ANXIETY

CONVERSATION GUIDE . . . for parents of High Schoolers

High school has always been stressful, but research tells us that teenagers today are facing more pressure than ever before. Juggling the changing demands in grades, relationships, and growing responsibilities places our teens at a much higher risk for stress. But some students are experiencing more than stress—they are struggling with anxiety.

Stress is our body's and mind's response to certain situations in life. It can make us have sweaty palms or a rapid heartbeat. We can have difficulty sleeping, our minds running wild with thoughts and conversations. While stress is usually short-term, it can make us feel restless, nauseous, and irritable. Stress can be either positive or negative, and is usually a reaction to something specific in our lives.

Stress is about experiencing temporary reactions like frustration, nervousness, or a jolt of energy. Anxiety is more about feeling overwhelmed and worried for long periods of time.

Anxiety is an overwhelming feeling of worry, unease, or fear that lingers, interfering with how we live our everyday lives. Anxiety continues after a stressful situation has been resolved. Sometimes we can pinpoint why we have anxiety, and other times we can't.

While there is a certain amount of stress that's healthy, anxiety can interfere with sleep, diet, relationships, and other areas that are critical to a student's health and well-being.

Anxiety can manifest itself in different ways. It's important to know what to look for when it comes to teens and anxiety[1]:

- Emotional changes: more-than-usual agitation or sadness, increase in withdrawn behavior—becoming "stuck in their head"
- Behavioral changes: changes in diet, sleep patterns, or avoiding normal daily activities
- Cognitive changes: decreased concentration, forgetfulness, and/or the appearance of carelessness

Some of these signs may sound like normal teenage behavior. That's why it's important to be in consistent communication with your kid—so you're aware of what's typical on a day-to-day basis.

Here are a few things you can say and questions you can ask to gauge your high schooler's stress and anxiety levels.

(Keep in mind, these conversations aren't always easy to have. Timing is everything. Try to initiate this conversation when you think your teen will be open to having it. When necessary, involve your ministry leader or professional counselors.)

WHAT TO SAY

TO FIND OUT IF YOUR STUDENT IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

- How have you been sleeping? Are you getting enough rest?
- I can't fix things for you, but I'm always here to listen.
- What's taking up the most space in your brain right now?
- What friendships do you have that are stressing you out?
- Which classes at school do you have trouble with? How can I help?
- Is there anyone at school who gives you a hard time? A person or group of people who make you uncomfortable?
- I know there are lots of things changing for you right now. Let's talk about some of those.
- Sometimes I worry about little things just as much as big things. Are there any little things on your mind that you want to talk about?
- I know what it's like to be stressed out for no reason. Has that ever happened to you?
- We live in a world where some pretty scary things happen. Do any of those ever worry you? How do you let things go when they are out of your control? How do you determine what is in your control and what is not?

WHEN YOU KNOW YOUR STUDENT IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

- On a scale of 0-10, how much stress are you feeling right now?
- What's one thought you keep having over and over again?
- Is there a certain time of day when you feel the most stress or anxiety? Let's talk about some ways to handle that.
- You haven't been sleeping/eating like you normally do. Is there anything you want to talk about?
- What is your biggest fear right now? Let's talk about what would happen if that fear came true.
- What's one thing about the future that stresses you out?
- How can I help the next time you feel nervous? (What can I say, do, etc. Many times a child's love language can be a helpful "go to" way to calm a child.)
- What's your favorite way to relax when you're feeling anxious? (If they don't have an answer for this, it could be a red flag that your child may need additional help.)

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Our kids are always watching us. They observe how we react in different situations—especially in situations where we're under a large amount of pressure and stress. It's important for you (as a parent *and* for your own well-being) to be intentional about caring for yourself when it comes to your own anxiety.

If you want your student to practice good nutrition, healthy sleep patterns, and exercise, those need to be priorities in your own life, too.

Make sure you have someone you can open up to honestly about your own fears and concerns. And, if necessary, consult the help of a ministry leader or professional.

WIDEN THE CIRCLE

Only you know your kid, but if your teen exhibits these behaviors, then it may be time to reach out a professional:

- Increased need for reassurance
- Increased time to self/isolation
- Frequent difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Increased difficulty managing emotions
- Easily tired
- Deflated affect (decreased emotional expression)
- ANY suicidal thoughts (any talk of life not being worth the work/too tired to keep going/being gone/no one caring/death)
- ANY instances of self-harm
- Sudden change in grades
- Significant change in appetite/weight change
- Lacking interest in previously enjoyed activities
- ANY drug/alcohol use including nicotine

Seeking professional help isn't a sign of failure as a parent. Being a good parent doesn't mean you are the source of everything your child needs, but it does mean that you reach out when you realize a situation is beyond your resources.

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[1]https://www.psycom.net/common-triggers-teen-stress/

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