

Realistic Thinking for Teens

*For younger children, see [Healthy Thinking for Younger Children](#)

When we are anxious, we tend to see the world as very **threatening and dangerous**. For example, when we are home alone and hear a scratch on the window, we might think it's a burglar. This makes sense because imagining the worst can help us prepare for real danger, enabling us to protect ourselves. However, this way of thinking can be overly negative and unrealistic, especially when there is no danger (for example, it's not a burglar at the window, but a tree branch).

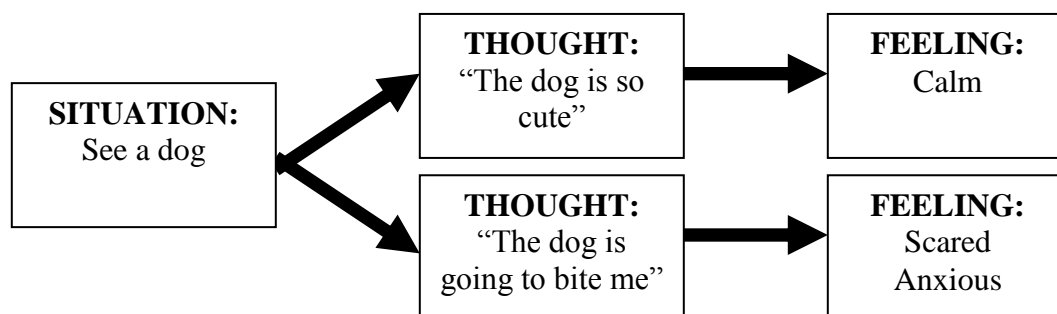
One strategy to help your child manage anxiety is learning to replace “anxious” or “worried” thinking with **realistic** thinking. This involves helping your child learn to see things in a clear and fair way without being overly negative. These strategies are aimed at **older children or teens** because some of these ideas may be more difficult for younger children to understand. However, **remember that learning to think realistically can be difficult at any age, so give your child some time to learn and practice these skills.**

How to Do It!

Step 1: Teach your child about *thoughts or self-talk*

- Thoughts are the words we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (self-talk). We can have many thoughts each hour of the day.
- Thoughts are private experiences; other people don't know what we're thinking unless we tell them.
- People can have different thoughts about the same thing.
- What we think affects how we feel.
- When we expect bad things to happen, we feel anxious.
- For example, imagine that you are out for a walk and you see a dog. If you think the dog is cute, you'll feel calm. However, if you think the dog will bite, you'll feel scared.

EXAMPLE:



Here is one way to explain thoughts or self-talk:

"We all have thoughts about things. Thoughts are the words we say to ourselves without speaking out loud (self-talk). We can have many thoughts each hour of the day. We all have our own way of thinking about things and how we think has a big effect on how we feel. When we think that something bad will happen -- such as that dog will bite us -- we feel anxious."

Step 2: Help your child *identify* thoughts or self-talk that leads to feelings of anxiety.

- Often, we are unaware of what we are thinking and it can take some time to learn to identify our specific thoughts
- Help your child identify his or her "anxious" or "worried" thoughts by asking him or her the following questions:
 - *What is making you feel scared?*
 - *What are you worried will happen?*
 - *What bad thing do you expect to happen?*

Some examples of "anxious" or "worried" thoughts or self-talk include:

- *"The dog will bite me"*
- *"I will fail the test"*
- *"What if I can't do it"*
- *"Things are not going to work out"*
- *"They don't like me"*
- *"I'm stupid"*
- *"Something bad will happen to mom and dad"*
- *"I'm going to get sick and die"*

Here's an example of what you might say to your child:

Parent: *You seem anxious tonight. What are you thinking about?*
Child: *I don't know...I have a test tomorrow.*
Parent: *Well, are you worried something will happen?*
Child: *Umm...I don't know.*
Parent: *What are you afraid might happen?*
Child: *Well...I guess I'm afraid I'll fail the test.*

Step 3. Help your child challenge "anxious" or "worried" thinking and self-talk.

