General Home Management Strategies

As a parent, you can help your child or teen learn techniques to manage his or her anxiety. While it is always advisable to seek professional help, especially in more severe cases, help is not always readily available. Even if you seek help in managing your child’s anxiety, you can still play a key role in helping your child.

Although there are different types of anxiety problems and specific strategies aimed at helping children cope with various fears, there are some general strategies that can help any child who is experiencing anxiety problems. These include:

1. Teaching your child about anxiety
2. Learning to relax
3. STOP plan or realistic thinking
4. Facing fears

How to Do It!

Step 1. Teaching Your Child About Anxiety

This is a very important first step, as it helps children and teens understand what is happening to them when they experience anxiety. Let your child know that all the worries and physical feelings he or she is experiencing has a name: ANXIETY. Help your child understand the facts about anxiety.

FACT 1: Anxiety is normal and adaptive as it helps us prepare for danger.

FACT 2: Anxiety can become a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real danger.

To learn how to explain this to your child, see How to Talk to Your Child about Anxiety

Step 2. Learning to relax.

The second step involves helping your child or teen learn to relax. Two strategies can be particularly helpful: calm breathing and muscle relaxation.

1. Calm Breathing: This is a strategy that your child can use to calm down quickly. Explain to your child that we tend to breathe faster when we are anxious. This can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, which can make us even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths through your nose. For more information see Teaching Your Child Calm Breathing.
2. Muscle Relaxation: Another helpful strategy is to help your child learn to relax his or her body. This involves having your child tense various muscles and then relax them. You can also have your child use “the flop,” which involves having your child imagine that he or she is a rag doll and relax the whole body at once. For more information see How to Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

Step #3: STOP Plan or Realistic Thinking

Often, the worries that children and teens have are unrealistic or very unlikely, but when they are anxious it is difficult for them to recognize this. For example, your child might worry excessively about mom and dad being in a car accident if they are late coming home.

One way to help your child examine his or her thoughts and decide whether the worries are unrealistic is to use the STOP Plan. The STOP Plan helps children recognize their anxiety and unhelpful thoughts, and develop new thoughts. For older children and teens, you may want to help your child challenge his or her unrealistic or anxious thoughts.

For a young child, see Healthy Thinking for Young Children. For teens, see Realistic Thinking for Teens.

Note: Younger children may have a more difficult time identifying exactly what they fear; however, they can benefit from coming up with some coping statements that they can say to themselves to help them deal with feelings of fear or anxiety. For example, “It won’t go on forever, it will end.”

Step 4. Facing Fears

The final and most important step in helping your child manage anxiety involves helping your child face his or her fears. If your child has been avoiding certain situations or places due to fear, it is important for him or her to start entering those situations or places. However, it can be easier for your child to start with something that is less scary, and work up to situations and places that cause a great deal of anxiety.

Work together with your child or teen to make a list of feared situations or places, such as going places alone, entering a crowded grocery store, riding the bus, or any situation that is being avoided. Once you have made a list, arrange them from the least to the most scary. Starting with the situations that cause the least anxiety, encourage your child to repeatedly enter the situation and remain there until he or she notices his or her anxiety start to decrease. Once your child can enter that situation with little anxiety, he or she can move on to the next item on the list. For more information, please see the Helping your Child to Face Fears: Exposure module.

For more general information, see Helpful Tips for Parents and Healthy Habits for the Home.