

# What to Do

When a Teen Tells You  
about Anxiety on a  
Mission Trip





# OVERVIEW

Mission trips provide adventure and an opportunity to get a break from life's normal routines and scenery. While many students welcome this change and can easily leave behind things that might distract or burden them from fully embracing the trip, others can't help but carry those things with them. Students coming from stressful, unstable or disruptive home environments cannot simply leave thoughts of their reality behind. Similarly, students who struggle with mental health bring those struggles with them, adding an element of unpredictability to their experience.

What does this mean for youth leaders on a mission trip? This guidebook is designed to answer that question by drawing from the expertise of TreeHouse and our 25+ years of experience hosting teenagers at YouthWorks mission sites.

This guidebook is structured around a case study. In the first chapter, we introduce you to Kiera and describe how anxiety showed up in her during a mission trip. The story includes her symptoms, the response from her peers and the efforts leaders made to address the situation. Kiera's experience will serve as our guide as we explore the following:

- Recognizing the warning signs of anxiety
- Understanding the underlying issues
- Managing students, leaders, and the community when a crisis occurs
- Practicing post-trip follow-up to ensure everyone grows from the experience

Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource.

- ▶ **Find a study partner.** The content in this guidebook is difficult to digest and it might take a while to understand how to best incorporate what you learn into your ministry setting. Invite someone along for the journey so you can process and learn together.
- ▶ **Take notes.** Even if you have some familiarity with anxiety, it is a good idea to document your thoughts and questions. This will allow you another way of processing the information and also make it easier to handle situations that arise on the trip. Bring your notes along so you are not relying on memory when something comes up mid-week.
- ▶ **Ask for help.** The crew at TreeHouse did a great job putting this information together, but you may still have questions about what student anxiety means for your team and your ability to provide leadership. That is perfectly understandable! Don't let it stop you from feeling prepared and empowered to serve the students on your trip. Reach out for help so you can feel more confident in your understanding.

Thank you for taking the mental health needs of your students seriously by engaging this material. We hope you find it to be helpful, encouraging and practical as you do the amazing work of student ministry.



## - CHAPTER 1 -

# When Anxiety Shows Up

### Meet Kiera:

Kiera was a senior in high school and had been part of the youth group for four years. When she came to us, she was struggling with high anxiety and self-medicated through the regular use of marijuana and alcohol. Through her time in our program, she grew immensely in her faith and went from smoking daily to smoking weekly.

She had gone on weekend retreats and even been on a few local mission trips and done very well. During her senior year, we decided to allow her to go on our international mission trip to Nicaragua. Being able to participate in these large trips was not automatic; we had a process to determine which students we believed would be a good fit. For Kiera, all the signs indicated that she was ready.

She was excited but had never left the Midwest or been on a plane. Her world was somewhat small and controlled. She wasn't ordinarily pushed outside her comfort zone, let alone experiencing a completely different culture and language.

Shortly after the trip began, we noticed that she was not around during hangout times and that when we were out serving she was becoming less and less engaged. Three days into the trip she began to struggle breathing, her chest felt tight, her fingers and toes became numb, and she expressed the desire to stay in her room for the rest of the trip.

The group soon learned of her situation and they began bombarding her with questions and pressuring her to enjoy the trip and "just trust God." This only increased her anxiety and physical symptoms, making her want to disengage even further. Kiera felt misunderstood and the other students were becoming frustrated that she was messing up their experience. Some of the leaders were also getting frustrated, believing she was mostly just seeking attention.

Within 24 hours, we had lost control of the group and the trip was on the verge of falling apart.



*What stands out to you from this story of Kiera’s experience?*

*What questions do you have about the actions or reactions of anyone in this situation?*

The next section introduces the causes and functions of anxiety and outlines some warning signs to be aware of in your mission trip planning.

