Recognizing and Treating Anxiety in Teens

Anxiety is a common emotion that many people experience throughout their lifetime. Feelings of worry, nervousness, fear, or apprehension in certain situations, such as during an interview or before taking a test, is considered normal or expected. But for some individuals, these feelings may become excessive and begin to interfere with typical functioning.

Common symptoms associated with anxiety disorders include an inability to control feelings of worry, fear, or nervousness. Additionally, anxious teens may experience sleep difficulties, fatigue, muscle tension, stomach aches, or irritability. Problems concentrating are common, in addition to feeling restless or on edge. These symptoms may result in decreased academic performance; avoidance of situations, people, or places that trigger the anxiety; and changes in eating habits or appetite.

Due to an increasing amount of pressure, teenagers may experience increased levels of anxiety related to navigating expectations in school, work, family, and peer relationships. Untreated anxiety disorders among children may lead to depression among teens and young adults later in life, therefore it is important for parents and caregivers to recognize when anxiety is occurring and intervene immediately. Helping teens cope with and overcome anxiety can seem like a daunting task for many parents, but there are certain things parents can do to help.

Knowing that anxiety is a treatable condition is essential to helping children and adolescents learn new ways of thinking, reacting, and adapting, in order to reduce anxious symptoms. Recognizing anxiety when it is occurring is an important first step in helping teens. Parents who observe these symptoms in adolescents should seek consultation from a trained mental health professional, in order to determine the best course of treatment.

Parents also can support positive habits among adolescents in the home, such as following an appropriate sleep routine, maintaining good nutrition, and helping teens find a balance between academic obligations and enjoyable activities. Parents should work to maintain a positive relationship with teenagers, a task that often is difficult due to the budding independence that frequently accompanies adolescence. Thoughtful compliments and asking open-ended questions show genuine interest on the part of a parent and can help maintain a strong connection with even the most challenging of teenagers. Parents also should offer ongoing reminders that they are available to support teens whenever needed. From making difficult decisions related to college or careers to navigating everyday social pressures, parents play a vital role in helping teens cope with anxiety and build greater resiliency for the future.