

Healthy Habits in the Home

Anxious children and teens prefer to have a sense of control in their lives. They do not cope well with a disorganized, "spontaneous" family style. They feel calmer when:

- life is predictable
- they know what is expected of them
- they know what the consequences will be

Two ways to help make life more predictable for everyone in the family are setting limits and creating routines.

Setting limits is a challenge for parents, especially when the anxious child or teen becomes upset, moody, or has a 'meltdown'. If limits are repeated and enforced, they help everyone feel more secure and, usually, a child or teen's behaviour will improve. It can be a relief to have adults in charge!

Routines also help to reduce anxiety. But anxiety tends to disrupt routines. You need to work hard to build family routines so life is more predictable for your child. Help your child adjust to new family routines by preparing him or her in advance. Ask your child to help plan the new routine, and introduce it gradually. Making an attractive schedule for the fridge provides a sense of control and order.

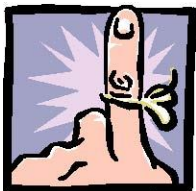
This includes bedtime routines! A bedtime routine involves doing the same things, in the same order, at the same time, just before going to bed. This ritual helps your child gradually relax and wind down. For both your child and the rest of the family, a routine that lasts about 15 to 30 minutes is best. However, stimulating activities should start to wind down about an hour before bed (e.g. turning computer games off).

Some activities you can include in a bedtime routine for younger children:

- some warm milk or a snack
- a warm bath
- let your child choose what pajamas or nightdress to wear
- read or tell a story
- tuck your young child in with a blanket, teddy bear or some other thing that makes him or her feel secure

For older children and teens, you may want to include:

- some one-on-one time to talk about the day
- listening to some soft music
- reading magazines together
- practicing some relaxation tools (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation)



Remember

a good routine can take several weeks to establish, but everyone will feel better once it is in place.

It is important you do not get into the habit of permitting your anxious child to sleep in your bed. This becomes a habit which is hard to break. For more information on how to handle this situation, see [What to do When Your Child Insists on Sleeping in Your Bed with You](#)

Plan time for homework and projects: This needs to be a regular part of the schedule, as anxious children and teens tend to procrastinate. They can easily become overwhelmed with a task. Therefore, it may be helpful to:

1. Break the task into small, manageable steps
2. Set a specific time and place to work (e.g. kitchen table)
3. Offer praise and rewards for each step completed

Often the hardest part is getting started, so knowing a TV program is on afterwards, or having computer time to look forward to may help motivate your child.

If your child is anxious about an upcoming event or project, you can adapt the [Fear Ladder Form](#) to break down the goal into manageable steps. Goals that work well with this activity are events that require preparation or a performance (e.g. a test, an oral presentation, rehearsing for a recital, a job interview etc...).

Encourage physical activity: For the anxious child or teen, exercise may help reduce stress and induce relaxation. They often feel "tired all the time" because they are always exhausting themselves with worry, and don't feel like exercising. But exercise will improve energy and reduce worry. Try to find something fun to do together rather than making this a chore. Ongoing participation in a physical activity program encourages self-discipline, leadership, as well as opportunities to socialize with peers. Get the whole family involved!

Food and Nutrition: No one copes well when they are tired or hungry. Anxious children and teens often forget to eat, don't feel hungry, or have upset stomachs. They rarely eat a large full meal. It's okay for your child to "graze" as long as the snacks cover the basic food groups in a day. Offer frequent, nutritious snacks. Instead of stocking up on chips and soda, have fresh fruits and vegetables and low-fat dairy foods available in your fridge or kitchen. As much as possible, make meal time "family time" and sit down and eat together.

Last but not least, be a good role model! One of the first steps in creating a positive and predictable environment is to take stock of your *own* daily habits and ways of coping with *your own* anxiety. Use the coping tools to manage your own anxiety and share appropriate examples with your child. After all, you are the single biggest influence on your kids!