



# Suwannee's HEART

## Helping Everyone Achieve Resilience and Thrive

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges that occur in children and youth. Anxiety is rampant in the world we live in – both in children and adults. Approximately 8.3 % of children and youth will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in their lifetime. It's important to note that this number represents children **diagnosed** with anxiety. Without doubt, there are many who struggle with anxiety but do not have a formal diagnosis. But what does anxiety look like? And how can we help the young people in our lives who wrestle with it? Let's talk about it.

Anxiety looks different in every person. Just like any physical illness, anxiety is not a "one size fits all" experience. In some people, anxiety manifests as withdrawing and becoming quiet and still. In another person, it is expressed as irritability and restlessness. Anxiety can also show up as frequent stomachaches, headaches, or fatigue. Understanding that anxiety appears in various ways is essential when it comes to supporting your young person.

All children experience fears and worries that are typical in childhood. For example, the anxiety young children feel when separated from their parent(s), even if they are in a familiar, safe place and cared for. It is when children do not outgrow the normal fears and worries that occur in childhood, or when there are so many that they interfere with home, school, play, or social activities that evaluation for an anxiety disorder is appropriate. An anxiety disorder is different than everyday anxiety because it is more persistent, more severe, and interferes with a person's ability to participate in daily life activities. The best place to start if you are concerned about your child is to schedule an appointment with their primary health care provider or a mental health professional for an evaluation.

Below are some signs that your child may be struggling with anxiety:

- Feeling extreme fear when away from parents or home
- Experiencing sudden, unexpected, intense fear accompanied by feeling dizzy, weak, or shaky, a pounding heart or trouble breathing
- Being very worried about bad things happening and the future
- Intense fear or avoidance of school and other places where there are people
- Having an intense fear about a specific thing or situations, such as going to the doctor or fire alarms
- Frequent episodes of crying or angry outbursts
- Excessive sleeping or self isolation
- Exaggerated startle response

The symptoms listed are not intended to describe all the ways that anxiety appears and are just a few of the signs that may signal its presence. It is important to remember that the frequency, intensity, and duration of these signs are key in determining if your child needs to be evaluated for an anxiety disorder. If signs and symptoms occur daily or most days, have been happening for an extended period of time, and get in the way of school performance, relationships, or being able to participate in and enjoy usual activities, then the chances of your child struggling with anxiety is very possible.

Early intervention is essential in preventing symptoms of anxiety from becoming worse. It also reduces the risk or secondary effects of chronic anxiety, such as poor academic progress or the ability to form relationships with peers. There are many options for treatment of anxiety. Counseling from a mental health provider, consultation with your health care provider about medication, and learning to manage symptoms with diet, physical activity, and techniques like mindfulness or breathing exercises are just a few. The first step is to see your child's health care provider or a mental health professional for an evaluation. Referral for mental health services is available through your child's school. Contact the school guidance counselor for information about this process. You can also contact me for help with a referral. Living with anxiety can be challenging, but treatment and management are accessible and effective.

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