



White Paper  
**Depression and Anxiety  
In Teens and Young Adults**

*In this white paper, we provide an overview of anxiety and depression in teens and young adults. We focus on helping these individuals through a variety of challenges, including, but not limited to: anxiety, depression, family conflict, self esteem issues, risky/harmful sexual behaviors, school failure, and behavior issues.*

*This white paper is written for parents, teachers, school counselors, or anyone needing advice on where to turn to help a teen or young adult through anxiety and depression.*

## **Anxiety and Depression in Teens and Young Adults**

Society tends to view depression and anxiety as “adult” problems. In fact, even experts once believed that only adults could have depression severe enough to require treatment. This can be a very dangerous misconception.

Because it is perfectly normal for teens and young adults to be sad or moody, sometimes even parents can overlook major symptoms of depression and anxiety in their child. It is all too common for these signs and symptoms to appear as “growing pains,” “being dramatic,” or “teenage problems,” in teens and young adults.

Another reason depression and anxiety are often overlooked in teens and young adults is because symptoms in teens and young adults can appear very differently than they do among adults. Depression or anxiety can look different in every individual and may vary from sadness and hopelessness to irritability and hostility.

If depression and anxiety are left untreated, some individuals may go as far as self injure or suicide. The most important thing you can do for your child is to step in and talk to them; see how he or she is feeling. Getting help at the first signs of anxiety or depression means that your son or daughter can start recovery sooner.

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## Signs of Depression in Teens and Young Adults

Depression in teens and young adults doesn't consist of just moodiness and bouts of sadness or melancholy. Depression is a serious problem that has the potential to affect many aspects of an individual's life. Left undiagnosed or untreated, depression in teens and young adults can lead to serious, harmful behaviors, such as substance abuse, promiscuity, self injuring or mutilation, violence, or even suicide. Because depression can appear differently in younger individuals than it does in adults, depression is too often overlooked or undiagnosed in teens and young adults. The following are signs of depression in teens and young adults.

- Hostility, aggression, and persistent irritability
- Changes in weight, eating patterns, and appetite (significant weight loss or gain, binge eating, hoarding food, avoiding food, not eating enough, etc.)
- Lethargy or a significant decrease in energy
- School failure/difficulties in school, a drop in grades, skipping school, or frequent absences
- Defiant or rebellious behaviors
- A sudden change in peer groups
- Difficulties with one's existing peer group
- Difficulties making decisions
- Family conflict or strained family relationships
- Feelings of guilt or inadequacy
- Low self esteem
- Changes in sleep patterns (excessive sleeping or difficulties sleeping)
- Wanting to die
- Self injury, harm, or mutilation (cutting, burning, etc.)
- Social withdrawal
- Frequent complaints of physical ailments, visits to the school nurse, or trips to the physician (headaches, stomach aches, body pain)

It is vital to keep in mind that some of these signs and symptoms of depression can also be normal teenage behavior, or indicative of another problem. For example: a teen who has low self esteem and has dropping grades may have an undiagnosed learning disorder. This is why depression can only be diagnosed by a trained, licensed health care provider or mental health professional.

That being said, if you have reviewed the signs and symptoms of depression in teens and young adults, and suspect that your child may be depressed, it is extremely important to act quickly. Talk to your son or daughter, express your concern, and find out more about his or her feelings. Obtaining help from a credible mental health provider is vital to ensuring that your son or daughter develops into a healthy, well-adjusted adult.

## Signs of Anxiety in Teens and Young Adults

Anxiety is also an issue that often goes undiagnosed or unnoticed in teens and young adults. Anxiety can actually be a normal reaction to help deal with stressful situations: e.g. anxiety can help a student focus on studying harder for a difficult exam or help an athlete play harder at a sporting event. When one's anxiety becomes a chronic, exorbitant fear with no root cause or meaning, that anxiety becomes a true problem, interfering with their quality of life.

