

Addressing Teen Anxiety

in the Digital "Village"

By Claire de la Varre, PhD, CHt, CI

While continuous access to friends, entertainment, and up-to-the-second information might be some of the benefits of living in a global village, for many teens there are no curtains in the windows and the lights are always on. The lack of privacy, and expectations for constant connection to peers, along with easy access to content that showcases violence, extreme ideologies, or pornography, mean that virtual interactions may come with disturbing and insidious consequences.

Suicide as a result of cyber-bullying regularly makes the headlines, but cyber-bullying is just one problem. There are less obvious—though equally harmful—hazards in the digital village in which our children live. Ubiquitous access to social media and the endless texting, scrolling, swiping, and—perhaps most important—constant comparisons have a powerful impact. The result: teens are led to suffer from poor body image, disrupted sleep, low self-esteem, loneliness, and academic underachievement, as well as mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. They may feel overwhelming pressures to post content that shows a relentlessly positive life. Unclear boundaries, and a lack of social cues that would easily be picked up in a



face-to-face setting, contribute to on-line interactions that may escalate rapidly into conflict or threats. Factor in the fact that adolescent brains are still developing their executive functions and that teens are trying to figure out who they are, and it's no wonder that anxiety in teens is so prevalent.

PHYSICAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL STRESS

Anxiety is often expressed through physical symptoms and the brain and gut are closely connected. I see many children with GI issues such as stomach aches and abdominal pain, chronic diarrhea or constipation, IBS, stomach migraines, fear of vomiting, nausea, food anxieties, difficulties swallowing, or oversensitive gag reflex. A local pediatric GI physician who sends referrals to me estimates that about 50 percent of his patients have little physiologically wrong with them although their symptoms can disrupt daily life and be debilitating.

CALMING ANXIETY THROUGH HYPNOSIS

I work with anxious children and adolescents to teach missing life skills such as how to self-soothe and calm

down, recognize catastrophic thinking or rumination, and handle bullies, as well as good sleep hygiene, and pain management. I talk to these kids about what is happening in their brain when they get anxious, and how to move from sympathetic (fight or flight) dominance to parasympathetic (rest and digest) dominance. I also teach self-hypnosis and deep breathing for relaxation, and how to pay attention to messages from the body. My aim is to give each child practical tools to combat anxiety in daily life.

Clinical hypnosis involves a state of focused attention and relaxation where the client becomes more open to suggestions, including those that target symptoms not typically affected by conscious thought. Through a gentle mind-body approach, I look at the child's core beliefs about illness, and facilitate release of any old traumas and associated emotions that might be contributing to their symptoms. Examples of underlying issues could be changing schools, transitioning to high school/college, falling out with a friend, the death of a family member or a beloved pet, struggles with sexuality, fears about school shootings, or pressures to use drugs.

Parents are invited to be present with younger children, or if a teen asks that the parent sit in for the session. Hypnotic relaxation is valuable to the whole family, and parents are welcome to participate in the homework, which involves listening to personalized guided imagery recordings. I will typically see a child for an initial one-hour assessment, then send them home with a routine of daily and weekly recordings to listen to, plus additional exercises, as appropriate. I follow up in two to four weeks and, if necessary, will see the child in my office again. **llh**

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