

Let's Talk: Teen Mental Health

By Danielle Nolan, MSW, RSW. August 2022.

The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) defines mental health as “emotions, cognition, and behaviours that vary in response to stress and resilience” ([SickKids, 2021](#)). Mental health includes our feelings, thoughts, and external behaviours. Concern for teen mental health has been growing since before the COVID-19 pandemic started. In a 2013 study, researchers found that more than 50% of autistic teens met the criteria for a co-occurring mental health condition ([Matson & Williams, 2013](#)).



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the most common type of mental health concern in autistic teens ([Van Steensel & Heeman, 2017](#)). SickKids describes anxiety as a feeling of fear, worry, nervousness, or unease. It is the body's alarm system to warn us of potential dangers ([SickKids, 2022](#)) – and it's normal!

Normal anxiety can be considered “good stress” because it helps promote development and personal improvement. What separates normal anxiety from concerning anxiety is when children/youth are overwhelmed by their worries and fears and it impacts their ability to go about their day and enjoy life.

Everyone experiences anxiety at some point. Usually, it's related to a stressful situation. As adults this can be job interviews, dentist appointments, and during times of uncertainty. For children and youth, there are common situations that trigger anxiety like tests, sports games, and unfamiliar social situations.



What can you do about it?

As parents and caregivers, your role is to provide support, encouragement, and your presence.

Here are some strategies that can help:

Shared Prioritization	Collaboration	Empathy	Active Listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have the same information and goals as your teen.• Find out what is important to them and what motivates them.• Work to understand each others' priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify your concerns.• Work with your teen to problem-solve strategies and solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Express genuine concern for your teen's experiences, reassuring them that you understand their concerns.• Calm your own emotions to connect with theirs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stay open and calm.• Avoid interrupting.• Rephrase their statements to make sure they know you are listening without judgment.

Mental Health Tools

Once you have your supportive strategies in place, you can begin to explore specific tools and techniques for supporting your teen's mental health. Here are a few ideas:

Cognitive Behavioural Strategies

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) treats anxiety symptoms by using behavioural strategies such as exposing the individual to their triggers in a gradual way, as well as cognitive strategies aimed at challenging thoughts and feelings (Ung, Selles, & Small, 2014).

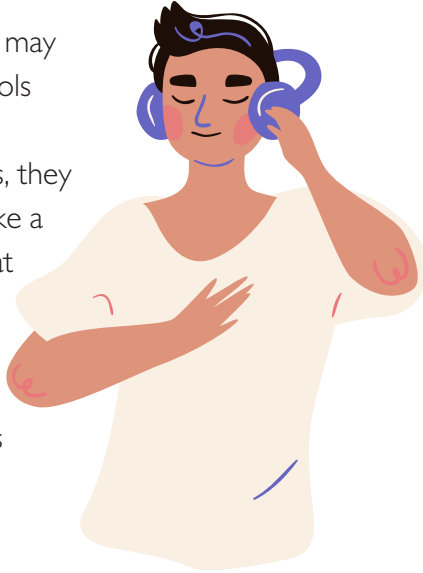
For example, if you and your teen both identify that attending a family event is important, then you could take small steps to expose yourself to the event (e.g., going to increasingly busy places, having a plan for arriving and departing, and challenging your beliefs that you "can't do it").



Sensory Strategies

Sensory strategies can sometimes help teens “stay calm and self-regulated in order to focus, attend, listen, and participate” ([Biel, 2017](#)).

For example, children may benefit from fidget tools like spinners, tangles, pop-its, etc. For teens, they can be more subtle, like a scrunchie or a pen that clicks or spins. They may also benefit from wearing noise-cancelling headphones to reduce sensory input and block out noise.



Mindfulness Strategies

Mindfulness teaches children and youth to pay attention to the moment and bring awareness to their bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and senses. For neurodiverse people, there are proven benefits of mindfulness including the ability to simply “slow down” and pay attention ([Ridderinkhof, Bruin, Blom, & Bogels, 2018](#)).

For teens, a good suggestion is the 'Five Senses' grounding activity. They are asked to take deep breaths and notice five things they can see, four things they can touch, three they can hear, two they can smell, and one they can taste. You can do an abbreviated version and focus on whichever senses are easiest for your teen to focus on.

GROUNDING ACTIVITY

Use this calming technique to help you reconnect to the present by exploring the five senses.

5

Things you
can **SEE**



4

Things you
can **TOUCH**



3

Things you
can **HEAR**



2

Things you
can **SMELL**



1

Thing you
can **TASTE**



Art Strategies

Art therapy aims to improve self-esteem and coping skills and minimize stress. It includes all types of the arts, including drama, music, dance, photography, and visual arts (Schweizer, Knorth, & Spreen, 2014).

Autistic teens can sometimes struggle to express themselves verbally, and art can be a less stressful and more motivating way for them to do so. You can access formal art therapy if that's available in your community, but it can be just as beneficial to enroll your teen in a recreational arts program.



Additional Resources

If you are looking for more information, the resource list below provides links to resources on teen mental health and the strategies and techniques discussed above.

Autism Ontario Webinars

- [Understanding Challenging Behaviour](#) with Ross Greene
- [Self-Regulation and Well-Being](#) with Stuart Shanker
- [Exploring the Senses Webinar Series](#) with Bethany Brewin
- [Promoting Mental Health in Autistic People: The Importance of Context and Support](#) with Jonathan Weiss
- [Wellness and Self-Care Session, Part 3: Autistic Youth And Teens](#) with Stephanie Moeser

Books

- [Start Here: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children and Teens Through Mental Health Challenges](#) by Pier Bryden and Peter Szatmari
- [Raising Human Beings: Creating a Collaborative Partnership with Your Child](#) by Ross Greene
- [Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child \(and You\) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life](#) by Stuart Shanker

Online Resources

- [Treating Mental Health Toolkit](#) by AIDE Canada
- [Mental Health and Sensory Challenges for Teens](#) by AIDE Canada
- [Natural Support Skills](#) by Social Impact Lab

