

# Teenagers, Anxiety Can Be Your Friend

Think of it as a personal warning system that will help you notice when things are on the wrong track.



Credit...Lisk Feng

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For many teenagers, anxiety is riding high these days.

A new report from the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health [found that one in three teen girls and one in five teen boys have experienced new or worsening anxiety](#) since March 2020.

And a year into the pandemic, there's certainly plenty to worry about. Maybe you're feeling nervous about catching or spreading Covid-19, or about returning to in-person school. You might be feeling tense about where things stand with your friends or perhaps, you're on edge about something else altogether: your family, your schoolwork, your future, the health of the planet.

While I wish there were fewer reasons to be anxious right now, I do have good news for keeping yourself steady. Psychologists actually understand a lot about anxiety — both the mechanisms that drive it and interventions that get it under control — and what we know is quite reassuring. So, if you're looking to feel more at ease, start by letting go of these common myths.

Without question, anxiety feels bad — it's no fun to have a pounding heart, sweaty palms and tightness in your chest — and for that reason, it's easy to assume that it must be bad. But the discomfort of anxiety has a basic evolutionary function: to get us to tune into the fact that something's not right.

You can think of anxiety as the emotional equivalent of the physical pain response. If you accidentally touch a hot burner, the pain makes you pull your hand away. In the same way, if your friends want to take a Covid-safe outdoor event and move it into a cramped indoor space, you *should* feel a surge of discomfort. That odd feeling in the pit of your stomach will help you to consider the situation carefully and be cautious about your next step.

Try to view anxiety as your own personal warning system. It's more often a friend than a foe, one that will help you notice when things are on the wrong track.

Given this, when is anxiety unhelpful? While most of the anxiety you feel is likely to be healthy and protective, psychologists agree that anxiety becomes a problem if its alarm makes no sense — either going off for no reason or blaring when a chime would do.

In other words, you should not feel anxious when all is well, and when you do feel anxious, the intensity of your nerves should match the scale of the problem before you. Feeling a little tense before a big game is appropriate and [may even improve your performance](#). Having a panic attack on the sidelines means your anxiety has gone too far. It may be worth talking to a mental health care provider for advice on how to manage it, but first you can try the [proven techniques](#) below.

You do not need to feel helpless when your anxiety alarm goes off, and even when anxious feelings cross the line from healthy to unhealthy, there's a lot you can do to settle your nerves. Keep in mind that anxiety has both physical and mental components. At the physical level, the amygdala, a primitive structure in the brain, detects a threat and sends the heart and lungs into overdrive getting your body ready to fight or flee that threat. This is helpful if you're dealing with a problem that calls for attacking or running — you're about to miss the school bus and need to break into a sprint to catch it — but bothersome if your one-note-Johnny amygdala gets your heart pounding and your lungs hyperventilating while you're trying to take a test.

A really good way to curb the physical symptoms of anxiety? Controlled breathing. Though it can sound like a daffy approach to managing tension, breathing deeply and slowly [activates a powerful part of the nervous system](#) responsible for resetting the body to its pre-anxiety state. There are many good [breathing](#) techniques. Find one that you like. Practice it when you're feeling calm. Put it to work when your amygdala overreacts.

For the mental component of anxiety, watch out for thoughts that are extremely negative. Are you thinking, “I’ll probably get sick if I go to school,” or “I’ll never find someone to sit with at lunch”? Such intense pessimism will almost certainly set you on edge. Counter your own catastrophic thoughts by asking yourself two questions: Am I overestimating the severity of the problem I’m facing? Am I underestimating my power to manage it? Weighing these questions will help you keep your concerns at healthy levels.

Understandably, if we’re scared of something, we’re inclined to stay far away from it. Avoidance alleviates anxiety in the short term, but here’s the rub: In the long term, avoidance entrenches it. There are two separate factors at work here. The first is that it feels *great* when we steer clear of the things we dread. If you’ve been doing school remotely this year and get nervous when you picture your return to in-person learning, resolving to stay home will cause your worries to instantly drain away. It’s human nature to want to repeat any behavior that leads to feelings of pleasure or comfort, but every boost of avoidance-related relief increases the likelihood that you’ll want to continue to avoid what you fear.

The second factor in the avoidance-feeds-anxiety double whammy is that you rob yourself of the chance to find out that your worries are exaggerated. For example, the realities of in-person school are sure to be more manageable than the harrowing scenarios your imagination can create. Going to school would likely bring your worries down to size.

Facing our fears can reduce anxiety. But you don’t have to dive into nerve-racking experiences when wading in is an option. If social distancing has left you feeling unsure about the status of your friendships, you might be tempted to isolate yourself. Instead, come up with a small first step, such as making a plan to hang out with just one or two buddies before returning to the broader social scene. Get your feet wet and then take it from there.

With the world beginning to open up, it makes sense that you might feel nervous about easing back into it. Knowing what’s true about anxiety — and not — will make it easier to navigate the uncertain times ahead.

Lisa Damour is a psychologist and the author of the New York Times best sellers “Untangled” and “Under Pressure.” Dr. Damour also co-hosts the podcast “Ask Lisa: The Psychology of Parenting.”