## RECOGNIZING ANXIETY

*Unhealthy anxiety* is your brain lying to your body. In a person who is struggling with an anxiety disorder, the brain tells the body there is a threat when there isn’t one, thus creating a sense of fear or worry when there is no need to feel threatened. This could happen because of a chemical misfire in the brain or because of deeply-rooted thoughts and false beliefs.

*Healthy anxiety* shows up anytime we do something that is unfamiliar or new. For example, a mission trip where you will be traveling to an unfamiliar location, meeting unfamiliar people and doing unfamiliar things will cause anyone some level of anxiety. In fact, part of why we do missions is to *create anxiety and uncertainty*. We want students to experience the reality that when they stretch themselves and feel uncomfortable, God steps in and does great things in and through them.

The problem comes when the anxiety grows to a paralyzing state, when it shifts from healthy to unhealthy. When this happens it can significantly alter the experience of one youth and sometimes affect the whole team.

## WARNING SIGNS

Identifying anxiety early is key. If we can identify it before leaving for the trip, we can make a plan for how to deal with potential increased anxiety during the trip. However, given the nature of mission trips, it is possible that the anxiety will take us—and the student—by surprise, once the trip is underway.

There are some common anxiety warning signs we can look for before and during a trip. When we start seeing patterns of these behaviors, it is a good time to check in with the student.

- ▶ Regularly misses prep meetings
- ▶ Asks a lot of “What if…” questions
- ▶ Asks detailed questions about the trip beyond what is typical
- ▶ Reluctance to engage in activities
- ▶ Becomes angry when they feel pressured to participate



- ▶ Excessive physical complaints without an identified cause:
  - Numbness and tingling
  - Dizziness
  - Chest pain
  - Headaches
  - Neck tension
  - Upset or nervous stomach
  - Pulsing in the ear
  - Burning skin
  - Nausea
  - Shortness of breath
  - Electric shock feeling
  - Shooting pains in the face
  - Heart palpitations
  - Weakness in legs
- ▶ Complains that they can't sleep or rest
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Jittery body movements (e.g., shaking knee)
- ▶ Follows you around and does not engage with their peers
- ▶ They disappear for long periods of time

None of these necessarily mean that the student can't have a great experience or will explode in a fit of anxiety. Nor should these symptoms cause leaders to fear. Rather, we can use them as a guide to help students who are susceptible to anxiety identify their underlying concerns and work with them to mitigate the unhealthy anxiety and correlating symptoms.

*Look for Kiera's experience in this list of attitudes and behaviors.*

*What can background information about Kiera's life tell us about what she experienced on the trip?  
What did her leaders consider before the trip even started?*

*Why might well-intentioned advice to "just trust God" have increased Kiera's anxiety?*

The next chapter explores common underlying issues, how they lead to anxiety symptoms, and what leaders can do to help.



## - CHAPTER 2 -

# Underlying Issues

When we are facing a situation where a teen is experiencing high anxiety there are many things to think about. Consider the case study of Kiera. Her behavior became erratic, people did not understand why, there were concerns about her safety and the impact on the whole team was becoming more serious.

The first step in managing the crisis is to keep the student safe and the trip on track. *In the moment, this should be our first priority.* But we should also recognize that there are underlying issues feeding into that teen's anxiety. Issues that likely took a lifetime to develop and won't be fixed overnight.

It is with this understanding that we can approach a student like Kiera with grace. Understanding the underlying issues could have helped Kiera's leaders realize that she's not just seeking attention, but experiencing something she perceives as a real threat.

When we are helping a teen who is struggling with anxiety, our reflexive response is often to react harshly, zeroing in on the anxiety's manifestations in that moment (e.g., lack of participation, isolation, physical irritants, etc.). We might tell them they must participate or scold them for being short with people.

Recognizing that the anxiety is only a symptom of a deeper-rooted issue gives us some context for what the teen is experiencing, as well as a framework to work within once everyone returns home from the trip.

