

# Dealing with Anxiety

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*Most kids experience anxiety to some degree, usually in anticipation of something they dread, like a test. That's normal for kids and adults alike.*

When anxiety can become a real problem is when it lasts a long time or gets in the way of social life, academics or daily functioning. Some studies have shown that as many as one third of children meet the clinical criteria for an anxiety disorder. Even so, anxiety disorders can be hard to detect.

Why? For one thing, kids sometimes just mention the physical symptoms: stomach aches, headaches or tension. In these cases, timing is key: Does the headache reliably happen in the morning just before school? If so, it may be a symptom of anxiety.

Plus, out of embarrassment or a desire not to rock the boat, kids and parents sometimes minimize the problem. Maybe it feels like something that will go away on its own, or like it's not that big a deal. The fact is that, over time, anxiety disorders can do real harm.

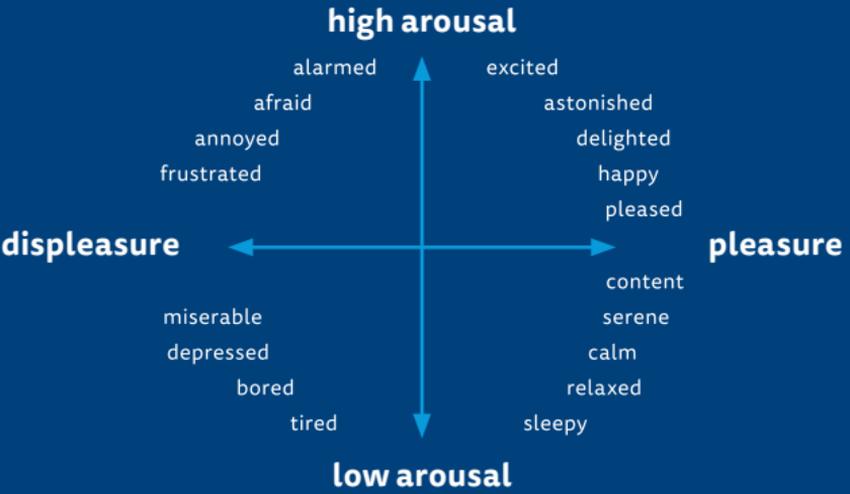
The good news: with treatment, kids and teens with persistent anxiety can increase their coping skills and learn strategies for success at school, at home and in all their pursuits.



## The two sides of therapy

Psychotherapy is the first course of treatment for anxiety, but what does it actually do? Well, generally anxiety disorders are rooted in some perceived threat — harm, peer rejection, separation, panic, imperfection or some combination of fears. Therapy dissipates these fears with two basic “active ingredients”: cognitive restructuring and exposure.

Cognitive restructuring helps kids see their fears in a different light. For if a young athlete has pre-game jitters, a therapist might help them see that as excitement, rather than anxiety. Basically, it’s about interpreting “emotional valence.”



Exposure is just what it sounds like: confronting the fear — although it’s not quite that simple. Done wrong, exposure can make the anxiety worse. Therapists do it gradually, in a controlled setting that helps kids adjust at their own pace.

To learn more about anxiety and how the Pediatric Mental Health Institute can help your child, visit [childrenscolorado.org/mentalhealth](http://childrenscolorado.org/mentalhealth) or call 720-777-6200.

