



Tackling the Anxiety Crisis for Kids

Yoga therapy improves teens' mental health, restores their rhythms, and decreases the loneliness of social isolation.



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Tackling the Anxiety Crisis for Kids Teens

Recently, one of my 19-year-old clients was lamenting during therapy, “I have just two weeks ‘til the end of the semester. But I’m so stressed about that 58% I have in Spanish.” This sentiment is coming from a kid who’s been in advanced placement classes since grade school. She graduated high school with top honors. As a result, she has a full-ride scholarship, which means she needs to maintain her GPA. But after a year of ‘zoomaversity’ (her nickname for completing her freshmen year online and out-of-state), she’s had to fast track her way to independence. Along with managing her studies, she’s learning how to navigate dorm life with a less than courteous roommate, how to cook, clean, budget and make new friends. All this is complicated by her new diagnosis of ADHD, along with her not-so-new diagnoses of depression and anxiety, which have been spiking. She knows she needs to a strategy to pull her Spanish grade up in two weeks. But first, she needed space to talk, and she needed me to listen.

This college kid client is not alone in her battle with mental health challenges. Globally, youth are suffering from a severe mental health crisis. In October 2021, UNICEF reported an estimated 13 percent of 10- to 19-year-olds have a mental health disorder. UNICEF has called for governments and societies around the world to act. In the U.S. alone, a national emergency was declared by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association. A third of US teens aged 13–18 years are experiencing an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institutes of Health.¹

Whether you’re a teacher, parent or mental health care worker, you can heed the call to reduce children and adolescents’ mental health burden and improve their well-being. Dr. Claire McCarthy, a Boston Children’s Hospital pediatrician, suggests several actions we as adults can take to support kids and teens.²

- 1) Be aware of [signs of anxiety \(read more\)](#)
- 2) Talk with kids about stressors
- 3) Be aware of expectations placed on kids

Dr. McCarthy’s tips seem so straightforward. But following them is not easy for parents. When parents hear about their kids’ struggles, most have one response: They want to fix their kid’s problem as fast as possible. But research³ shows that problem solving is a crucial skill for kids to learn for themselves.

We need to allow kids to get stuck, and then unstuck. In addition, we need to remain calm and attentive as we allow kids to sort out their problems. Not so easy. But we can learn.

Dr. Bruce Perry, child psychiatrist and neuroscientist, has spent his career researching and working with children's mental health issues through the lens of neuroscience has developed a model that can help adults better support children and teens when they struggle. His model is called the Sequence of Engagement. ⁴

Dr. Perry's model suggests we practice the following when talking to kids about their problems: *Regulate - Relate - Reason*. ⁴ In other words, if we want to engage a child's mind, we first need to relate with them. And in order to relate with them well, we need to regulate ourselves (i.e., feel calm). For example, one of my regular routines is walking my dog because it helps me feel calm and centered—regulated, in neuroscience parlance.

Back to my 19-year-old college student client: I simply let her talk. It was clear she was stressed. In order to relate with her situation, I needed to hear it all the way through. I knew she was going to figure this out. By intently listening, I gave her the space to hear herself think out loud, as well as show her that she and her struggles matter.

When she wanted to jump into problem solving mode, I asked her to stop for a moment. "Would you do me a favor?" She stopped mid-sentence. "Could we take a few deep breaths together?" We did. With just three, deep, even breaths she looked calmer and resumed talking more slowly and confidently. She came up with a plan to download a planner template from a phone app. She prioritized what assignments to tackle first. She said she could now see the light at the end of the tunnel. We pumped fists together and made 'rah-rah' sounds.

Then I offered, "Hey, you know what else you could do if you feel stressed again? You could do some sun salutations."

This client first came to me as a yoga therapy client, so she knows yoga—especially sun salutations—well. Reminding her of this practice was a way of reminding her of her own power. Through yoga asana practice and meditation, she's told me she has learned to trust herself.

It's no surprise that I thought to remind her of yoga after we'd done deep breathing together. I use yoga regularly in my practice because of its proven positive benefits. The breathing practice we shared not only helped to regulate my client, but me as well. This is called *co-regulation*, which on a physiological level, describes how the therapist's autonomic nervous system interacts with the patient's autonomic nervous system in a sensitive, attuned manner that facilitates greater emotional balance for the patient. The therapist 'co-regulates' by staying present with the child, empathizing, accepting them as they are and validating their feelings.

Dr. Perry's *Regulate - Relate – Reason* model⁴ demonstrates that when adults, caregivers and therapists regulate themselves (a part of the co-regulation process), they create a safer space for the kids they support. As a therapist, I became more resourced after breathing with my client. This in turn helped me suggest yoga, an empowering practice for her.

Yoga is gaining traction as an important therapy intervention. Dr. McCarthy says, “as with any mental health disorder, anything that supports general wellbeing is an important part of anxiety treatment ... (including) yoga.” The beauty of yoga is that it allows us to co-regulate with a child or teen who may be struggling. It settles the nervous system and allows us both to think more clearly.

If we want to help our kids with their mental health challenges, we as adults need to empower them to problem solve—which means give them permission to struggle. Adding yoga to the mix can help us both remain calm, present and connected as this process unfolds. So consider adding yoga to your therapeutic practice – it can help both you, and your clients, self-regulate and gain a centeredness and clarity that can result in new and better solutions.

Citations

1. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml#part_155096. Anxiety disorder, and in fact all mental health concerns, cut across gender, racial and socio-economic lines.
Pew Research Center, 2019; <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx>.
2. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx>.
3. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/142/3/e20182058/38649/The-Power-of-Play-A-Pediatric-Role-in-Enhancing>.
4. <https://www.neurosequential.com/ourteam>.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNuxy7FxEVk>.

Resources

Splitting Open the ‘Problem’ of Anxiety in Our Children

Guest Author: Clinton Nunnally, LPC | Founder of [Foundations Family Counseling](#)

Anxiety is a normal emotional and physiological experience for all humans. How we deal with anxiety in ourselves is also how we tend to deal with it when we see it in children. So, how can we deal with children’s anxiety more effectively? Read more:

<https://www.embodiedyouthyoga.com/post/splitting-open-the-problem-of-anxiety-in-our-children>

Watch Michelle Fury’s Presentation from the Global Yoga Therapy Day Conference

On August 14, 2021, Michelle gave a keynote presentation at the Global Yoga Therapy Day Conference. In this video, you’ll learn how to spot anxiety and depression in your kid clients, as well as how to use yoga tools to help kids regulate their moods and behavior.

<https://vimeo.com/589184255>

Subscribe to the Embodied Youth Yoga Therapy Video Series for \$17.99/Month

This series of instructional yoga video and audio series gives therapists access to audio meditations that allow you to tap into calm energy anytime, anywhere. Learn yoga-based tools that you can utilize with your clients.

<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/embodiedyouth>

Buy the Book: *Using Yoga Therapy to Promote Mental health in Children and Adolescents*, by Michelle Fury

Michelle’s book outlines a framework of clinical yoga therapy practice for mental health problems that addresses the whole child, rather than solely their symptoms. This is a go-to book for any therapist or clinic interested in adding yoga-based therapy to their toolbox.

[Buy on Amazon.com](#)