### ANXIETY IS A SYMPTOM

Consider a common headache. The pain of a headache is not the real issue. It is a symptom of something else; a headache is our body's way of telling us that we're hungry, or tired or stressed. If we want to get rid of the symptom of pain in the long term, we need to take care of our bodies by eating well, getting a massage or sleeping. If we only treat the symptom by taking medication, that headache is going to return.

Anxiety, like any other uncomfortable emotion, is not a bad thing. As a matter a fact, experiencing these emotions is a gift from God because our emotions are our messengers. They are telling us that



there is a problem that needs to be addressed, a lie that is being believed, or a thought that needs to be acknowledged. They are wonderful guideposts that prompt us to seek new ways to think, believe and interpret our circumstances according to God's word.

Yet for many of us, our emotions are our reality. We allow them to determine what is true instead of God's word telling us what is true. How we feel becomes our final authority. The challenge with allowing our emotions to determine what is true is that they are not trustworthy - they change continuously. This is most true of teenagers, as they are experiencing massive brain development and hormone fluctuations.

## HELPING THEM MOVE FORWARD OVER TIME

Ultimately, we want to see teens at peace, resting in the love of their savior. We want them to believe they don't need to fear the future because God loves them and is faithful. We want them to believe the never-changing God instead of their ever-changing emotions.

When we can help teens get to a place where they make the choice that the truest thing is what God says, they will begin to find freedom.

Going back to Kiera's experience, she didn't respond well when other teens slapped her with the platitude, "Just trust God!" Although well-meaning, this response actually worsened her anxiety because it added guilt and shame to what she was already dealing with.

Unfortunately, this misguided approach has been prevalent in churches and caused a lot of people to shy away from God rather than embrace him as a source of help.

It is also important to note that the root cause of anxiety can be purely physical. Sometimes the spiritual and psychological root causes can be addressed, but the anxiety persists because of a chemical imbalance. People in this situation often feel a great deal of shame because they think that if they just try harder, their problems would be solved. This is another reason to be careful to walk with teens in grace, recognizing that their pain and struggle is real.



## A GRACE-BASED APPROACH

Rather than chastising a teen for their lack of trust, what if we began to teach them about how trustworthy God actually is?

Many teens do not understand their identity. They don't understand that God is their father and that they are his dearly beloved children; his most treasured possession.

### Pro-Tip

When your teens gain understanding of the causes of their anxiety, celebrate with them. Self-understanding won't make worries disappear, but it does help to minimize their impact, and increase resilience.

It is hard for them to believe that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" in exchange for *their very lives* and he is *fully dedicated and 100% up for the task* of taking care of them here on earth and thereafter (*1 Peter 5:7, Philippians 4:6-7*).

We have the amazing opportunity to help teens renew their minds to the truth of their extreme value to God and his unfailing commitment to them as his children.

It is with this approach that we can address teens in the middle of a crisis and continue caring for them after returning home. We can remind them that God loves them and we can be the agents of God's love in the moment. We can help them feel heard and valued.

Experiencing high anxiety on a trip can be an awful experience for a teen. However, in that moment of raw emotions, it's a great time for us to introduce (or reintroduce) them to a God who loves them right where they're at, anxiety and all.

*Consider how you might bring God's truth to Kiera's situation in a way that she might experience as inviting and safe.*

*How might an understanding of underlying issues affect how people interpret symptoms of anxiety?*

*How would you describe short-term and long-term strategies for helping teenagers with anxiety in your group?*



## - CHAPTER 3 -

# Managing the Crisis

Before you can dig into the grace-based approach with teens, you will have to manage the crisis at hand.

### **Pray**

When helping a student who is experiencing anxiety, the first step is always to take a quick minute to pray. The Holy Spirit that lives inside of you already knows what the student is going through and the best way to proceed. Lean into the Spirit as you engage the student.

### **Separate**

It is usually helpful to get the student away from the group to talk, as they may be embarrassed by what they're going through. At times, they may want to bring a close friend or someone they feel comfortable with for support.

