

When to Worry about Worrying

By Stacie Isenberg, Psy D

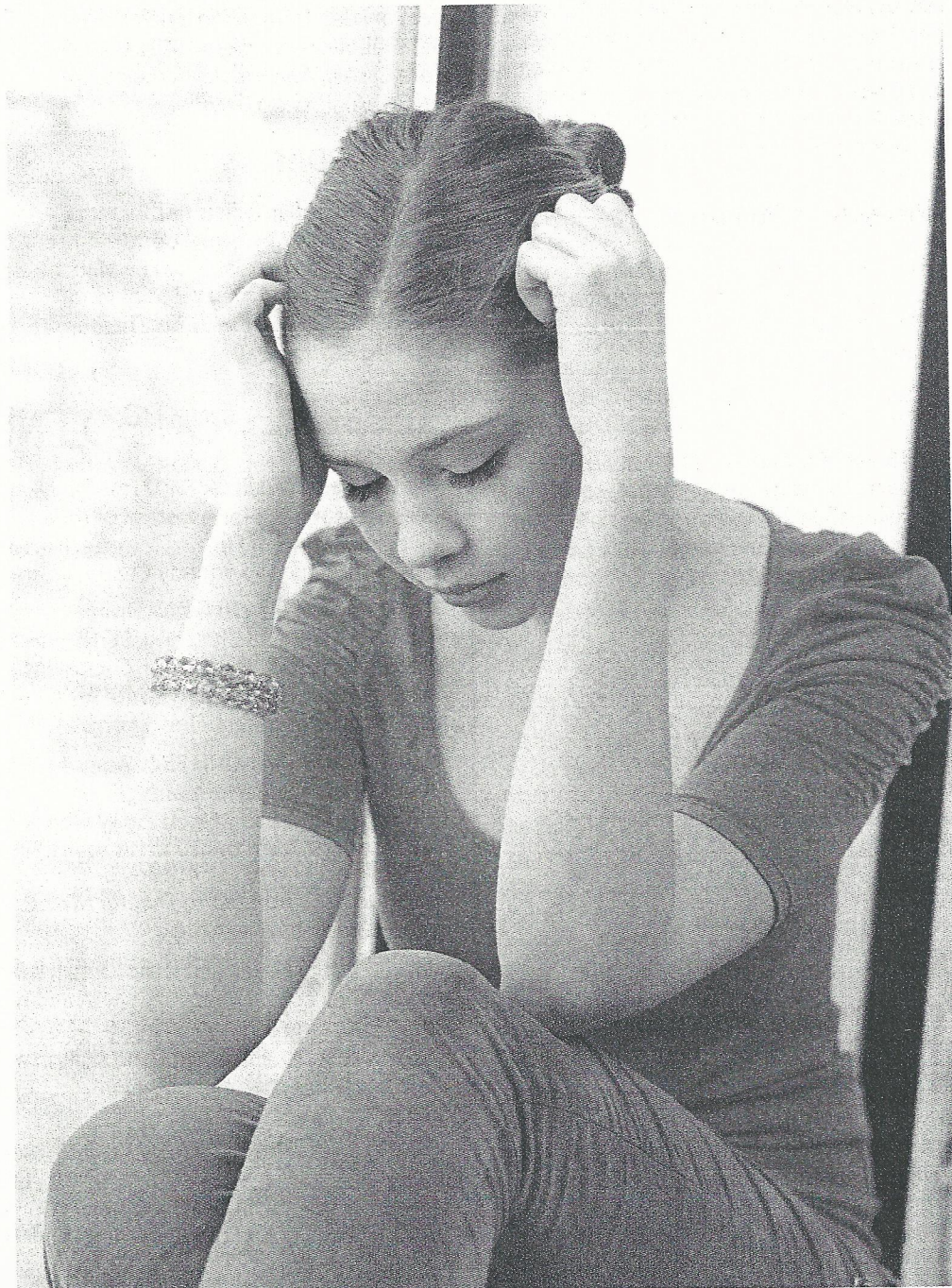
Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses in children. In fact, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately 25 percent of teens (age 13-18) suffer from anxiety disorders. Left untreated, these children are more likely to perform poorly in school, avoid important social experiences and abuse substances.

Causes and Symptoms

Anxiety disorders affect thoughts, feelings and behavior, and they may be caused by heredity, body chemistry and life events. Sometimes there is a clear trigger; sometimes not. Symptoms may be similar across ages, although there are also typical manifestations by age group: clinging and crying in young children, stomachaches and school refusal in older children, and excessive worry and insomnia in teens and adults.

Is It Anxiety or Anxiety Disorder?

First, consider whether the anxiety is developmentally appropriate. Remember that what's appropriate at one age can be inappropriate at another (such as fear of the dark). Second, consider the intensity of the symptom. Some behaviors are appropriate in a mild form (hand washing before meals), but problematic when excessive (hand washing after touching any object). Third, think about the duration of the symptom. Sometimes behaviors are caused by



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temporary circumstances and resolve on their own. Typically, anxiety is considered to be problematic once it is inhibiting a child's ability to function with reasonable emotional comfort.

Common in Kids

Anxiety disorders commonly affecting children and/or adolescents include:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:** Excessive worrying (often about the future, past performance, schedules, routines, health, perfection)
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:** Recurring thoughts that are consuming, and/or the need to perform repetitive behaviors to relieve anxiety induced by the thoughts
- **Panic Disorder:** Acute panic attacks that disrupt normal living
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:** Intense fear and agitated behavior following exposure to a trauma
- **Separation Anxiety Disorder:** Excessive anxiety upon separation from caregivers or other familiar situations
- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** Marked fear of social situations


- **Specific Phobia:** A specific fear that is excessive, cannot be reasoned away, and is not stage-specific

Treatments that Work

Despite the existence of effective treatments, most people with anxiety disorders don't seek help. That's a shame, because anxiety disorders respond well to treatment. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is regarded as the most effective treatment for anxiety disorders, sometimes in conjunction with medication. With CBT, the individual is taught to change how he or she addresses anxiety. Skills include establishing new thinking patterns and ways to manage distressing feelings and bodily complaints.

If you have concerns about your child's anxiety, talk with your pediatrician. Once identified and treated, kids with anxiety disorders can take control of their anxiety, become empowered, and get back to being kids.

Stacie B. Isenberg is the director of Child & Adolescent Services at The Ross Center.



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Pediatric Mood & Anxiety Research

Researchers at the NIMH are conducting studies to learn how the brain functions in children and adolescents with anxiety and/or depression. These studies seek boys and girls ages 8-17 for research at the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, Md. Research participation includes brain imaging and computer-based problem solving and memory tasks. Treatment is available over 8 weeks of outpatient visits.


Participation includes: Diagnostic interviews, physical examination, and your choice of either cognitive-behavioral therapy or medication.

Participants must: Be between 8-17, otherwise medically healthy, and not taking any psychiatric medications.

All clinical evaluations, research procedures, and outpatient visits are free of cost. Both parent and child must agree to the child's participation. Transportation reimbursement available.

TTY: 1-866-411-1010

For more information: **Call: 301-402-8225**



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