While anxiety, like depression, is often thought of as a very "adult" problem, teens and young adults may worry about everything from school, fitting in with peers, getting along with family members, or their own personal shortcomings. Every individual experiences symptoms of anxiety in a different way; the following are potential signs of anxiety in teens and young adults:

- Excessive fear or anxiety about things before they happen
- Excessive worries about school, peers, or extracurricular activities
- Constant concern and worry about safety for self or family members
- Irritability
- Displaying clingy behavior with parents and family members
- Fear of staying the night away from one's home
- An inability to relax
- An inability to concentrate
- Becoming easily alarmed or startled
- Frequent complaints of physical ailments (stomachaches, headaches, muscle aches, and tension)
- Trouble sleeping
- Avoiding/refusing to go to school
- Excessive lethargy or fatigue
- Social withdrawal

Like the symptoms of depression, symptoms of anxiety can often go overlooked, as some of these behaviors can be normal for a teen or young adult; however, if you suspect that your son or daughter has anxiety that goes beyond normal worries and concerns, it is important to talk to him or her. A good way to start this conversation is to acknowledge that something is bothering your son or daughter and simply asking, "Would you like to talk about it?"

This is a great way to let your child know that you have noticed that there is a problem, and that he or she is free to divulge as much (or as little) as they desire. If you are still feeling concerned, consulting a healthcare or mental health professional is a key factor in getting your son or daughter the help he or she needs.

## Can You Have Anxiety and Depression?

Yes, it is possible to have both anxiety and depression at the same time, although depression and anxiety disorders are not the same. Anxiety and depression are two distinct issues that do have some overlapping symptoms, such as irritability, impaired sleep patterns, and decreased concentration. Although depression and anxiety are different conditions, they can occur together.

It is not uncommon for individuals to be diagnosed with both an anxiety disorder and clinical depression. It is possible for anxiety to occur as a symptom of clinical depression; on the other hand, it is also possible to become depressed as the result of an anxiety disorder. Some individuals who have a history of an anxiety disorder earlier in life can develop depression later in life. While many people suffer from both disorders, there is no evidence that one causes the other.

### Depression and Anxiety in Teenage Girls

While anxiety and depression can occur in both genders, and can appear in a variety of different age groups, teenage girls are far more at risk than teenage boys. Before they hit puberty, girls and boys are at the same risk for being diagnosed with depression or anxiety. Once they hit the teenage years, girls are twice as likely to be diagnosed as teenage boys are; according to the Child Mind Institute, "by mid-adolescence, girls are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mood disorder as boys, with the prevalence at adult levels, 14 to 20 percent."

## The Importance of Early Intervention: Getting Your Child Help for Depression and/or Anxiety

When your son or daughter is anxious or depressed, the desire to ease his or her suffering is not the only reason to seek professional help. The symptoms that come along with anxiety and depression can lead to further problems in your child's life. For example:

- A withdrawal from others could be detrimental to your child's social skill development
- The deficits in social skill development can also be detrimental to your child's self confidence
- Lowered energy/motivation and poor concentration could lead to problems in school for your child.

While the effects of depression or anxiety on your child's academic performance are usually a primary concern for parents, your child's social development is just as important. Not only can a deficit in your child's social learning cause difficulties in his or her social life, but difficulties relating to others (especially peers and family members) can be an added stressor, worsening your child's symptoms.

Early intervention is important to make sure that all of the symptoms of your child's depression and/or anxiety are addressed. For depression, early intervention is key, as "Adolescents with a duration of the depressive episode of two years or greater had significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation and intent, lethality, and number of suicide attempts than youngsters with depressive episodes of shorter duration." (Ryan, N. D., Puig-Antich, J., Ambrosini, P., Rabinovich, H., Robinson, D., Nelson, B., & Twomey, J. 1987)

Anxiety is not an uncommon issue for teens and young adults to face; an estimated 8 percent of teens, 13 through 18, have an anxiety disorder. As mentioned previously, there is an even higher rate in teenage girls (14 to 20 percent). Early intervention is key to helping your son or daughter with his or her anxiety. "Longitudinal studies are showing children who have experienced high levels of anxiety symptoms at one point in life are likely to experience high levels of depression symptoms at later times in life." (Cole, Peek, Truglio, Seroczynski, 1998). As such, parents should watch for signs of both anxiety and depression in their child over time.

## Treatment for Anxiety and Depression

Both anxiety and depression have similar courses of treatment. Symptoms of anxiety and depression can be improved with therapy, medications, or a combination of both. Improving one's health and lifestyle decisions can improve symptoms of anxiety and depression as well. For example, getting more adequate sleep and getting regular exercise can further improve symptoms.

