

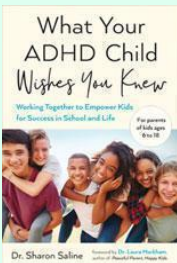
Help Neurodivergent Children and Teens Manage Anxiety



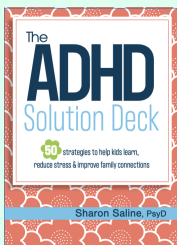
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Anxiety is a natural part of life. But when these emotions and concerns become too difficult for a child or teen, they may need your help. For neurodivergent kids and teens, worry and fear can increase their **agitation, distractedness and impulsivity** and **make things seem worse than they are.**

When worrying takes over, everybody is out of sync.

Does your child or teen express these concerns?

- Regular onset of fear or worry that is not temporary
- Anxiety that gets worse over time
- The inability to complete age appropriate tasks
- Disruptions in appetite, sleep or other typical functions



Anxiety means that someone's reaction is bigger than what the situation actually calls for. It can help us prepare for 'fight, flight or freeze' reactions to genuine threats or imagined concerns.

All too often, parents try to anticipate and cope with a child's fears to protect them from the pain. But anxiety needs to be addressed head on.

✗ Reassurance can offer short-term anxiety relief, but it **increases** long-term anxiety. It also **doesn't** teach the necessary coping skills that kids and teens need.

Instead, you should aim to:

- ✓ **Acknowledge their fears**
- ✓ **Validate their concerns**
- ✓ **Brainstorm solutions *together***

Try saying: *"Yes, of course you are worried about making the team. What did you figure out to do last season? How can you prepare this time?"*

Tools to Help Neurodivergent Children & Teens Manage Anxiety:

1. Manage your own concerns first

Kids and teens have incredible radar. They easily pick up when their parents are stressed or anxious, and it increases their own distress—conscious or unconscious.

The first step is to lower your own anxiety. Discuss your concerns with your partner, a friend, extended family member or counselor. Write these down and strategize responses or to-do action items to each by creating an **Anxiety Decelerator Plan**. This ADP will help you feel like you have some control. For instance, if your child needs more academic support, you can contact the school to set up a meeting.

2. Identify their worries, one worry at a time

We can't help kids turn down the frequency or intensity of their anxiety unless we know what's *causing* it. It might be worrying, or it might be environmental triggers. We want to stop this tumble.

Explore what's uncomfortable or uncertain for them during your weekly or twice a week check-in meetings (these are a must). Write these down. Pick **one** fear to address first together. When its volume is lower, you can pick another. People can really only change one thing at a time.

3. Figure out what your child really wants & what they can control



You can't overcome anxiety if you don't know what your goal is. Is it feeling confident about trying out for the soccer team or speaking up in class? Think of a time when they did something similar and required them to overcome hesitation or avoidance. ***What motivated them? What did they do or say that helped?***

Name aspects of this situation that they can control. Rather than focusing on what *might* happen, and all of the possible negative outcomes, shift their attention to proactive action. ***What steps can make the dentist more manageable?***

4. Brainstorm solutions

Kids and teens need some help figuring out what to say when anxiety heightens. When you work on this together, you'll lower your anxiety as well as theirs.

Create a few easy-to-remember statements. Clear language helps kids and teens out of sticky situations and provides tools to reassure themselves.

5. Help kids find what makes them feel good, and encourage it

Neurodivergent kids with anxiety need those wonderful endorphins. You can benefit from daily yoga and/or meditation to help you practice how to monitor your reactivity and calm down during inevitable stressful moments.



Make a list of Calm-Me-Down activities for both of you, and post it on the fridge so you can find it.

6. Recall past successes in times of stress

Anxiety is skilled at fostering amnesia about our personal resources and strengths.

Gather together and discuss challenging times in the past. ***What personality traits or life skills helped them overcome those obstacles? How can they apply those strengths to this situation?*** Write down some of these reflections to refer to in a tough time. Enlist the support of caring friends and family.

7. Reduce negative thinking

Expecting the worst contributes a lot to anxiety. Help kids project their fears as far as they can see.

When fearful thoughts emerge, ask them, “*And then what?*” until they arrive at the end result.

Then, evaluate how realistic the fear is and what you can do now.



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