

# Caring for Your Anxious or Depressed Child or Teen

By Dr. Karen Prentice

In the last two years my partners and I have noticed a dramatic increase in the number of children and teens coming to see us for stress, insomnia, anxiety and depression. These are healthy kids and teens from wonderful supportive families. What is going on? Why are so many children and teens having trouble? How many more are out there that we don't know about?

- According to the CDC 13% of children between the ages of 8 to 15 years-old have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- 2% of school-aged children and 8% of teens are depressed.
- 8% of children and adolescents have a diagnosed anxiety disorder.

In hopes of better helping these children, I recently completed a course on Integrative Approaches to Anxiety and Depression. I now feel compelled to share the information with everyone, but I have a few disclaimers:

## Disclaimer 1:

**Emergency-If your child or teen is suicidal or has intentions or thoughts to hurt themselves or others, take this situation seriously and go to the Emergency Room!** If you are not sure, please call us so we can help you figure out what the best plan of action is.

## Disclaimer 2:

The information in this article is not intended to be used in place of having your child or teen evaluated by either their pediatrician or a qualified mental health provider. An evaluation is the first step. Please call your child or teen's doctor and they can talk to them, examine them and rule out any medical causes that could be causing or contributing to their anxiety or depression. After the initial evaluation, your child or teen may need to have labs done. They may also need to see a psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or a counsellor. Please refer to our website for a list of qualified mental health providers.

## Disclaimer 3:

If your child or teen is already getting counselling or being treated by a psychiatrist with medication, **PLEASE CONTINUE WITH THEIR CURRENT THERAPY.** The following advice is not intended to replace their current therapy but simply meant to complement or enhance anything you are already doing. Of course if you have any questions or need help, please call us.

## Treatment for Anxiety and/or Depression

- 1. Medical Evaluation-**The first step to treating anxiety and depression is to have a medical evaluation. This will include a thorough history and physical and perhaps laboratory tests to rule out any medical causes such as thyroid disease, anemia or vitamin deficiencies. Your doctor will also help you identify any medications, supplements or herbal products that may be causing or contributing to your child's difficulties.
- 2. Medications or Nutritional Supplements-**If your doctor finds any medical issues or nutritional deficiencies, they will either refer you to the proper specialist and/or advise you on what supplements you should take. Things your doctor might try include a multivitamin, vitamin D3, and omega 3 fatty acids to include EPA and DHA. Ask your doctor if these are right for your child.

3. **Counseling**-Your doctor may advise that your child or teen see a counselor, psychiatrist, or psychologist. Please refer to our website for a list of qualified mental health providers.

### What Can You Do to Help?

Help your child or teen take control of their own health and wellbeing. Consider the definition of wellness or wellbeing, and look at every aspect of your child or teen's life: not only body, but mind and spirit. The goal of the following advice is to empower them and give them a sense of control that enables them to make changes to improve their well-being.

### What Your Body Needs to Achieve Wellness:

1. **Spirituality/Faith**-Most of us all know the following, but we do not always think of spirituality and faith as part of wellness. Medical studies tell us that people who have a faith belief system are less likely to suffer from self-destructive behaviors such as smoking; drug and alcohol abuse; and suicide. Studies also show that spirituality and faith help promote good health by boosting our immune system, reducing depression and anxiety and aiding with high blood pressure. Being part of a congregation, whatever your religious preference, gives families a supportive environment to raise their children.
2. **Social Support/Family and Friends**- According to Greek Philosophy, humanity can be differentiated from other forms of living creatures by the deep need to associate and affiliate with others. We need friendship, family, and a sense of belonging. Critical to this is human touch. A hug or a touch on the shoulder can lower blood pressure, decrease pain and elevate mood. It is easy for most of us to hug and kiss our babies and young children, but did you know that teenagers are desperate for human touch? Teens often give off the "vibe" that they don't want to be touched or hugged, when in actuality they really need it. Go ahead, hug a teen today!
3. **Family Meals**-Studies show that families who share 3-4 meals together per week are happier and healthier. Children and teens who regularly enjoy family meals have a lower rate of teen pregnancy and drug and alcohol use and perform better in school. In addition, families who have regular meals together eat more nutritious foods, are less likely to suffer from being overweight, and have fewer eating disorders. Strive for at least 3 family meals together and please have everyone shut off their electronics before coming to the table. A media free meal is a great way to connect with everyone (that includes mom and dad!)
4. **Sleep**-A good night's sleep helps the body grow, restore itself, heal, and enables the body to have the strength to fight off illness and infection. Children and adults who suffer from insomnia and sleep disorders do not clear brain waste metabolites as effectively as those who sleep all night. This can lead to decreased concentration, stress, anxiety and illness. Let your doctor know if your child or teen is having trouble with sleep.
5. **Exercise**-An hour a day of an exercise that you enjoy not only helps your body stay strong and at a healthy weight, but studies show exercise is critical for good mental health. Exercise can improve depression, anxiety and help children and adults with ADHD focus better. People who exercise regularly have fewer illnesses and infections. Try to encourage your child or teen to do something fun that involves exercise about an hour a day. It does not have to be an hour straight! They can do a 20 or 30 minute activity and later go walk the dog for 15 minutes then swim or ride a bike for 10 or 15 minutes. Make it fun so your child stays with it. If you can find something to do outside, combining both time in nature and exercise is even more beneficial to overall wellbeing both physical and mental. Look on our website for our "Get Fit" handout for fun activities to do in Phoenix.

