

# Parent Handout #1

## Parenting Anxious Youth: 101

### The Pusher

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*You just need to go. We're going now, and you have to go with us. You used to go all the time, you can go now.*

#### Why you do it:

Because you've seen your child become more isolated from the world, and you're concerned. You've seen your child hold back from doing things, either from things she has done before or from things that her siblings and friends are doing. You feel that, if you could just get her to go, she would enjoy it once she got there and realize that it's not as scary as she thinks.

#### What's good about it:

Ultimately, we do want your child to do the things that make her anxious and face her fears.

#### Why it doesn't work:

It can feel invalidating to the child, as if you do not understand how anxious, upset, or uncomfortable this situation makes her. Also, your child does not, yet, have the skills necessary to handle those anxious, uncomfortable feelings. It is likely that, even if you do succeed in getting her to approach the situation, she will "fail," either by panicking or otherwise feeling overwhelmed by the situation. She will then decide that she was right all along—she can't handle the situation, and it is too scary.

### The Softy

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*What's the matter, honey? Your heart is racing and you feel sick to your stomach? OK, if going to school (or Sam's party or soccer tryouts) is this hard, maybe you should just stay home.*

### Why you do it:

One of the most basic instincts of parenting is to keep your child safe from harm. When a child is upset, hurt, or distraught, we want to fix it, by whatever means necessary. Often parents worry about making their child worse by pushing her, sometimes even stating their concern about “traumatizing” their child by making her do something that is so obviously distressing.

### What’s good about it:

Often, a teen feels as if a parent who accedes to her fears is the one who “gets her”—the one who understands how real and significant her anxiety and distress truly is.

### Why it doesn’t work:

Avoidance is a pattern. Once it starts, it is hard to stop. The next time your child gets nervous before an event, she will think that the only tool for handling anxiety is to avoid it. Also, it sets up the idea that anxious feelings are bad, since you are trying to make them stop. Anxiety is a feeling; it is neither good nor bad, it is simply neutral. Just as you would never suggest that your child should never feel sad, angry, or frustrated, you would not want to suggest that she should never feel anxious. Finally, overreacting to the physical symptoms sends the message that these symptoms are dangerous. They are uncomfortable, to be certain, but not dangerous or harmful.

## The Anticipator

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*Oh, boy. We just got this invitation from Aunt Jane to go to a family reunion. I know that 4 hours in the car is just too much for you. Plus, it’s being held in a state park, so I’m not sure what the facilities will be like. I’ll go ahead and decline.*

### Why you do it:

You know your child and her typical responses to these types of situations. You’ve already wasted time and money on unsuccessful ventures, whether they were family trips that had to be cancelled at the last minute

or parties or other events that had to be left early, in the midst of panic. Rather than risk embarrassment for you and your child, it seems better just not to bother.

**What's good about it:**

Similar to “The Softy,” your child may feel like you truly understand her since you can anticipate her feelings and limitations.

**Why it doesn't work:**

You are teaching your child that she can't do it and furthering her sense of “that's too hard for me to handle.” You are modeling that things that make us anxious should be avoided, rather than faced. Also, you are setting up the idea that anxiety is embarrassing. The attitude that “we'd rather not go only to have to leave halfway through” suggests that your child should be embarrassed or ashamed of her anxiety problem.

## **The Importance of a United Front**

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Often parents differ in their approach to their child's anxiety—one might be “The Softy” while the other is “The Pusher.” Teens are smart and savvy: they will pick up on this discrepancy quickly. Inconsistencies in parental responses can send mixed messages that can be confusing. It is important that whatever disagreements you and your spouse have behind the scenes, your child should think of you as a united front (not only about anxiety, but about all parenting decisions).

There is a healthy alternative to these ineffectual approaches:

## **The Ideal**

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*I know you're not feeling well. This usually happens before a big test. Use the skills you've learned in therapy. I know it's hard, but I also know that you can do this. Think about how proud you are going to be of yourself when it's all over and you've done it. Let's think of a good reward—how about going out to dinner tomorrow?*

**Push compassionately:**

Help your child push through the anxiety, and hold firm to expectations about her following through with the situation. But be equally sure to include empathy for the amount of distress the situation is causing her.