### **Calm**

If a teen is in an extreme state of anxiety (i.e., a panic attack) you will need to help them regain composure before you can have a meaningful conversation with them. (See appendix for how to identify a panic attack vs. general anxiety.)

You can start with breathing exercises—slow breaths in and out. At first, this will be hard for a student in crisis and they may want you to breathe with them. We recommend breathing in for 4 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, out for 4 seconds and hold for 2 seconds.

Another exercise that is helpful is a grounding exercise. This includes saying 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. This provides a distraction as well as brings the student back to the present moment.

High-level anxiety will not last forever, so riding the wave—or allowing time for the student to experience their range of emotions—tends to be helpful. What goes up, must come down. Be patient.



## Listen

Once they are calm enough to have a conversation, ask some open-ended questions to help the student verbalize what they are feeling, such as:

- It seems like you're having a hard time, can you help me understand what's going on?
- Can you identify what is making you anxious?
- When did you begin to feel anxious?

### Pro-Tip

When your teens identify triggers, keep notes. It will help you plan ahead to avoid unnecessary triggering moments. And, it will help you not to overreact—and help your community not to overreact—when triggers are engaged.

These questions will help give you some direction for your plan. Everyone experiences anxiety differently, so it is important to take time to let the student feel and tell you what they need.

## Plan

Next, work with the student and fellow staff members to figure out what the teen needs. Their needs could be simple, such as having an adult check-in with them periodically so that they can sort through their feelings. Or they could be drastic, such as having an augmented schedule or leaving the trip early.

As you plan, you should be thinking from three perspectives:

- What will lead to this student's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will lead to the group's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will help my adult leaders grow in their leadership?

*What did leaders do, or what could they have done, in Kiera's situation, considering these questions?*

*Why are open-ended questions so important when addressing students in an anxiety crisis?*

## GROWING THE GROUP

When a student is experiencing or causing chaos on a trip, it can be easy to put all your energy into helping the one student. However, if we only focus on the student, we miss an opportunity to help our staff and students mature.

### Helping Leaders Be Successful

Every adult leader you've brought on the trip is coming with their own perspectives, beliefs, feelings and past experiences. As the teen's anxiety crisis becomes evident, they will all respond differently. Some might become pouty, frustrated that the trip isn't living up to their expectations. Others might become heavy handed, wanting to take over and deal with the situation unilaterally. Others may have experienced anxiety in their own lives and begin to project their experience onto the teen's experience.



It can be easy to lose focus on how leaders are doing emotionally and spiritually. As the primary leader of a trip, it is important to check in regularly so leaders have the opportunity to vent and process how the trip is going from their perspective.

In these meetings evaluate the following:

- **How are the leaders doing spiritually?**

*Take time to pray together.*

- **How are the leaders feeling emotionally?**

*Empathize with your leadership team; it is always hard to see people we care about struggling. Give them time and space to find the words and feelings they may be having. Don't be surprised if a leader is frustrated or annoyed with the teen. These are normal feelings when dealing with a difficult teen/situation.*

- **Are we unified as a team?**

*Intentionally creating a sense of unity can be one of the biggest ways to support leaders during a crisis situation. Make sure they know they are not alone and that the team is working through this together.*

*The unified approach starts at the top. Adult leaders will be watching how you behave. Make sure they know that you have theirs and the teens' best interests at heart, and that you remain steadfast in your support.*

- **What is our action plan?**

*Create a plan for how to best support the leader most directly involved with the teen. Ask how you can best support them as they support the youth experiencing the anxiety.*

In many cases, there will be one adult leader who serves as the point person for the crisis. They are likely the one closest to the struggling teen and probably heard about the problem first. It is vital to give this leader extra support.

