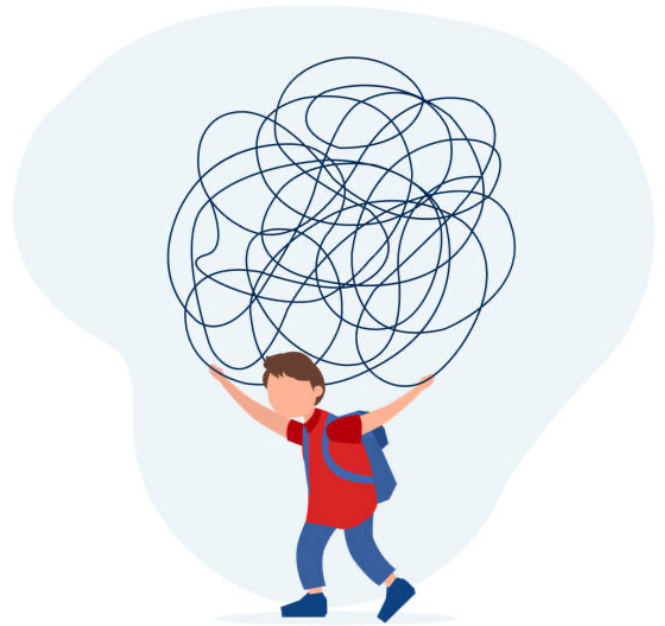


Childhood Anxiety Disorders: What They Are and How They Manifest

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, nearly 1 in 12 children and 1 in 4 adolescents suffer from an anxiety disorder. Childhood anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric conditions that affect children, and like adult anxiety disorders, they often involve an overactive – or excitatory – sympathetic nervous system. However, childhood anxiety disorders manifest themselves through a large variety of unique symptoms, and they may impact each child’s ability to function to a slightly different degree. If left untreated, many childhood anxiety disorders will persist into adulthood and affect an individual’s ability to engage in healthy relationships or maintain successful careers. Childhood anxiety disorders can be treated with a combination of exposure-response therapies - like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); lifestyle changes; and medication, if a medical professional deems it necessary.



Separation Anxiety Disorder:

According to the National Library of Medicine, Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is an exaggeration of otherwise developmentally appropriate anxiety manifested by excessive concern, worry and even dread of the anticipated separation from an attachment figure. SAD is one of the most common anxiety disorders in children, and the average onset age for the disorder – 6 years old – makes “it one of the earliest anxiety disorders to present in children.” A child who is affected by SAD may experience:

- Difficulty being away from parents or other loved ones
- Excessive worry about harm to loved ones
- Excessive worry about danger to self
- Difficulty leaving the house, even to go to school
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling physically ill when away from loved ones

Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

According to the Boston Children’s Hospital, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is “characterized by excessive and uncontrollable worry about a variety of events,” and children who suffer from GAD worry “more intensely than other children in the same circumstances.” One significant difference between the way that GAD presents itself in adults and the way that GAD presents itself in children is in the content of the worry. While adults with GAD typically worry excessively about ordinary circumstances – such as finances and job transitions - children

with GAD may become overwhelmingly anxious about performing well in school, their personal safety, or about future events and natural disasters. A child with a generally shy or timid temperament may be more susceptible to developing GAD, and children who are affected by GAD are generally more perfectionistic than adults with GAD. Children who suffer from GAD may exhibit these symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- General apprehension and timidity about performance
- Dwelling on perceived personal shortcomings
- Irritability
- Seeking frequent reassurance from parents, caregivers or teachers
- Headaches, Muscular tension, Restlessness, Heart palpitations, Frequent nausea or digestive pain

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by recurring intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions) that an individual does in response to the unwanted obsessions. These debilitating compulsions interfere with an individual's daily life because they are time consuming and cause significant emotional distress, and, according to Texas Children's Hospital, OCD affects around 1 in 200 children in the United States. OCD can manifest itself in childhood, adolescence or early adulthood, and pediatric OCD affects slightly more boys than girls. The worries that a child with OCD may struggle with may be more fantastical or unrealistic in nature than the worries of a child who does not suffer from OCD, and a child who suffers from OCD may experience 'magical thinking' – the belief that one's thoughts or actions may cause consequences that have no direct logical connection.

Some common obsessions that children with OCD may experience include:

- Fear of dirt, germs or other forms of contamination
- Fear of harming oneself or others either accidentally or intentionally
- Doubts about one's personal safety
- Preoccupation with aesthetics, organization, and appearance of things or self

Some common compulsions that children with OCD may experience include:

- Repeating, counting, touching, ordering/arranging
- Excessive hand washing, showering, grooming or other cleaning behaviors
- Frequently seeking reassurance or confessing to perceived wrongdoing
- Following rigid rules or engaging in rituals

Social Anxiety Disorder:

According to Yale Medicine, Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by "ongoing feelings of intense, persistent fear caused by the anticipation of, or participation in, social situations," and people who suffer from SAD are "intensely afraid of others watching or judging them." Individuals with SAD may present with low self-esteem, and they may be highly critical of themselves or struggle to engage in positive self-talk. Although SAD typically presents itself in early adolescence (between the ages of 8 and 15), the disorder

can affect younger children – especially those with a predisposition for extreme shyness. The problematic symptoms must persist for at least 6 months, and children who suffer from SAD will likely express distress over the presentation of those symptoms, even if the distress appears unrelated. Children with SAD may exhibit:

- Difficulty meeting other children or making friends
- Tantrums or excessive crying before an event or social situation
- Speaking in a very quiet voice and avoiding eye contact
- Stomachaches, blushing, dizziness, trembling, sweating
- Avoidance of social situations, like parties, events, going to school
- Excessive reliance on adult or caregiver, especially in social situations

Panic Disorder:

As reported by the National Institute of Mental Health, Panic Disorder is an anxiety disorder characterized by “unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear” that are “accompanied by physical symptoms” such as “chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness or abdominal distress.” Panic Disorder is more commonly diagnosed in women than in men, and the panic attacks these individuals suffer typically last between 5 and 20 minutes. Individuals who have been diagnosed with Panic Disorder may experience panic attacks in response to a specific trigger – such as a trauma-related memory or event – but they may also struggle to identify the root cause of such a sudden onset of panic symptoms. Some symptoms of Panic Disorder include:

- Pounding or racing heart
- Sweating
- Sense of impending doom or danger
- Tingly or numb hands
- Chest pain
- Intense worry about when the next panic attack will occur

Phobias:

Phobias are extreme fears of specific things, activities or situations that do not subside for at least 6 months and that cause “unreasonable” amounts of anxiety. Much like Panic Disorder, the fear that children who suffer from phobias experience is often ‘triggered’ by an event or interaction with a phobia-related object, and a child who has a phobia may avoid the object of the phobia altogether or fearfully anticipate an encounter with it. If an untreated child can endure an encounter with the phobia, it will likely come at the cost of severe interference with their daily activities and functionality. Boston Children’s Hospital estimates that up to 9.2% of children suffer from a phobia, and some examples of common childhood phobias include:

- Agoraphobia: the fear of open spaces, the outside world, or of leaving the home
- Emetophobia: the fear of vomiting
- Hemophobia: the fear of blood
- Zoophobia: the fear of animals

For more information regarding what childhood anxiety disorders are and how teachers or caregivers can mitigate the effects of an anxiety disorder on a child's life, please see [Kids' Health's Anxiety Disorders Factsheet](#).

For more information regarding Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and other therapies for childhood anxiety disorders, please see the [Child Mind Institute's "Behavioral Treatment For Kids With Anxiety"](#).

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