

# MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

## TECHNOLOGY AND TEENS

We all know that the digital age has provided access to information and facilitated important life-saving and life-enhancing advancements in ways we never imagined possible. As with most things, with the good, comes the not-so-good. Finding the right balance is key.

The mental health community continues to debate whether technology overuse is a true “addiction” and how it might be related to other psychological issues and conditions. Yet, very few disagree that an array of serious problems can surface that stem from our seemingly constant use of devices.

According to a recent Common-Sense Media Survey (2019), American tweens and teens are spending an average of 6-9 hours a day texting, gaming, browsing social media, and posting on multiple networks. Not surprisingly, technology overuse interferes with school, relationships, family time, sleep habits, and has been linked to stress, loneliness, depression, poor physical health, obesity, familial conflict, and delayed independence in young adults.

Teens themselves believe there’s a problem. In the same Common-Sense Survey, half of the teens reported “feeling addicted” to their mobile device, and three-quarters feel compelled to respond to texts and other notifications immediately. Half of the teens in the survey indicated that they preferred texting or interacting through a digital device over talking directly to people who are right in front of them! They further admit that technology is keeping them up at night and distracting them from homework.

Even more concerning is that 45% of teens in the study said they are online “almost constantly,” and nine out of ten teens think that the preoccupation with technology is a significant problem for them.

**Our modern-day challenge, then, is helping our youth learn the **self-discipline** and **discernment** necessary to appropriately connect both on and off-line to the world around them.**



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### Warning Signs of Teen Tech Overuse:

- ❑ Obsessed with technology and can't seem put down device or walk away easily when first asked to do so
- ❑ Unrealistic about how much time one spends on technology
- ❑ Makes excuses for use
- ❑ Use of technology interferes with everyday activities (sleep, school, social activities, engaging with family, doing chores, cleaning up after self, paying attention to pets, eating regular meals, etc.)
- ❑ Becomes irritable or angry when asked to do without technology
- ❑ Preoccupied throughout the day about what to share, post, look-up or watch next
- ❑ Information obtained from non-news technology interfaces (YouTube, Tick Tock, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) is often the central topic of discussion or source for initiating conversations
- ❑ Being without Wifi (or even the thought of it) causes genuine discomfort and anxiety
- ❑ Using technology is the first thing one does or thinks of in the morning and the last thing one does or thinks of at night





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## Tips for Parenting Anxious Children

Children experience real stress. Uncontrolled stress leads to anxiety. Anxiety is rooted in biological, emotional, cognitive and physical precursors and responses.

Managing anxiety requires interventions in these same areas.

To help your child reduce stress and gain control over anxiety, you can do the following:

1. **Recognize and validate** the feelings your child is experiencing. Anxiety is real and very unpleasant.
2. Coach your child to **use deep, slow, belly breathing**. This is a simple, portable, calming technique that works.
3. Say, **“Tell me what you are thinking”** to reveal the scary, absolute, and other negative thoughts that are fueling the anxiety.
4. Teach your child to **challenge unhelpful thoughts** by asking, **“How likely is it that (the thing you are afraid of) will happen?”**
5. Tell your child, **“Thoughts are just thoughts. They cannot hurt you. What is a more calming thought you can use instead?”** Repeat as many times as needed in a quiet, calm voice.
6. Encourage your child to **brainstorm solutions** by asking, “What are some things you can do to handle this situation?” and offer options developed in collaboration with your child, rather than a single solution.
7. **Do not support attempts to avert feared situations** by allowing “days off,” “sleeping with a parent night,” or other escape behaviors because they only strengthen fear and reinforce avoidance, which leads to more of the same.
8. **Praise and encourage bravery and efforts to be courageous**, no matter how small they may seem. Say, “I am so proud of you for going to school/class today,” or “sleeping in your own bed last night,” or “trying to \_\_\_\_\_.”
9. **Discuss, define and write down the baby steps** your child can take towards meeting the bigger goal of facing an anxiety-provoking situation.
10. Create opportunities during daily interactions, in comfortable environments, when stress levels are low (e.g. home) to **practice the thoughts and behaviors necessary to be successful** in unfamiliar or more demanding settings. Role play works.
11. When you feel stressed and anxious, talk out loud about your thoughts and feelings in front of your child, and **model calming behaviors** for your child. Exposure will **normalize the fact that stress happens in life** and you can demonstrate specific ways to push forward despite discomfort and worry.



## STRESS . . .

We all experience it and our bodies produce a powerful, chemical survival response to it.

Anxiety is a symptom of the unpleasant sensations generated by stress hormones that are designed to compel you to react and survive through the fight, flight or freeze response.

So, how do you deal with your anxious symptoms? You decrease the levels of your stress hormones. There are many ways of accomplishing this, but an end goal is to optimize your body's chemical profile.

Understanding that you cannot change this innate survival response and separating your identity from the reaction is the first step overcoming anxiety. Helpful interventions are aimed at decreasing the release of stress hormones and exerting control over your response by changing your automatic THOUGHT patterns.

When you change your reactions, you change the architecture of your brain and the release of stress hormones. But, because we don't like feeling anxious (or frustrated, angry and all of the other uncomfortable emotions associated with stress), humans tend to try to ignore, suppress or disguise the emotion, which really fires up your nervous system to secrete more stress hormones. And the vicious cycle continues.

Therefore, mitigating the harmful effects of stress happens by allowing and learning how to feel first and then creating some “space” before re-focusing your attention to produce a different response.



## Talk to Someone Who Can Help

Clarity Psychological Services provides personalized, compassionate, respectful, and competent psychological services in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating the full spectrum of mental health issues for people across the lifespan.