Whenever possible, it is best to empower this person to help manage the crisis. Allow them to take the lead on decisions and issues that arise. Crisis situations are some of the best learning opportunities we can give to our adult leaders. If they know that we are walking alongside them and empowering them to make helpful decisions for the teen, they will walk away with more knowledge than they could obtain elsewhere. They will likely make some mistakes along the way, but that's ok! Mistakes are the building blocks of growth.



Above all, recognize your leaders' hard work and dedication to supporting the group. Encourage them and appreciate their willingness to stay with the teen in hard places. If possible, write them notes and point out the gifts that they bring to the team and the teens.

Remember that you are all in this together, and that with the right plan, you can work together to make a huge impact in the teen's life.

### **Group Dynamics**

One student's crisis can quickly lead to large group chaos. Gossip, jealousy, anger and frustration can quickly become toxic.

There are few steps you can take to reel the group in and set them up for success:

- **Call out offenders quietly**

*If students are causing tension and discord, pull them aside. Call them out and cast a vision for them to become encouragers rather than destroyers.*

- **Have a group meeting**

*With the permission of the anxious student, it might be necessary to bring the group together and address the issues you're seeing. This meeting shouldn't be about the struggling student, but rather about the behavior of the group. Using encouraging language, try to help everyone focus on supporting one another and building community.*

- **Have students pray**

*It's hard to hold a grudge against someone when you're praying for them. If you sense the other students are feeling negatively toward the struggling student, pull them aside to pray for their teammate.*



# CONCLUSION

## Post Trip Follow-Up

You made it! The trip is over, you've caught up on sleep (in your own bed), and returned to a regular eating schedule.

But the trip isn't really over. The issues that arise on a mission trip tend to carry over into the rest of life—and that's a good thing! When anxiety bubbles up on a trip, we learn something about everyone involved. We learn how they react to stressful situations, things they believe, and how they treat others. These are the things we want to carry back home and continue to recognize.

### DEBRIEF WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Anticipate the possibility that several people and groups might need post-trip follow-up. This includes your teen(s) in crisis, their parents, your adult leaders, your other teen participants and their parents, and your supervisors.

In all conversations, make sure to:

- ▶ Listen attentively to concerns
- ▶ Respect thoughts and feelings
- ▶ Affirm your commitment to the safety and support of all participants

Here are some debriefing guides for various groups:

#### Debriefing Yourself

- *What was I feeling in the situation? What about now?*
- *How did I handle the crisis?*
- *What did I do really well?*
- *Was I seeking to simply control or to help the group to grow?*
- *What can I be thankful for about what happened?*
- *What would I handle differently next time?*
- *Recognize God's grace, love and compassion toward you and others. Don't beat yourself up for mistakes made.*

#### Debriefing with Your Adult Leaders

- *From your perspective, what happened?*
- *Upon reflection, how are you feeling about what happened?*
- *Who were you proud of during the crisis?*
- *What did we do right as a leadership team?*



- *What could we have done better as a leadership team?*
- *Are there any measures we should consider for the next trip to prevent a crisis like this again?*
- *Pray together*

**Debriefing with the Teens** (assuming the crisis spread beyond the individual teen experiencing the anxiety)

- *What was a highlight for you from the trip?*
- *What was a lowlight for you from the trip?*
- *What did you learn because of the situation we experienced?*
- *Who were you proud of during the trip?*
- *As a group, how well did we show love?*
- *Is there anyone you need to apologize to for your actions or attitude?*
- *Are there any measures we should consider for the next trip to prevent a crisis like this again?*
- *Pray together*

**Debriefing Parents**

- *What have you heard about the trip and what are your concerns?*
- *Explain the situation factually and unemotionally*
- *Explain the measures you and your staff took to handle the situation*
- *Take responsibility for mistakes you or your staff made (without assigning blame)*
- *Affirm your care for their teens and your commitment to their safety and growth*

**CONTINUING THE GRACE-BASED APPROACH AT HOME WITH THE ANXIOUS TEEN**

Despite your best intentions, the teens that need the most help are often the teens who are the hardest to connect with because they are guarded, slow to trust and focused on survival. They need to be trained to focus on new skills and goals.

