While God doesn't promise to relieve us of all our ailments, He does promise to walk through them with us. But because anxiety often presents differently in teens than it does in younger children, different approaches will be warranted, although the strategies are ultimately the same.

For teens dealing with anxiety:

- ✔ **Fight for relationship.** As with all discipleship, the first step is deepening relationship. When ministering to teens who struggle with anxiety, you must be a safe place for them. Kids with anxiety feel pressure from all angles and sometimes that pressure comes from you simply because you are their parent, laying out expectations and following through on hard life lessons. To balance that, look for intentional, unstressful ways to connect. Build margin into your calendar to spend time with your teenager, intentionally avoiding conversations about grades, homework or chores. Spend time listening. Talk about the small things, laying a foundation of trust to be able to talk about the difficult things.
- ✔ **Develop a spiritual strategy.** Alongside a counselor or therapist, you will likely be working with your teenager to develop strategies for managing anxiety. Make sure you also incorporate spiritual elements! This may include key verses you find together and post on a mirror or screenshot on their phone. Perhaps craft a five-word prayer that your kid can pray repeatedly when they feel anxiety creeping in. Work together to develop a list of truths that your child can reference, or you can gently remind them of, when the lies of anxiety are loud.
- ✔ **Find a balance of truth and grace.** Your teenager needs your understanding. They need you to recognize that their struggle with anxiety isn't a cry for attention, an excuse to avoid situations or something they can control. At the same time, your teenager needs you to help them battle anxiety from taking over their lives. Balance understanding with pushing them forward by speaking truth and not being afraid to challenge them.
- ✔ **Don't avoid the hard things.** It can be easy to feel that you are walking on eggshells, fearful of triggering anxiety in the teenager you love. Romans 5:3-4 says, "We rejoice in our

sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” As difficult as it is to watch our kids struggle, we recognize that God will use this in their lives. Our goal has to be to disciple them through the struggle, not help them avoid it altogether.

- ✔ **Emphasize healthy daily spiritual habits.** Our spiritual strength is not developed in the acute moments as deeply as it is established in the everyday, routine habits of growing closer to God. When we help our kids establish daily Bible reading, prayer, and memorizing God’s Word, we help them strengthen their hearts for when the battle of anxiety hits.
- ✔ **Model patience.** The battle with anxiety is not resolved overnight. It is truly a roller coaster as some seasons will be peaceful and settled, and some seasons will be challenging with one anxiety attack after another. You can model for your teenager that you have faith that God is working in them and through them, recognizing that His plan is often long-term and not immediate, however, you can both trust Lamentations 3:22-23, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.”

For younger kids dealing with anxiety:

- ✔ **Fight for relationship.** Anxiety in children looks different than how it presents in teenagers or adults. Their fears might come in the form of being socially disconnected, unable to break the fear of being in front of people or meeting someone new. Fear of elevators. Animals. New routines, foods or people. It might also be in the questions they ask you, like *What happens if the house burns down?* or *Who is picking me up from school today?* During these moments, avoid responding with disbelief and take a minute to connect with your child. Reassure them with a direct answer to their question, and dig deeper by asking *Is there something you’re thinking about that is making you nervous? What other questions do you have?* Don’t dismiss their questions; take the time to understand where they are coming from and what might be underneath their question.
- ✔ **Develop a spiritual strategy.** Do you find your child’s anxiety triggered by a certain event, place or activity? Pairing those anxiety attacks with a consistent way to connect with God can give them the courage they need to step forward. What might that look like? Perhaps saying a prayer or closing your eyes together and taking 3 deep breaths to invite the Father, Son and Holy Spirit into the situation to alleviate their fear. Play their favorite worship song or pray over them with your hands on their shoulders or head. Pick out their favorite verse and read it out loud multiple times, inviting the child to join you each recitation. Give your child the freedom to decide which strategy might work best for them in any given situation.

- ☑ **Find a balance of truth and grace.** While connecting with your child is important to build relationship, they need you to speak truth into their moments of anxiety. While a lack of sleep and feeling of overwhelm might make it a tricky line to balance, it's worth the fight. If appropriate, consider spelling out what the "worst case scenario" might be for the particular anxiety they are fighting to help them see that God will walk them through even the craziest outcomes.
- ☑ **Don't avoid the hard things.** Kids can often have anxiety about their families and friends getting hurt or dying. When dealing with anxieties around death and dying, sit in the reality that at some point, everyone will die. Avoid dismissing their fear by saying *Oh I'll always be here for you!* or declaring *That's an awful long time from now so we don't need to worry about it.* Help them see this as part of the Gospel and an essential part of seeing Jesus return and restore the earth. When finished, reassure them that for as long as you are breathing, you'll be there to love and care for them.
- ☑ **Emphasize healthy daily spiritual habits.** Have you ever experienced the Holy Spirit prompting you with a song, scripture verse or prayer in your time of need? These prompts are often things we've listened to, read or prayed during our time with God, and in our moments of need they can act as rocks we cling to. Encourage your child to spend time each day reading their Bible (try reading it together!), listening to worship music and praying. Reflection time can also be a powerful tool; give them opportunities to journal, engineer structures (think Magna-Tiles or blocks!) or draw what the Lord is putting on their heart.
- ☑ **Model patience.** While your child will have moments of joyous triumph, you'll also have moments of pulling out of a specific situation and helping them stabilize and regain a safe headspace. You can model for your child that you have faith that God is working in them and through them, recognizing that His plan is often long-term and not immediate, however, you can both trust Lamentations 3:22-23, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning."

