

Supporting anxiety in adolescents – strategies for parents

- Anxiety is the most common mental health problem experienced by adolescents.
- Some anxiety is normal and actually can be helpful. When anxiety starts “getting in the way” and preventing your child from doing things they would normally do, this might indicate a problem.
- Signs of anxiety include physical, behavioural and emotional symptoms. The following list is not exhaustive:
 - Stomach aches
 - Headaches
 - Fatigue
 - Sleep difficulties
 - Pessimism / Thinking the worst
 - Self-critical / over-exaggerating
 - Worry (about things that have or may have happened)
 - Anger
 - Panic
 - Restlessness and irritability
 - Difficulties coping with change
 - Avoidance
 - Clinginess or crying
 - Perfectionism

Talking to your child when they tell you they are feeling worried about something:

- Normalise what they are feeling and going through – “Some anxiety is normal”
- Praise them for sharing their difficulties. It takes guts to talk about this with an adult
- Avoid the temptation to start solving problems straight away – listen, ask questions and find out more...
- Try and obtain some context for their fears. They may be experiencing significant difficulties / real threat. Are their worries founded?

CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)

- Works by noticing unhelpful thoughts and challenging them. Eg: seeing whether there are more helpful thoughts / more “balanced” and realistic thinking. CBT also encourages brave behaviours.
- Challenging unhelpful thoughts:
 - Start by finding out what the worry is about.
 - Why are you worried?
 - What is frightening you?
 - What do you think might happen?
 - What are you afraid of?
- Help your child to think of alternative thoughts:
 - Is there anyone you know who doesn't feel scared in this situation? What would they be thinking?
 - What would you tell a friend in this situation?
 - What would your friend say to you in this situation?
 - Is there a more helpful way of thinking?

- Particular behaviours carried out to 'stay safe' can actually keep anxiety going. For example: Avoidance of anxiety provoking situations; Getting reassurance from others; Checking ; Engaging with anxious thinking; focusing on the worry; Being on the lookout for danger; Parents being over-involved/overly protective.
- Encouraging brave behaviour:
 - The most important part of getting over anxiety is to face fears - but in a graded manageable way!!!
 - Do not "throw them in at the deep end" and force them to face their worst fears all at once.
 - Collaborative, empowering approach is needed. Teenagers need to have choice and control.
 - Involves planning and doing things that are anxiety-provoking in small steps and stopping certain behaviours which might make young people feel 'safe'.
 - Helpful to do this in a graded way (get your child to develop a number of steps from less to more-anxiety provoking and start with easier steps)
 - Encourage brave behaviour, but beware that 'taking over' undermines confidence and leads young people to see themselves as vulnerable.

General

- Ask questions rather than providing reassurance
- Praise and reward brave behaviour
- Ignore / do not overly respond to anxious behaviour. Give attention to brave behaviour instead.
- Model brave, non-avoidant behaviour yourself.
- Spend quality time with your child – be gentle and kind.
- Listen and acknowledge it can be difficult.
- Help them to have a healthy lifestyle – good sleep, not too many energy drinks, be fit and active etc...
- Support your child to be more independent (e.g. getting up / getting to school / packing own bag).
- Offer choices rather than make decisions for your child / teenager.