



Middle School Guidance Officer

10 Surprising Ways to Help an Anxious Child Calm Down

1. Stimulate the Vagus Nerve

Stimulating the vagus nerve (located on both sides of the voice box) can interrupt fight or flight mode and send a signal to the brain that they are not under attack".

Ways to stimulate the vagus nerve include:

- Chewing gum.
- Singing.
- Gargling with regular water.
- Breathing slowly– with roughly equal amounts of time breathing in and out.
- Eating a piece of dark chocolate (which is also a parasympathetic regulator).



2. Breathe

When teens are anxious, they tend to take rapid, shallow breaths that come directly from the chest. Taking slower, deeper breaths (from the abdomen or diaphragm) can relax them.

Try:

- Imagine that with each breath your body becomes filled slowly with a soothing color, aroma, sound, light, or warmth.
- Breathe in for three, hold for three, out for three.
- Breathe "in through the nose, out through the mouth".

3. Cross the Midline

Crossing the midline, or moving one's hands, feet, and eyes across and to the other side of the body can help reset the brain. Research suggests that when you move your arms or legs across the center of your body, the brain hemispheres are activated and work together so you can think with both logic and emotion.

Try:

- Cross marches, teen marches in place while touching their opposite knee (right arm touch left knee).
- Wipe the table with one hand.
- Walk-in figure eight.

4. Heavy Work

Heavy work activities (any activities that push or pull against the body) provide input to a teen's muscles and joints, increase focus and attention, and center a child. Doing wall pushups, carrying a backpack, pushing a vacuum, carrying a pile of books, can help calm and regulate their emotions.

5. Name It

Dr. Daniel Siegel suggests that when teens are in fight or flight mode, their emotions are raging and they have "lost touch with their upstairs brain." He recommends helping teens "name it to



tame it" by assisting them in telling the story about what's upsetting them." By talking, teens will use their left brain to make sense of their experience and feel more in control.

6. Narrow Focus

Parents can help teens "look at one thing, hear one thing, or think about one thing" because research suggests that relaxation can be achieved by narrowing attention. Use guided imagery or visualisation by asking kids (when they are not anxious) to think of a "happy place" or "happy symbol."

- "Imagine a place where you feel totally comfortable and happy, somewhere you have seen, or completely made up.
- What do you see there? What do you hear? What do you smell?
- How does your body feel?"

When teens are anxious, have them imagine their happy place.

7. Make a Plan

Making a plan (MAP) or My Anxiety Plan (MAP) can help your child learn how to tolerate rather than eliminate anxiety. One child worried about thunderstorms when her mother was out of town for work. The girl made a plan to text her mom and to string a necklace out of plastic beads with her babysitter whenever she heard thunder. (She called these her "thunder beads" and eventually looked forward to making them).

8. Use Humor

Research suggests that exposure to humor can significantly reduce anxiety. Humor can distract, relax muscles, reframe, heal, and release endorphins that combat stress. Try playing a goofy game with your teen, watching slapstick cartoon together, reading a funny book together, or telling jokes like:

- What has four wheels and flies? *A garbage truck!*
- Why did the math book look so sad? *Because it had so many problems!*

9. Use a Ritual – Before/After/During

Research suggests that rituals act as "stability anchors" that help teens relieve stress. Consider providing a consistent ritual or choice before, during, or after an anxiety-provoking situation. One parent kept a stash of Superman comic books for her child to read at the doctor's office. Another took his child for a slushy after every tough appointment.

10. Reflect

If kids are anxious yet make it through an activity anyway, helping them reflect can build resilience and strength for the next time.

Ask:

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard was it?
- Was it harder or easier than another tough activity?
- What one thing helped you get through it okay?
- What one thing did you end up enjoying about the activity?

Read the full article by Erin Leyba at *Psychology Today*.