

"It's really common for high schoolers to feel that way. What's one thing about the future that stresses you out?"

"On a scale of 0-10, how much stress are you feeling right now? Tell me more about why you chose that number."

"How can I help the next time you feel this way?"

"Are there people you follow on social media or content you consume that makes you feel more anxious?"

"When your thoughts or your heart start racing, maybe try breathing really deep and really slowly. Count to 10 slowly, breathing in and out. How do you feel after that?"

"Do your muscles feel tense? One thing you could try is to tighten your muscles and slowly let them relax to tell your body it's safe."

"I know what it's like to be stressed out for no reason. Has that ever happened to you?"

"That's a really good question. I'm not sure about the answer, but maybe we can figure it out together."

"When you start to feel that stress or anxiety creep up, maybe ask yourself this question: Where did you see God today?"

"What's one thought you keep having over and over again? What helps you re-center when those thoughts start to spiral?"

A Volunteer's Guide to . . .

Talking About Anxiety



with High Schoolers



How to Talk About Anxiety

Anxiety among teenagers is at an all-time high.

→ While 1 in 3 teenagers struggle with an anxiety disorder¹, nearly all teenagers experience some form of anxiety, stress, or anxious thoughts in their daily lives. And when a teenager is experiencing anxiety or stress, those feelings can shape how a teenager sees God, themselves, and everybody else. As a leader, your job isn't to cure anxiety or diagnose *anything*, but you can be a safe place for teenagers to sort out big emotions and ask for help when needed.

High schoolers have more responsibility than ever, more freedom than ever, and are making more decisions for their future than ever. That's why it's important to remind them that they're not alone and it's normal to be anxious about the future. At the same time, they can experience hope and peace through learning how to cope with their anxiety and through remembering that God is with them and has good plans for their lives.

In this Phase . . . As a volunteer, your role is to **mobilize their potential** by helping them develop the skills of recognizing and dealing with anxiety, and guide them towards the tools and resources they need.

High schoolers are motivated by freedom. But, this big influx of freedom comes with an increased sense of pressure as they make decisions that will impact their future. Remind them that Jesus says they are enough.

In Your Conversations . . .

BEFORE

Understand the causes. Think through some of the reasons students may be experiencing anxiety such as academic pressure, family dynamics, excessive social media use, and lack of sleep. Understanding the potential causes of anxiety can help you equip high schoolers to identify the source of theirs.

Honor the parent. Remember, you do not know the mental health history of the teenagers you serve or their parents. Be mindful to speak in a way that's honoring, and know that joking around about mental health may cause unintended pain for students.

DURING

Validate their feelings. You may be tempted to tell them their anxiety or situation isn't that bad in hopes that if you downplay it, they can dismiss it. The reality is, the best thing we can do as leaders is to help a student feel fully seen, accepted, and safe.

Help them recognize feelings of stress. Help them identify the physical symptoms of stress like stomach issues, muscle tightness, and lack of sleep, so they can be more aware of when they're experiencing anxiety.

Use a feelings wheel. Help teenagers name the emotions they're experiencing and find more language for expressing and processing emotions.

Encourage prayer, meditation, Scripture reading, and worship. These can all be helpful tools for someone experiencing anxiety but remember they aren't substitutes for seeking medical care when needed.

Help them slow down. High schoolers are wired for action and can take unwise action quickly. Coach them to pause before making decisions and not to make big decisions when anxious.

Ask clarifying questions. Teenagers may be inclined to make jokes about their extreme feelings or use mental health terms flippantly. Be aware of their conversations around anxiety, and aim to ask clarifying questions one-on-one after group.

Give them tools. The emotional center of the brain, activated when anxious, takes time to sloooooow down once it's agitated. Try learning some tools that will help kids calm down enough so the thinking center of the brain can come back online to logic through the distress.

AFTER

Cue the parent. Share what you are observing and hearing from them—especially if you think professional support may be helpful.

Report to your leader. Follow any relevant policies if a student shares they have experienced suicidal ideation or self-harmed.

¹Understanding Anxiety in Kids and Teens | McLean Hospital." 2023. www.mcleanhospital.org. March 24, 2023.