

When Anxiety Makes You Angry: Parent's Guide

You have a teenager with something that looks like an explosive anger problem. They're moody. They're irritable. They're always on edge. Underneath all the prickliness, your sweet baby is still in there, but it is so hard for you to feel that tenderness when your teen is always pushing you away. You know at your core that something's wrong, and it probably feels like it's been wrong for a while.

You want the best for your child. You know it and we know it (and your teen definitely knows it underneath it all too). Is there something you should be doing? Should you be stricter or let things go? Should you remind them about every homework assignment or let them make mistakes on their own? You're tired of feeling like you have to walk on eggshells, but you hate when they seem so mad and then feel so remorseful afterward. You have so many questions, and you just feel trapped.

Anger doesn't come out of nowhere, and it often masks a different underlying issue. While depression, grief, loss, ADHD, and trauma can all lead to external anger, the big one I want you to focus on is anxiety. Anxiety can look like anger, like stress, like perfectionism, and regardless of how it looks, it's getting in the way of everything else.

Anxiety leads our body to a fight-flight-or-freeze response. Parents and professionals have an easy time recognizing anxiety when it looks like flight (running away) or freeze (clamming up and not talking). It's easy to label the shy kid as nervous, or the clingy kid as anxious. We often don't remember that fight is an equally valid reaction to fear. Rather than your teen just shutting down or avoiding the anxiety-prompting situations in their lives, they respond with shouting, yelling, arguing, and aggressive behavior.

As your teen reads *When Anxiety Makes You Angry: CBT Anger Management Skills for Teens with Anxiety-Driven Anger*, they'll be provided with a full toolkit of strategies to manage their underlying anxiety issues, while also better managing their explosive outbursts. Your child is probably in this pattern of overthinking what's going on, getting stressed about it, having a frustrated outburst, and then not knowing why it's happening. This pattern cycles around and around, leaving them even more angry because they don't know why they're reacting the way they are.

You know that stepping in and telling them what you think is going on and what to do usually doesn't end up in your favor. You also know that you can't do the work for them. But you can learn to support them and help them move forward along the path from an angry, anxious, overwhelmed teen to one who is calm and centered and able to handle the challenges that come their way.

As a therapist and owner of my group private practice, Compassionate Counseling St. Louis, I've worked hard to help kids, teens, and parents learn the best way to deal with their anxiety-driven anger. Writing this book helped me put to the page the general approach that I take in treatment.

I also wanted to incorporate information from my intake coordinator, Lauren Goldberger (MSW '22). Lauren schedules all our clients for us and is the frontline helper when parents call in, already at the end of their rope.

When you reach out for counseling for your child, you'll usually do a phone consultation first. So picture yourself, sitting on the phone, calling us at Compassionate Counseling St. Louis. You're not sure what to do about your anxious/angry teen. You're at the end of your rope. You're worried, you're tired, and you need someone to answer your questions. Then you're connected to our intake screener—and she's ready to help. Take it away, Lauren!

My child gets so overwhelmed, then angry, then shuts down and doesn't talk to me. Is this just typical teen behavior or is this something more?

Teens have a lot going on! Navigating school, activities, and friends while also dealing with internal changes can be really overwhelming. While we do expect some developmental changes, your child may need extra help regulating their emotions. Typically, we hear about a lot of teens dealing with mood swings, social anxiety, low self-esteem, and overwhelm with school. It's also common

for parents to express concern over their teen's perfectionism, high expectations for themselves, and worry about the future. While all these concerns are normal, it can still be helpful to dive in a little deeper to figure out why these concerns are getting so big, and then learn ways to healthfully cope with the overwhelming emotions. (We share some favorite coping skills on Kelsey's website, <https://www.kelseyorgersondunn.com>.)

A lot of times, the teens we talk to don't know why they feel this way, and they end up feeling more frustrated because they can't pinpoint the cause of their stress. Underlying anxiety can bring up a lot of emotions that manifest in those angry mood swings and low self-esteem that parents then call us about. Building up their coping skills to deal with challenges, even if they're typical stressors, can help your teen feel more in charge of themselves, and get them back to being the happy kid they were before.

Top tip for parents: Help your teen build coping skills to manage the stressors that come their way. Even if the stress is normal, it doesn't mean you have to live like this forever.

What is anxiety-driven anger? How do I know that this is what my teen is going through?

Anxiety is often confused with anger because the physical components can look the same. When we think of anxiety-driven anger, we think of aggressive outbursts or that 0–60 reaction that seemingly comes out of nowhere. When a child experiences anxiety that becomes too much for them to handle, their reactions to small annoyances can be bigger than necessary. That's why we refer to this as anxiety-driven anger. Even though they're angry, it's coming from that underlying anxiety you may not be able to see.