**Focus on competency:**

Reiterate (as many times as necessary) that your child has the ability to handle the situation. Help her to focus on the skills needed to complete the task rather than on the anxiety.

**Downplay physical feelings:**

Express compassion for the physical feelings, but no longer react to your child as you would if she were truly ill (e.g., if she had the stomach flu). Remind her that anxiety is causing the sensation, the sensation is time-limited (i.e., it won't last forever, it will end as soon as the anxiety does), and it is not harmful.

**Be realistic:**

If something is really hard (or perhaps is the first time the child is trying something new), keep the situation manageable in length and intensity, but with the understanding that each time the child tries it, she should push herself to stay a little longer.

Some of this may be different from your typical response to situations, and it may feel uncomfortable at first. Also, you may wonder why your other children have responded just fine to your usual interventions. It is important to note that your interventions weren't "bad parenting"; they simply were not the ideal way to handle a child with an anxious temperament. It is important to find a parenting style that fits with your child's temperament—since each child is different, your parenting may have to adjust slightly to best meet each child's needs.

# Parent Handout #2

## Behavioral Principles for Parenting Anxious Youth

### Reinforcement

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#### Positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is when a pleasant reward follows a behavior and tends to further encourage that behavior. As a parent, you want to positively reinforce those behaviors that you want to see continue. You also, however, must be careful not to reinforce those behaviors you want to stop. Think of a child having a tantrum in a grocery store: typically, the immediate response of a parent is to get the child to quiet down ASAP. Often this means leaving the store or giving the child a toy or a piece of candy to quiet down. These behaviors are rewarding for the child; therefore, he is likely to throw a tantrum the next time he gets upset in the grocery store.

You want to positively reinforce the behaviors you like (e.g., approaching anxiety-provoking situations) and be careful not to reinforce the behaviors you don't like (avoiding anxiety). While the obvious examples (like the tantrum) are easy to avoid, parents may often find themselves more subtly reinforcing behaviors that they do not like (e.g., allowing a child whose panic has kept him home from school that day to go out with his friends, thinking "Well, at least he is getting out of the house."). An example of using positive reinforcement appropriately is when your child goes to a previously avoided place or situation and you praise him for it, saying something like, "That's fantastic! I am so proud of the way you are learning not to avoid things!"

#### Human Slot Machine

The reason people play the slots is because they believe a chance exists that they might win big. That hope is fostered by the sounds of winning machines all around them and the fact that every once in a while, they,

too, win some money. What makes playing the slots so irresistible is that it uses “variable reinforcement”—you never know if the next pull of the lever is the one that will win you the big money. If sometimes when your teen whines, gets upset, or panics he gets his way and other times he doesn’t, you are a human slot machine. By varying in your response, your teen learns that if he keeps pushing, maybe the next tactic will be the one that will get “the big payoff” (i.e., the outcome he wants).

Even if you’ve been variable before, if you start being consistent now and continue to be consistent, eventually these behaviors will subside. This doesn’t mean you can never be spontaneous or break from routine, it just means that first you have to create a culture of consistency, and then, when you are spontaneous or break from routine, it has to be on your terms and not on your teen’s. So, once a consistent pattern has been set regarding curfew, for example, if you decide to extend his curfew because of a special event or as a treat for doing something good that week, this is a great reward and should be offered as such (e.g., “I am so proud of you! You worked so hard this week to face your anxiety, going to a mall and staying home by yourself for 2 hours, so I think you deserve an extra hour at curfew on Friday night.”). However, extending curfew because you got tired of arguing about it reinforces the idea that your teen should argue with you in the future because eventually you might give up. Every time you give in, you reinforce the behavior of arguing.

### **Active Ignoring/Picking Your Battles**

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To avoid reinforcing negative behaviors, it is often advisable to ignore such behavior, unless it breaks a house rule, is dangerous to the teen (or to others), or is potentially harmful in some other way. This is called “active ignoring.” You see the behavior, you don’t approve of the behavior, but if it is not crossing an important line, you choose to ignore it. Thus, you refrain from subtly reinforcing the behavior (perhaps the teen is trying to get you to react), and you also minimize the number of negative interactions you have with your teen over the course of a day.