Another important practice for parents and caring adults is simply the practice of sympathizing with our child/teen's experience. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, pastor Dane Ortlund examines the use of the word "sympathize":

The word for 'sympathize' here is a compound word formed from the prefix meaning 'with' (like our English prefix co-) joined with the verb to suffer. 'Sympathize' here is not cool and detached pity. It is a depth of felt solidarity such as is echoed in our own lives most closely only as parents to children. Indeed, it is deeper even than that. In our pain, Jesus

is pained; in our suffering, he feels the suffering as his own even though it isn't... His is a love that cannot be held back when he sees his people in pain.

Note how he emphasizes that though the sympathy of Christ is more complete than any earthly relationship, it is closest to the relationship of parents and children. The best thing you can do as a parent of a child suffering from anxiety is empathize—something you are likely already doing without even realizing it. Their pain is your pain in a very real way. Though this might be difficult to communicate to your teen or child, you can show it even without words by being there for them physically with things like hugs and a reassuring presence, or just by making it clear that you are always safe and available for them to process their pain in whatever way they need to.

Reflection Questions: What does the concept of discipleship mean to you? Besides what we've discussed here, what are some things that come to mind when you consider how to disciple your children in their experience of anxiety?

Practical steps to work with anxiety

As we've been saying, a step you can take to help your child if they are struggling with anxiety is to seek professional help. Though your love is going to be essential in helping them work through and develop health in the midst of anxiety, sometimes a little more support is needed. This might come in the form of individual or family therapy, a clinical diagnosis, or medication.

We want to assure you that no medical or professional treatment your child receives indicates a lack of faith on their or your part. Though of course we may, and should, pray for God's healing, sometimes that healing comes through the services provided by professionals. Think of it this way: if your child had a broken leg, while you should absolutely pray for God's presence during the process of its healing, you wouldn't think twice about going to the hospital to get the bones set and the leg put in a cast if needed. Most of us wouldn't see that as a failure to trust; in fact, the doctors and the technology that allow a person with a broken leg to make a full recovery is a way that God exhibits His healing power. So if your child needs professional help to deal with their anxiety, trust that God is working in their life and using the therapists, doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists to bring about healing.

Anxiety, like many other mental health issues, is also tied to our physical health. Nutrition, sleep, and exercise have enormous impacts on our mental health. [Verywellmind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com) summarizes a recent study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* saying that "Getting good quality sleep, exercising, and eating more raw fruits and vegetables is crucial for good mental health and well-being." For someone who is living with anxiety, it may be a struggle to get good sleep due to racing thoughts, to go to a gym or do group sports because of social anxiety, or even to eat healthy food that might not feel comforting or "safe." However, despite how hard doing these things might be, it's essential to do them to work towards health.

Another thing that's important to realize is that in many cases, anxiety can tend to get worse when we try to avoid it instead of facing it head on. In *Psychology Today*, Susan Biali Haas M.D. [says](#), "It changes your brain's physiology to face your fears, especially in doses you can handle without getting completely overwhelmed...If I had chickened out, I would have taught my brain that fear and avoidance is the right reaction to this "threat," and it would have been worse the next time. Phobia experts know this to be true."

Though phrases like "just get over it" or "push through" are ultimately unhelpful and can even be harmful as "solves" for anxiety, there is also a certain amount of control that people with anxiety can and should practice exerting over their mind. Mental illness is very difficult, and can make

day to day life feel impossible, but it isn't. With a balance of receiving support, trusting God for help, and taking responsibility for our own growth and symptom management, even people with the most severe anxiety disorders—or other mental illnesses—can live fulfilling, stable lives.

Reflection Questions: What are strategies you've developed for dealing with your anxiety or stress? How can you help model healthy coping mechanisms to your kids?

Conclusion

We cannot overstate the importance of prayer. As [John Piper writes for the Gospel Coalition](#): “Prayer is the way you walk by the Spirit. Prayer is the way you walk by faith. In other words, it’s the breath of the Christian life all day long. Just breathe in, breathe out. It’s the way you live.”

As parents, it is our highest call and responsibility to pray for our children. Sometimes they do not feel able, willing, or aware of how to bring their pain before the Lord. In these times, we can stand in the gap and bring our requests on their behalf before Jesus as He brings them before the throne of God. Under the salvation of Christ, emboldened by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we may feel safe to approach the untouchable Father of Lights with the confidence of a child climbing onto their father’s lap.

We leave you with [Philippians 4:6-7](#): “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Invitation to Generosity

If you liked what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org. Thank you!

Also check out our partner for this Parent Guide, Awana. Awana is a non-profit and has been a global leader in child and youth discipleship for more than 70 years. Each week, Awana reaches more than 5 million kids with the Gospel across partnerships with more than 68,000 local churches in 134 countries. [Childdiscipleship.com](https://childdiscipleship.com) is a project of Awana and their mission is to equip you to disciple the kids and teens in your life to help them foster a vibrant relationship with Jesus. For more discipleship resources like this, check out childdiscipleship.com and create your free account today! Thank you!

Sources Used in This Parent Guide

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Related Axis Resources

- » [A Parent's Guide to Depression and Anxiety](#)
- » [Conversation Kit on Anxiety](#)
- » [A Parent's Guide to Emotion](#)