If you're noticing your teen getting worked up over small things, or having difficulty managing their angry outbursts, building anxiety-management skills can often help alleviate these behaviors by treating the root cause. By learning ways to take a step back and figure out what's going on in their brain, how it impacts their emotions, what reactions are leading to, and then finding more helpful ways to get and keep their emotions calm and in check, you might find that their anger and aggression have decreased.

Top tip for parents: Anxiety can lead to what looks like an anger problem. Think about what else might be going on underneath the surface, and research anxiety strategies. Our biggest tip is to have your child work on Kelsey's book, When Anxiety Makes You Angry!

My child gets super stressed about school and homework. They have a lot of perfectionism, but they have great grades. Should I be concerned?

Anxiety and perfectionism can go hand in hand. When your child has the goal of being perfect, that leaves little room for mistakes. They become constantly worried about not meeting their own expectations and what that says about them. This increased state of anxiety and stress can lead to angry outbursts when things don't go as planned, or when they don't reach their goals.

It's common for teens who have high expectations for themselves to seem angry or upset if they don't meet the impossible standard of perfection they've set for themselves. Anything less than perfect is seen as a failure, and for a perfectionist kid, that failure is hard to move on from. This perceived failure can also lead to a shame spiral and dip into depression mode that can be hard to pull themselves out of. Instead of thinking they can do better next time and move on, they immediately see it as a reflection of their self-worth.

Perfectionism can also get in the way of your child trying new things, out of fear of being bad at them, or keep them from continuing activities if they aren't the best. While perfectionism can motivate and give your kid a high drive to succeed, it's also important to monitor how that behavior is affecting them.

Top tip for parents: Notice whether the high expectations your child has for themselves are getting in the way of their happiness. Model healthy ways of coping with disappointment and praise effort along with praising outcome.

Why does the smallest thing seem to set them off?

A lot of times anger is a symptom of anxiety. All that underlying worry, stress, and overwhelm can bubble up to the surface and cause your teen to lash out. That's why even the smallest thing, like reminding them to do their homework, can cause a big reaction. It's not always about what's happening in that moment. Sometimes, it's the emotions you can't see underneath.

When your child has become so overwhelmed that they're shouting, yelling, or fighting with you, they're outside their "window of tolerance" (Ogden, Minton, and Pain 2006; Siegel 2012). This term is a way of understanding that we all have a limit of how much frustration, stress, and anxiety we can manage before we just can't handle any more.

When we're operating within our window, we're able to think through our problems, even when we get angry, anxious, or sad. Once we've reached our limit, and we're outside that window, we end up in fight-flight-or-freeze mode. We can't stop to think. We're too flooded with emotion, and we're in that incredibly overwhelmed space until we're able to calm back down and return to our window.

When we're faced with a lot of stress building throughout the day, we might reach our breaking point and react by yelling or screaming, even when it's just a small stressor. It's kind of like the straw that breaks the camel's back. Everyone's window is different, so if you notice your teen reaching that breaking point more often, it might be that they are operating at the highest level of their window and need help finding coping skills to calm down and expand their window of tolerance.

Top tip for parents: Learn more about the window of tolerance in Chapter 4 of When Anxiety Makes You Angry.

How can I support my angry, anxious kid? And will this book actually help?

Supporting your child means giving them all the tools to succeed and allowing them time to work through their emotions. It's okay, and very common, for parents to feel overwhelmed and at their wits' end with their kids, but just by reading this guide and trying to understand why your teen is acting the way they are, you're already supporting them. Remember to be patient. Everything takes time.

Parents come to us for help when there's an ongoing problem and they've tried different things at home that don't seem to be working. We help provide lasting change and teach your child skills they can maintain and refer back to when they begin to struggle. This book is about helping your child learn those skills and understand why they might be feeling angry. Building that change can take time, and having your child work through this book is the start they might need to feel more in control of their emotions.

If your teen is expressing anxious feelings or behaving in a more irritable or aggressive way, it's also worth it to try new strategies. This book helps break down why they might be feeling the way they do, and how to calm their anxious mind when things get too overwhelming. Like anything else, learning coping skills takes time and effort, and if your teen is willing to put in the work, there is relief in sight.

You may also be wondering if you and your teen need more support than this book. You may be asking yourself, "Do we need counseling?" This is a great, important question, and it's a question that comes down to you. While *When Anxiety Makes You Angry* can offer some ideas to consider, the best way to know is to complete an assessment with a licensed mental health therapist. You know your teen best. If you have concerns about their behaviors and their emotional overload, it's a good idea to reach out for help.

Top tip for parents: You can always search online for anxiety counseling in your area, and reach out to several therapists before making a decision. You want to find someone who is a great fit for you and your teen.

We want this guide to help you think about what's going on and what you might be able to do to help. We also want this guide to help you realize that you are not alone. There are so many parents in the same boat as you.