To further minimize arguments and increase the amount of positive interaction, it may be necessary to alter your expectations and “pick your battles.” It is also important to pick your battles because, to avoid be-

coming a human slot machine, you do not want to set a limit or make a rule that you do not intend to enforce consistently.

## **Praise**

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All too often, especially with teens, parents fall into a trap of focusing on the negative. When teens are doing what they are expected to do (keeping their room clean, using good manners, getting their chores or homework done), little or no reinforcement is given for these behaviors. While this may work with many youth, teens with anxiety already tend to be hard on themselves and focus on the negative. As such, it's important to remember to praise them. Everyone likes to be praised, and praising acts as positive reinforcement. Remember, positively reinforced actions are more likely to continue. This goes for routine behaviors (e.g., emptying the dishwasher) as well as anxiety-related behaviors (e.g., going to a previously avoided place like the movie theater).

## **Labeled Praise**

When giving your teen a compliment or praising him for something, be as specific as possible. So, when praising, be sure to reinforce the aspect of the behavior that you like (e.g., "Your room looks great! What a great job you did straightening up all those books and CDs!") rather than offering more general praise (e.g., "Thanks for cleaning your room.").

## **Thoughtful/Mindful Parenting**

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The general idea is to think about what your teen is learning from a given situation or interaction. Consider a variety of situations, both anxiety-related and routine. What behaviors are you reinforcing? Is your teen getting rewarded for behaviors you want to continue? Or for behaviors you want to stop?

Also, think about what your own behavior is modeling for your teen. Ask yourself "What did my teen just learn from that interaction/situation?" or "What message am I sending to my teen?"

# Parent Handout #3

## Parenting Anxious Teens

### Limit-setting

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Parents often have difficulty setting limits with their anxious teen. It seems counterintuitive to punish or threaten punishment for a teen who is clearly anxious and distressed. While you might handle a teen who is refusing to go to school because she simply does not want to go differently from a teen who is refusing to go to school because she is anxious, the end result should still be the same—the child must go to school. Also, parents tend to tolerate behaviors from their anxious teen (yelling, whining, even cursing) that they would not tolerate in other settings, thinking that the teen's obvious distress makes that behavior "okay." But the lack of negative consequences, combined with often being allowed to avoid the anxious situation, reinforces both the bad behavior and the avoidance. Rules are rules, and no one in the family should be able to get away with bad behavior without consequences.

Also, although our emotions may not be completely under our control, our behaviors are. We have all had moments when we have been so angry at others we've wanted to yell, scream, or even strike out at them, but we did not do any of those things because those behaviors are not appropriate. Similarly, your teen must learn that feeling anxious does not give her the right to act inappropriately. She may be very upset; she may feel anxious and angry and frustrated all at once. But she still needs to obey house rules, and she needs to be able to calm herself. This is a valuable life skill for her to develop, for although this program is designed to treat her panic disorder, she will certainly experience anxiety throughout her life, and she must be able to cope with that anxiety appropriately.

### Allowing Natural Consequences (or How Not to Enable Your Teen's Anxiety)

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One way to get out of the trap of feeling like the bad guy is to allow the natural consequences of your teen's anxiety, rather than helping her negotiate around those consequences. For example, parents often drive

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their teen to school because otherwise her anxiety in the morning will cause her to be late. Typically, the school has consequences for being late (e.g., detention, demerits, etc.) that are in place to help teens learn to be on time. By helping her avoid the consequence, you are reinforcing (a) that she needs or deserves special accommodations because of her anxiety and (b) that she can put off going to school in the morning because you will make sure she gets there on time.

## **Expecting/Anticipating Anxiety and Anxious Situations**

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As described in the handout “Parenting Anxious Youth: 101,” parents often become so accustomed to their teen’s anxiety that they anticipate it for her. For example, pulling the teen out of potentially anxiety-provoking situations in advance or asking questions repeatedly before an event (e.g., “Are you sure you’re okay with this? Do you think you can do this?”) or during an event (“Are you holding up okay? How are you? Do you need me to do anything?”) signal to the teen that she is not capable of handling the situation. Also, asking repeatedly how the teen is feeling will cause her to hyperfocus on her physical sensations; this level of attention given to feelings can often increase the likelihood of panic.