You can foster a positive, trusting relationship with anxious students through supportive, empathic discussions of their current worries and concerns. Listen. Listen. Listen. As the relationship develops, you will earn the right to speak truth into their pain.

Consider setting up some long-term mentoring that might help the teen grow and overcome. Mentoring relationships are great vehicles to support struggling students. Mentors can:

1. Help them find ways to choose to manage their anxiety
2. Help them renew their minds to the truth of scripture

**Help Them Find Their Choice**

Teens who struggle with anxiety—and other mental health related issues—often feel helpless. They feel entirely enslaved by their strong emotions. It can be tempting to go to the extremes of either 1) absolute permissiveness or 2) cold condemnation. On the permissive end, we write off all of their negative behavior as beyond their control and make concessions to help them feel comfortable. On the condemning end, we offer no flexibility, assuming they are able to simply stop at will.



A better way to approach the teen is to help them find the points where they do have choices.

For example, they may be able to:

- Choose to avoid triggering activities
- Speak up when they are feeling anxious before they cause harm to themselves or others
- Use healthy self-soothing techniques (e.g., slow breathing) to reduce anxiety
- Choose to be kind to others even though they don't feel OK
- Choose to seek counseling or medication

As you work with your teen after the trip, help them see where they had choices on the trip. Use it as an opportunity to teach them to self-manage in these stressful environments. This will help them as they grow into adults, who face stressful circumstances regularly.

### **Help Them Renew Their Minds**

As mentioned above, helping our teens manage their anxiety is only part of the equation. Over time, they may become very good at making external changes and modifying behavior. The bigger challenge is to help them toward a changed set of beliefs. As teens begin to deeply believe the truth of God's amazing love for them and his ability to care for them, they will begin to realize freedom.

To help teens develop these beliefs, you could:

- Study scripture with them related to their identity in Christ, God's love for them and his ability to care for them.
- Help them develop habits to remind themselves daily of their position in Christ.
- Continually remind them that their anxiety doesn't define them and it doesn't make them defective. They are perfect in Christ (Hebrews 10:14).
- Help them develop an attitude of thankfulness in every circumstance.
- Help them develop the habit of continual prayer, being in communion with God about all of their circumstances, easy or hard.

As you do this, try to avoid over simplifying things by focusing on scripture that condemns anxiety, such as Philippians 4:6. The teen knows their anxiety isn't good, they don't need that reminder. Rather, they need to be built up in truth that will help to decrease their anxiety.

### **Rest**

Before we look at the amazing list of resources in the following appendix, pause for a moment to let all of this sink in. Your willingness to learn about anxiety demonstrates your commitment to helping students live their best lives, rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. We hope this guidebook continues to be a helpful reference and resource as you serve the people in your ministry.



# IDENTIFYING CHART

## Anxiety and Panic Attacks

As you start to take the next steps in this conversation, we wanted to provide you a helpful resource to identify the differences between anxiety and panic attacks in your students.

	SYMPTOMS	ANXIETY	PANIC ATTACK
<b>Emotional</b>	Apprehension and worry	✓	
	Distress	✓	
	Restlessness	✓	
	Fear	✓	✓
	Feeling they might die		✓
	Feeling of being disconnected from oneself or surroundings		✓
<b>Physical</b>	Modified heart rate	✓	✓
	Chest pain	✓	✓
	Shortness of breath	✓	✓
	Difficulty breathing	✓	✓
	Dry mouth	✓	✓
	Sweating	✓	✓
	Difficulty maintaining body temperature	✓	✓
	Shaking	✓	✓
	Numbness or tingling	✓	✓
	Upset Stomach	✓	✓
	Headache	✓	✓
	Feeling like they might pass out	✓	✓





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