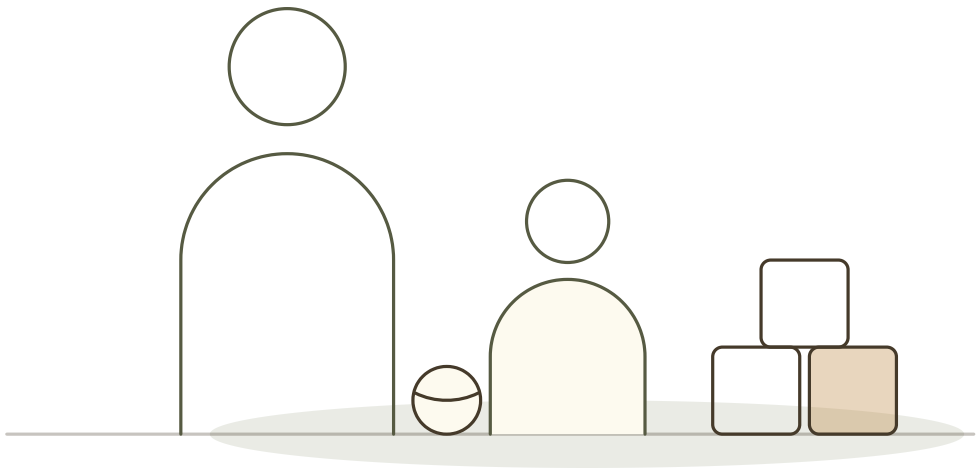
PSIRA
INSTITUT DE PSICOLOGIA
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Anxiety in teenagers: a guide for families

How to recognise the signs, what helps at home and when to seek professional support.

For parents and families with children aged 12 to 18. · 6 min read

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Adolescence brings all kinds of changes: to the body, to school, to friendships, to how young people see themselves. Feeling nervous, worried or afraid at times is part of this stage, and up to a point it's useful: it helps them prepare for an exam or be careful in a new situation.

Sometimes, though, anxiety grows, lasts for weeks and starts to take up too much room: going to school, sleeping or seeing friends becomes hard. This guide aims to help you spot the signs, support your son or daughter at home and know when it's worth seeing a professional. It isn't a diagnostic tool: every teenager is different, and only a professional assessment can say what's going on.

Signs that may point to anxiety

Anxiety doesn't always look like fear. In teenagers it often shows up as physical discomfort, irritability or avoidance. None of these signs on its own means there's a problem; what matters is whether several appear together, whether they last for weeks and whether they get in the way of daily life.

- Frequent stomach aches, headaches, nausea or dizziness, especially before school or an activity, with no clear medical cause.
- Trouble falling asleep, waking often or having nightmares.
- Constant worry about grades, about what others will think or that something bad will happen.
- Avoiding things they used to do: school, sport, parties, speaking in public, going out.
- Irritability, getting angry over small things or crying easily.
- A need to have everything under control, or asking for reassurance again and again.
- Difficulty concentrating, or going blank in exams despite having studied.
- Sudden episodes of a racing heart, shortness of breath or feeling out of control.
- Spending hours shut away in their room or on screens as a way of escaping what worries them.

Some of these signs can also have other causes, physical or emotional. So if they concern you, the first step is to talk to your paediatrician or GP and to a psychologist.

What helps at home, and what doesn't

Families can't make anxiety disappear, but they can make it weigh less. It often helps to:

- Listen before offering solutions, and acknowledge how they feel: 'I understand this scares you.'
- Keep predictable routines for sleep, meals and physical activity.
- Encourage them to face what frightens them gradually, in small, manageable steps, rather than avoiding it altogether.
- Value effort more than results.
- Cut down on screens at night and agree the limits with them.
- Look after yourself too: teenagers pick up on adults' stress and learn from how we handle it.