Instead of focusing on your teen’s anxiety, you should be indicating to her that she is completely capable of coping with the situation and that her anxiety is natural and harmless. Do this by expecting that she will attend family functions/outings (e.g., “Remember, we’ve got Aunt Sue’s BBQ this weekend.”), offering occasional words of encouragement (e.g., “You’re doing so great!”), focusing on the positive (e.g., “This is such a fun BBQ!”), and generally letting her have the space needed to experience and enjoy the situation.

## Parent Handout #4

### What To Do (and Not To Do) in the Face of Panic

Now that your teen is engaging in various exposures and no longer avoiding situations that make him feel anxious, you may actually notice an increase (for a short time) in the number of panic attacks that he has. It is important, therefore, that you know how to handle a panic attack (or a potential panic attack).

Panic attacks not only feel scary to the person experiencing them, they often look scary to other people. When your teen is in the midst of a panic attack, he may cry, scream, shake, hyperventilate, and say things such as “I think I’m dying!” or “I’m losing it!” or “I think I’m going to faint!” Being in close proximity to such high levels of emotion is enough to make anyone feel anxious or worked up, but for parents to witness such emotion in their own child can be heartbreaking. As stated earlier, one of the most basic parental instincts is to protect your child, so when your teen gets upset, you want to jump in and fix things. However, as you have learned by now, while panic feels (and looks) scary, it is, in fact, *harmless*. So, while you may want to calm your child down because he looks so distressed, some of the ways in which you may interact with your teen during panic attacks can inadvertently make the situation worse.

#### Downward Spiral of Panic #1: Mimicking Your Teen’s Panic

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The teen starts to panic. (*Oh my God, I can’t breathe!*) →

The parent gets upset and responds with strong emotion. (*What do you mean you can’t breathe? You need to sit down, you’re white as a sheet!*) →

The teen, feeding on the parent’s alarmed reaction, continues to panic. (*I don’t feel right—my heart is pounding, my chest hurts, I can’t breathe!!*) →

The parent, getting more frightened, becomes frantic. (*We need to get you out of the store! Maybe we should call the doctor!*) →

The teen, seeing how scared and upset the parent is, becomes even more frightened, and the panic increases. (*The doctor?!? Oh my God, I'm dying, aren't I! I'm having a heart attack!*) →

This cycle of upset continues until the panic attack naturally subsides.

## **Downward Spiral of Panic #2: Desperately Seeking Calm**

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The teen starts to panic. (*Oh my God, I can't breathe!*) →

The parent gets upset and tries to calm the teen down. (*What's the matter? Are you hyperventilating? We need to find you a paper bag!*) →

The teen, responding to the parent's cue that hyperventilating is dangerous, continues to panic. (*No, really, I can't breathe! I do need a paper bag! I need to sit down!*) →

The parent starts frantically trying to get the teen to calm down. (*Just try breathing slowly, like this, in and out, in and out.*) →

The teen tries this, but because the panic has already escalated, cannot do so. (*I am trying, but I can't. I can't catch my breath! Something must be really wrong with me!!*) →

This cycle of upset continues until the panic attack naturally subsides.

## **Ideal Responses to Your Teen's Panic**

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Instead of participating in the downward spiral of panic, we recommend that you stay calm in the face of your teen's panic. Emphasize that he has the skills to handle the panic and that it is not dangerous. Be empathic—remind him that you know it is uncomfortable, but that it is short-lived and will be over soon. Sometimes, in the very early stages of a panic attack, teens might be able to calm themselves down and prevent a full attack from occurring. Once it has reached a critical point, however, there is just no way to stop the attack from coming, and they need to “ride the wave” of anxiety.

## The Ideal #1: Prevented Panic

The teen starts to panic. (*Oh my God, I can't breathe!*) →

The parent remains calm and reassuring. (*You're starting to feel really anxious; that makes sense since this is the first time you've been to this mall in a long time. Try to use your skills to calm yourself down.*) →

The teen uses some cognitive restructuring and/or limited relaxation skills and is able to calm down and prevent the panic attack.