6. **Nature**-Most of us are nature deprived. Studies show spending time in nature helps us to calm down mentally, enjoy some vitamin D, and have improved self-esteem and overall wellbeing. For more information about nature deprivation and the benefits of being in nature, read *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv.
7. **Nutrition**-I could write a book about the benefits of a healthy diet-actually, I already did, to be published fall, 2015! Most of us know that if we keep a healthy weight and eat healthy foods we can reduce our risks for heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Did you know that eating a healthy diet can also improve mental wellbeing? It makes sense. The following is a general run-down of our daily nutritional requirements.

- **4-5 Servings of Vegetables per day (organic if possible)**
- **3-4 Servings of Fresh Fruit per day (organic if possible)**
- **3-4 Servings of a Dairy or Calcium/Vitamin D Rich Food per day**
- **5 Servings of Whole Grains such as brown rice or quinoa per day**
- **3 Servings of a Protein food per day such as beans, nut butter, fish, chicken or tofu**

Serving size varies with age, sex, activity level and growth phase your child is or teen is in. Use the Myplate method when serving your family meals with half of their plate fruits and vegetables and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the plate protein food and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the plate a whole grain. Ask your doctor or look on our website for the Pediatric Anti-inflammatory Food Pyramid by University of Arizona's Dr. Andrew Weil for examples of healthy foods. For more information and recipes, check out my book, *An Apple a Day the Doctor's Way* coming soon.

8. **Water**-Drink at least 8-10 glasses of water per day.
9. **Positive Thoughts**-Teach your child or teen to focus on good things and positive thoughts. Help them to appreciate what makes them unique and wonderful. Help them to find activities that brings them joy and makes them feel confident. Write those activities down, and when they are "blue" help them to engage in those positive activities. Spend time with them and find things that you can do together as a family. Help build their confidence by telling them that you expect them to succeed and do well and that they are capable of managing difficult situations. Praise them often. Catch them when they are doing something right and let them know.

#### **What Your Body Doesn't Need:**

1. **Negative Foods/Drinks/Drugs**-Avoid processed foods, preservatives, nitrates, artificial sweeteners such as Splenda, Aspartame and Nutrasweet, food dyes especially Red Dye #40 and Yellow Dye #5, and caffeine. Avoid sugar drinks such as soda, juice and Gatorade and avoid sugary foods. Read food labels carefully and if the food contains ingredients that you don't recognize-avoid it! Avoid alcohol, smoking and drug use.
2. **Negative Activities**-To paraphrase one of my favorite bible verses, "whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things." Monitor what your child or teen is watching or playing. Stick with "G" movies for little ones and "PG" only for preteens and teens. For video games or online games, stick with "E" rated games for everyone. **Remember that too much of even a good thing is a bad thing.** The following is the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation for screen time:

- Children less than years old: no screen time
  - Children Greater Than 2 years old: Only 1-2 hours per day of combined electronic time including iPhone, iPad, T.V., computers or video games.
- 3. Negative Thoughts-**Teach your child or teen to avoid self-put downs and appreciate what makes them special. Boost your child or teen's ego with positive comments and activities. Avoid instilling shame and even when disciplining your child or teen, do so with gentleness and love. Avoid yelling, hitting and spanking and instead use time-outs or take away privileges.

For more helpful ideas, check out the book, *Helping Your Anxious Child* by Ronald M. Rapee, PhD. Your child or teen might find these workbooks helpful, *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edmund Bourne PhD and *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety* by Georg H Eifert PhD, and John Forsyth PhD.