### Treatment for Anxiety and Depression in Teens and Young Adults

Treatment for depression and anxiety disorders can vary, especially among teens, and young adults. While every individual is different, your son or daughter's treatment will depend on various factors, including:

- His or her overall physical health and medical history
- His or her diagnosis (whether he/she has anxiety, depression, or both)
- Age (depending on his or her age, medication may not be safe/appropriate)
- The extent of the symptoms he or she is displaying
- His or her reaction to different medications
- His or her reaction to therapy
- Your preference

Treatment for anxiety and depression can include: antidepressants, antianxiety medications, individual therapy, and sometimes family therapy, as a positive family dynamic is key to helping your child through his or her anxiety. Your child's doctor should perform an extensive, comprehensive evaluation of your child and your family before prescribing treatment.

## Supporting Your Child Through Their Depression or Anxiety and Treatment

As your son or daughter goes through the process of diagnosis and treatment, the best thing you can do is to let him or her know you are there. Battling depression can be lonely, but if your son or daughter truly feels supported, this will help the treatment and healing process immensely. Here are ways to show your support and let your son or daughter know that he or she is loved, valued, and respected.

### 1. Learn More about Depression/Anxiety

Become the depression or anxiety expert in your household. It will help you to make the best decisions for your child during the treatment process. Research, read, learn from the many resources available on anxiety and depression, from blog posts, podcasts and videos, to eBooks. Learning as much as you can about your child's struggles is the best way to learn how to help him or her. It is also the best way to be an advocate for your child during his or her treatment.

### 2. Foster Your Child's Health and Well Being

Research shows that alongside medication and/or therapy, a healthier lifestyle can assist in improving symptoms of anxiety and depression. There are several everyday factors that can help improve your child's quality of life and symptoms. These factors include:



**Exercise:** Encourage your child to be more active; better yet, make it a family affair. Regular exercise can be extremely effective in improving not only one's physical health, but one's mental well being. According to the Mayo Clinic, exercise can help lessen the severity of symptoms of depression and anxiety by releasing neurotransmitters, endorphins, and endocannabinoids. There are also emotional and psychological benefits of regular exercise, including an increase in confidence, serving as a distraction from anxieties, and providing a positive coping mechanism. Something as simple as walking the family dog each day after dinner, or playing basketball in the driveway, can be very beneficial in alleviating symptoms.



**Sleep:** Try to ensure that your child receives at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night, depending on his or her age. Sleep is an essential, and often overlooked, contributor to health and well being. Not getting enough sleep can cause stress, irritability, and fatigue, worsening your child's symptoms.



**Nutrition:** A healthy, well balanced diet fosters health and well being in children. Encouraging your child to make healthy decisions, and to eat several smaller meals throughout the day, can minimize blood sugar spikes and keep his or her energy up.

### **3. Encourage His or Her Social Life**

A strong social support system can help your child's treatment process. While your son or daughter may feel tempted to remain isolated due to his or her symptoms, this can only worsen them. While some teens and young adults choose to remain isolated from their close friends, others will seek out peers that have a negative influence on them. Getting in with the "wrong crowd" is a red flag sign of anxiety and depression, and can be detrimental to your child's healing process.

Encourage your son or daughter to hang out with uplifting and encouraging friends who are positive influences. If he or she has difficulties making friends who are positive, uplifting people, offer to enroll him or her in a social activity that he or she would enjoy, such as an art class, sports team, or after school club. It is vital that your child has a support system of friends who will encourage their recovery, and will not undermine their treatment.

### **4. Be Involved with the Treatment Process and Team**

By effectively communicating with your son or daughter's doctors, therapists, or counselors, you can help to make sure that he or she is sticking to all of the treatment recommendations, including taking medications at specified times and going to scheduled therapy sessions. Be sure to notify your child's healthcare provider or mental health professional if his or her symptoms worsen or intensify.

## **Why Wilderness Adventure Therapy is So Effective in Treating Depression and Anxiety**

Over the past few decades, wilderness adventure therapy programs have become more prevalent, as the demand for effective alternatives in therapy has increased. The popularity of wilderness therapy is due to its ability to help teens and young adults in overcoming depression and anxiety--among other cognitive, emotional, and behavioral issues. The following are aspects that make wilderness adventure therapy programs successful in helping teens and young adults with anxiety and depression.