## The Ideal #2: The Minimized Attack

The teen starts to panic. (*Oh my God, I can't breathe!*) →

The parent remains calm and reassuring. (*You're starting to feel really anxious; that makes sense since this is the first time you've been to this mall in a long time. Try to use your skills to calm yourself down.*) →

The teen tries to use the skills, but continues to panic. (*I've tried everything! I can't calm down; I need to get out of here!*) →

The parent remains calm, reminds the teen of what he already knows, and tries to focus on a post-panic reward. (*OK, so you might have a panic attack. I know you're uncomfortable, but you're not in any danger. We can't leave because, if we do, the panic wins. How about we go sit on that bench over there until it passes? Once it does, we can continue with our quest for the perfect pair of back-to-school shoes.*) →

The teen does have a panic attack, but is able to put it in perspective afterwards. (*That wasn't as bad as some other ones. I was able to remember that it wouldn't last forever and that I wasn't going to die.*)

Remember that with thoughtful/mindful parenting, you want to consider what message your actions/behaviors send to your teen. If you get frantic, look scared, or desperately try to get your teen to calm down, you further the notion that panic is bad or dangerous and must be stopped immediately. If you remain calm, however, you send the signal that your teen is going to be fine, whether or not he actually panics.

# Parent Handout #5

## You and Your Less Anxious Teen

Like most parents, you likely came to therapy thinking, “I just want my teen to feel better. I want her to be like a normal teenager, and not feel so anxious all the time.” Be careful what you wish for!

### On Having a Normal Teenager

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Normal teenagers fight with their parents. Normal teenagers break rules and test limits. Their job, as teenagers, is to figure out who they are, and they can only do that if they differentiate themselves (to varying degrees) from their families. While you may have thought you wanted a normal teenager, after the tenth time you’ve had to drop your teen at the mall in one week or the umpteenth fight you have over whether or not she can skip a family function to go out with friends, you may begin to wish you had that anxious teen back again—the one who didn’t want to go anywhere without you and preferred being at home to anywhere else in the world.

### Mourning the Loss

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It is okay for you to feel some sadness and regret over the distance that may develop as your teen begins to have a more independent life. However, it is important to remember that this is an important stage in your teen’s development. Picture your teen as an adult—what are the things you want for her? A happy relationship? A good job? A family? These come from figuring out who she is and becoming an independent adult. It is your teen’s job to fight with you and separate somewhat from you; it does not mean that you are “losing” her, it just means that she is developing. And that’s a good thing!

## **Find New Ways to Bond with Your Teen**

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Now that your teen is starting to do things on her own, you may feel that panic is no longer the “glue” keeping your relationship feeling close and together. So, if you are no longer needed to help your teen through panic attacks because your teen already has these skills, it is important that you and your teen find new ways to bond and find time together. Once the panic attacks decrease, you may begin to feel as if you are not needed anymore, but that is not true. We know that building a good relationship with your teen now will help her navigate the teenage years and beyond. So, focus on finding new, positive things you can do together regularly that don't involve panic, such as going out to lunch together, shopping together, going to a concert or sporting event together, and the like. Brainstorm with your teen fun activities that you and she can do together. Now that panic is not ruling your teen's life anymore, you are free to enjoy so many more things together! Enjoy this opportunity!!!

## **Adjusting the Volume, Not Changing the Station**

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Some parents may find that, although their teen is no longer panicking (or avoiding feared situations), she is still more clingy than her siblings and still gets more anxious in certain situations than other teens. While therapy does many things, it is not going to change who your child is at heart. Some people are introverts, others are extroverts, and still others are somewhere in between. None of these is good or bad, and the world would be a boring place if everyone were the same. If you think of your teen as a radio, therapy is not going to change the station, it just adjusts the volume. In other words, therapy helps turn the anxiety volume down to a manageable, acceptable level; it does not turn your child into an entirely different person, nor would we want to do so! Teens who are temperamentally more anxious are often sensitive, empathic, and caring. Be sure to focus on the positive qualities your child possesses—there are plenty of them!

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