

Practical Ways You Can Help a Teen Struggling With Intense Anxiety

One in 3.

That's the proportion of the U.S. population that will be affected by a diagnosable anxiety disorder during their lifetime.

That makes anxiety the most common psychological disorder in the U.S.

If you are reading this in a room with eight others, statistically speaking, it's probable that three of you will suffer from an anxiety disorder.

When it comes to today's teenagers and young adults, even those who aren't diagnosed with an anxiety disorder feel stressed. Some of them feel it nonstop. As a researcher and parent, I can't remember the last time I talked with a young person who didn't feel continually anxious.

If you care about a teenager or young person, there's a good chance you've seen him or her struggling with worry and anxiety at some point. Based on extensive interviews with therapists and theologians conducted for our Faith in an Anxious World parent and youth leader resources, we believe your best response as a caring adult is the acronym of A, B, C, D and E.

1. ASK your young person to rate their anxiety on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the worst. If they rate it a 1-3, it's likely no big deal, and a 4 or 5 is probably manageable. If they rank it a 6 or above, they probably need more help from you, and likely also a trained professional.

2. Encourage your young person to BREATHE deeply. Have you ever noticed that when you start to panic, your heart begins to beat faster? That's your heart's automatic gas pedal to accelerate oxygen to every extremity to help you in emergencies. When you breathe deeply, your heart gets more oxygen and doesn't have to work as hard. As your heart slows down, your brain starts to get the message that you aren't in danger anymore. It's your body's simple, but powerful, brake pedal for out-of-control emotions.

3. Help your young person CENTER on a helpful truth or phrase. What few words from a meaningful scriptural passage, worship song or prayer could they repeat to themselves as a theological anchor? In my family, we've landed on "Emmanuel, God is with us" as a favorite mantra that my husband and I name for our teenagers every few weeks.

4. Help your teenager or young adult DEVELOP a team. If they are likely to be anxious in first period physics or at their new job, help them think ahead of time about a friend or adult they could talk to in those moments. If you're not their parent, encourage them to let their parents know the depths of their stress. As needed, invite them to consider seeing a professional therapist. If you don't know a therapist you can recommend, contact a few churches or high schools for referrals.

5. Throughout your conversations, EMPATHIZE with and empower them to take future (often baby!) steps. One of my favorite phrases to simultaneously "feel with" young people while also emboldening them to move forward is from psychologist and author Lisa Damour: "That stinks, and I think you can handle it."

Whether your young person has diagnosable anxiety, feels anxious or is merely having a tough day, it's rarely wrong to empower them through empathy. In general, teenagers and young adults want to know you see their pain and are with them as

they figure out a way forward.

If you or your young person needs help beyond these ABCDEs, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK, or chat online at . {eo}