On the other hand, even with the best intentions, these rarely help:

- Playing it down: 'it's not a big deal' or 'that's nonsense'.
- Always sorting out difficult situations for them or letting them avoid every one: it brings short-term relief, but in the long run anxiety tends to grow.
- Pushing them to 'get over it' all at once, or comparing them with siblings and friends.
- Firing questions at them in the middle of a crisis: they need to calm down first.
- Discussing their problems in front of other people without their permission.

If a moment of intense distress comes, the most helpful thing is usually to stay beside them and keep calm. Say little, in short sentences, breathe slowly so they can follow you and remind them that the feeling, however unpleasant, will pass. Once they've calmed down, there will be time to talk about what happened and what helped.

How to talk about it

Many important conversations with teenagers don't happen face to face across a table, but in the car, while cooking or walking the dog. Choose a calm moment, with no rush and nobody else around, and don't expect them to tell you everything on the first day. Open questions, the kind that can't be answered with a 'yes' or 'no', tend to work better:

- ? You've seemed more tired lately. How are you feeling?
- ? What's worrying you most at the moment?
- ? When this happens, what do you notice in your body? And what goes through your mind?
- ? Is there a time of day that feels especially hard?
- ? What helps a little when you're feeling like this?

? What could I do that would be useful, and what would you rather I didn't do?

? Is there anyone you'd feel comfortable talking to about it, apart from us?

? If a friend of yours were going through this, what would you say to them?

If you get silence or a 'nothing', don't take it as a failure. Make it clear you're there and that you can talk again whenever they want.

Steps to support them

1 **Observe and take notes**
For a week or two, note what happens, when and how they react. It will help you see whether there's a pattern and will be useful if you later see a professional.

2 **Talk to them without judging**
Tell them what you've noticed, with specific examples and without labels, and ask how they experience it.

3 **Rule out physical causes**
If there are a lot of physical symptoms, mention them to your paediatrician or GP.

4 **Talk to the school**
Their form tutor can tell you how they're doing in class and help make small adjustments. Where possible, do this together with your son or daughter.

5 **Seek professional help if things don't improve**
If after a few weeks anxiety is still affecting their daily life, see a psychologist. There's no need to wait for things to get worse.

When to seek professional help

It's worth seeing a psychologist when, for example:

- The distress lasts for weeks and doesn't improve with support at home.
- They start missing school or drop activities and friendships they used to enjoy.
- Anxiety is clearly affecting their sleep, eating or performance.
- They have panic attacks or intense fear they can't manage.
- They tell you themselves that they need help, or you feel the situation is too much for you.

Asking for help doesn't mean the family has done anything wrong. A professional can help your teenager understand what's happening and find tools to cope, and can also guide you as parents.

If it's urgent

If your son or daughter talks about hurting themselves or not wanting to live, if they self-harm or if you think they're in danger, don't wait: call 112. In Spain you can also call 024, the suicide prevention helpline, free and available 24 hours a day.

Teenagers at Institut PSIRA

The centre's Child and Adolescent Unit supports parents and children from birth to 18. With teenagers we work in a space of their own, confidentially, and involve the family when needed.

- From the age of 16, teenagers can use our services on their own, with confidentiality and professional support.
- We can coordinate with their school so that everyone is pulling in the same direction.
- As well as individual sessions, there are group sessions for children and teenagers.
- Sessions last 55 minutes.

The unit's services and prices are on the specialities page of the website.

If you're worried about how your son or daughter is doing, you can book a first visit with the Child and Adolescent Unit through Doctoralia, on WhatsApp at +34 621 404 235 or by email at info@institutpsira.com. We'll listen, assess the situation with you and guide you on the next steps.

Would you like to talk it through with someone from the team?

Book on Doctoralia or message us on WhatsApp and we'll point you in the right direction. WhatsApp +34 621 404 235 · info@institutpsira.com · c/ Marquès de Caldes de Montbui, 123 · 17003 Girona

This guide is for general information and is no substitute for an assessment by a professional. In an emergency, call 112; if you are thinking about suicide, call 024.