- Explain how thinking something doesn't mean it's true or that it will happen. For example, thinking that the dog will bite you doesn't mean it will.
- Sometimes our anxious or worried thoughts are the result of falling into **thinking traps**. Use the [Thinking Traps](#) form to help your child identify the traps into which he or she might have fallen!

The following questions can help your child challenge his or her negative thoughts or self-talk:

- *Am I falling into a thinking trap (for example, catastrophizing or mind-reading)?*
- *What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?*
- *What would I tell a friend if he or she had that thought?*
- *Am I confusing a “possibility” with a “probability,” as it may be possible, but is it likely?*
- *Am I 100% sure that _____ will happen?*
- *How many times has _____ happened before?*
- *Is _____ really so important that my future depends on it?*
- *What is the worst that could happen?*
- *Is this a hassle or a horror?*
- *If it did happen, what can I do to cope or handle it?*

*Give your child the handout on [Challenging Negative Thinking](#)

Here’s an example of what you might say to your child to help him or her challenge negative thinking:

Parent: *I know you’re worried about failing the test, but thinking something bad will happen doesn’t mean that it will. Sometimes, when we are anxious we fall into “thinking traps” -- which means we tend to think in a very negative or unrealistic way. An example of a “thinking trap” is fortune-telling, which means you predict that things will turn out badly. Do you think you might be “fortune-telling”?*

Child: *I don’t know. Maybe.*

Parent: *Well, unfortunately, we can’t predict the future because we don’t have a magic ball.*

Child: *But, I’m pretty sure I’ll fail.*

Parent: *Are you a 100% sure you will fail?*

Child: *Well, no.*

Parent: *How many times have you failed a test?*

Child: *Well, I failed a few quizzes.*

Parent: *And how many tests have you failed?*

Child: *Well, I haven’t failed a test...yet!*

Parent: *Well, although it is possible, is it likely based on how you’ve done in the past?*

Child: *I guess not. But what if I fail this time?*

Parent: *Well, what’s the worst that could happen if you did fail?*

Child: *I would have a bad grade and might fail the whole class.*

Parent: *Well, if you fail the test, does that mean that you will fail the whole class?*

Child: *No.*

Parent: *Is there anything you could do to bring up your grade if you did fail the test?*

Child: *I don’t know. I know some kids did an extra project for bonus marks.*

Parent: *And will there be other tests?*

Child: *There are two more tests in this class.*

Parent: *So it is possible to make up some marks?*

Child: *I guess so.*

Step 4. Teach your child how to identify *more helpful or realistic ways of thinking*

Helpful ways of thinking include:

Coping statements: Come up with statements that remind you how you can cope with a situation. For example, “If I get anxious, I will try some calm breathing” or “I just need to try my best.”

Positive self-statements: Say some positive things about yourself or your abilities. For example, “I am brave,” “I have a lot of strength” or “I can get through this.”

Alternative statements based on challenging negative thoughts: Once you’ve looked at the evidence or recognized that you’re making a thinking error, come up with a more balanced thought such as “90% of the time I do okay on tests” or “Sometimes I make mistakes, but everyone does and it doesn’t mean I’ll fail the class.”

Here’s an example of what you might say to your child to help them identify more helpful ways of thinking:

Parent: *Are there some more helpful things you could say to yourself?*

Child: *I don’t know. I guess I could tell myself to try my best.*

Parent: *Yes! What could you say to yourself based on everything we talked about?*

Child: *Well, I guess I’m “fortune-telling.” I don’t know for sure that I will fail and I usually pass tests. And even if I do fail, it’s not the end of the world. I can probably make up the marks or study more for the next test.*

Parent: *Yes!*

Make copies of the [Realistic Thinking](#) form and help your child work through some examples. Encourage him or her to use the sheet to identify and challenge negative thinking when it pops up.