

RESPONDING TO A STUDENT'S ANXIETY

DURING A TRIP OR EVENT



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 an unfounded sense of fear or worry. This could happen because of a chemical misfire in the brain or because of deeply rooted thoughts and false beliefs.

SIGNS Unhealthy anxiety can show up in excessive physical complaints without an identified cause, such as:

- Numbness and tingling
- Dizziness
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Neck tension
- An upset or nervous stomach
- Pulsing in the ear(s)
- An inability to sleep or rest
- Difficulty concentrating
- Burning skin
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Electric shock feeling
- Shooting pains in the face
- Heart palpitations
- Weakness in legs
- Jittery body movements (e.g., shaking knee)
- Following a leader around, not engaging with their peers
- Disappearing for long periods of time

RESPONDING TO ANXIETY

Healthy anxiety shows up anytime we do something that is unfamiliar or new. For example, a trip that includes 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 offer real-world experiences to teenagers is to create a healthy level of 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 the youth feeling anxious and sometimes, the whole team, which is why it should be addressed.

PRAY When helping a student who is experiencing anxiety, the first step is always to take a minute to pray. The Holy Spirit already knows what the student is going through and the best way to proceed.

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), help them regain composure before you can have a meaningful conversation with them. You can start with breathing exercises – guiding them in taking slow breaths in and out. At first, this will be hard for a student in crisis, and it may be helpful for you to breathe with them. We recommend you breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds and hold for 2 seconds.

[Click here](#) for a chart that shows how to identify a panic attack vs. general anxiety.

A grounding exercise may also be helpful. 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 while bringing 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?

Everyone experiences anxiety differently, so it is important to take time to let the student tell you what they need.

Pro-Tip: When your teen identifies triggers, keep notes. It will help you plan ahead to avoid unnecessary triggering moments. And it will help you to not overreact when triggers are engaged.

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 event or trip early. As you plan, think through these 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?

FOLLOW UP WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS Even if you connected with the appropriate parent or guardian during the situation, follow up with them afterwards.

- Ask: What have you heard about the event and what are your concerns?
- Explain the situation factually and unemotionally.
- Explain the measures you and your staff took to handle the situation.
- If applicable, take responsibility for mistakes you or your staff made (without assigning blame).
- Affirm your care for their child and your commitment to their safety and growth.
- Pray together.

This resource was adapted from a guidebook created in partnership with TreeHouse. TreeHouse is on a mission to unleash hope in teens everywhere. Learn more at treehousehope.org.