

"What are some reasons you think middle schoolers may feel anxious?"

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

"Is there a certain time of day when you feel the most stress or anxiety?"

"What's one thought you keep having over and over again?"

"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?"

"Thank you so much for sharing that with me. Because I believe you, I can't keep this to myself. I'm going to share this with _____ so you can get the support you need, and I will be with you for the next steps."

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

"Nutrition, sleeping, and exercise can have an effect on your mental health. How are you sleeping? Are you drinking more caffeine or eating more sugar than usual?"

A Volunteer's Guide to ...

Talking About Anxiety



with Middle Schoolers



How to Talk About Anxiety

1 in 3 adolescents struggle with an anxiety disorder.¹

→ While 1 in 3 adolescents have experienced an anxiety disorder,¹ nearly all teenagers experience some form of anxiety, stress, or anxious thoughts in their daily lives. And as middle schoolers experience puberty earlier than ever before, they're often experiencing complex emotions without the tools or maturity needed to manage them. 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.

In this Phase . . . As a volunteer, your role is to **affirm their personal journey** by helping them normalize language around emotions and stress. Remind them that mental health is part of the human experience and they aren't broken for struggling from time to time.

Middle schoolers are motivated by acceptance. When you affirm that they matter to God and remind them that they belong in God's family, you can give them hope.

In Your Conversations . . .

BEFORE

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

Break it down. You may need to define more words and add concrete examples to help them understand big ideas or psychological terminology.

Reach out to parents. If you've seen signs of anxiety as a pattern for their kid, at check-in ask parents if there is anything you can do to help their teen feel more at ease.

Do your research. Remember, if you are not a mental health professional, it's okay to ask for help from your ministry leader if you are unsure of what to do.

DURING

Validate their feelings. You may be tempted to just tell them it 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 kid 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.

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.

Be generous with encouragement. Fitting in and gaining approval is a big deal during this phase, so affirm them and when necessary help them talk more kindly to themselves and each other.

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.

AFTER

Cue the parent. Remember that parents have a unique (and scientifically proven) role in addressing anxiety or despair.² It can be helpful to share resources with them, like those found at ParentCue.org.

Connect with your ministry leader. Learn what resources your church has available to parents and what you should do if you think a kid may need extra support. Follow any relevant policies if a student shares they have experienced suicidal ideation or self-harmed.

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

² Hutcherson, Will, and Williams, Chinwé. *Seen: Healing Despair and Anxiety in Kids and Teens through the Power of Connection*, Parent Cue, 2021.