### **Exposure to the Therapeutic Wilderness Setting**

Living in the wilderness is a big change from the everyday environment many teens and young adults are used to. The opportunity to become fully immersed in the beauty of the outdoors presents the opportunity for individuals to try new things and overcome obstacles. In addition, research has shown that mere exposure to the outdoors can significantly reduce many symptoms associated with anxiety and depression, including:

- Better executive functioning
- Enhanced problem solving



- Improved critical thinking and decision making
- Reduction in the symptoms of ADD/ADHD (which can contribute to one's depression and/or anxiety symptoms)
- Improved clarity

### Therapeutic Group Living

The therapeutic group living setting is one of the most effective aspects of wilderness adventure therapy that helps with anxiety and depression. In fact, depression in adolescence often “stems from unresolved developmental conflicts, issues of separation/individuation, the search for identity and the development of the true self” (Norton, 2010). Wilderness Adventure therapy is used to address the intrapsychic, developmental, and relational factors contributing to depression. This is achieved through therapy, therapeutic group living, and therapeutic wilderness and adventure activities.

Research indicates that “a primary cause of emotional and behavioral disturbances in youth is the lack of significant relationship with the social and natural worlds” (Gass, 1993). Wilderness therapy is powerful in the treatment of adolescent depression as the therapy, therapeutic group living, therapeutic setting of the wilderness, and adventure activities address the learned helplessness, dependency, and feelings of worthlessness associated with depression (Kimball and Bacon, 1993).

### Adventure Activities

Adding an adventure therapy component to traditional wilderness therapy leads to a higher engagement in therapy for teens and young adults, due to the variety of appealing activities.

An adventure component also allows therapists to more effectively target an increase increase of self efficacy, as opposed to just increasing self confidence. Self efficacy is The belief in oneself to overcome adversity/difficulties in life. This is vital, as research has shown that self efficacy is one of the most influential predictors of behavioral change. (Wells, Widmer, & McCoy 2004)

Wilderness Adventure therapy utilizes overwhelming mastery experiences to increase self efficacy and help teens and young adults in overcoming depression and/or anxiety. The more repetitive a treatment program can be with overwhelming mastery experiences, the better. Clients are more likely to generalize the belief that they can achieve difficult things, and can incorporate this belief into different domains of life: classroom, peers, sports, etc. For example:

If teens and young adults believe they can:

- Navigate terrain on a mountain bike
- Rappel a cliff
- Go rafting down a river

They will more likely believe they can:

- Overcome/manage their symptoms
- Mend strained relationships
- Perform well in school/at work

## Considering Treatment for Depression or Anxiety? What to Look for In a Reputable Wilderness Therapy Program

If you have decided that residential treatment would be beneficial for your child in the healing process, wilderness therapy is an effective option to assist teens and young adults through anxiety and depression. Most parents have no idea where to begin or what to look for in a credible, reputable program.

There are several criteria that a credible wilderness therapy program should implement to ensure that they are following best practices within the industry. There are aspects that set the best wilderness therapy programs apart from other residential wilderness treatment programs. Look for the following when researching wilderness therapy programs to help your child with depression or anxiety:

### ✓ 1. Licensure/Accreditations

A reputable wilderness therapy program should be licensed by the state. To implement and maintain clinical best practices, the program should partner with regulatory organizations that are dedicated to providing the highest quality of services.

To maintain the integrity of the wilderness lands they use, reputable organizations should partner with applicable regulatory and accrediting outdoor ethics organizations that focus on teaching individuals how to enjoy the outdoors responsibly, with the lowest environmental impact possible.

If the organization offers academic credits to their participants, the wilderness therapy program should be accredited by an academic organization to assist in the transferring of credits.

### ✓ 2. Medical Care

A credible wilderness therapy program conducts a medical examination upon admission, and routine medical check-ups to monitor participants' well-being. There should also be access to appropriate medical care when participants are in the field such as EMT's or Wilderness First Responders.

### ✓ 3. Formal Evaluation

Unlike other programs designed to help with depression and anxiety, a credible wilderness therapy program should evaluate their students' individual needs upon admission; routine formal evaluations of the effectiveness of the treatment path should also be conducted periodically to ensure that the treatment is effective.

- ✓ **4. Adequate, Expert Supervision**

The wilderness therapy field guides should operate under supervision of a licensed mental health professional, such as a licensed psychologist, licensed family therapist, licensed mental health counselor, or a licensed clinical social worker. In addition, wilderness therapy program participants should have individual or group therapy sessions with a licensed mental health professional.
- ✓ **5. Family Involvement**

Addressing the family dynamic is a vital part of offering help for anxiety and depression. A reputable wilderness therapy program involves the family in the healing process since families are vital to the process of change that takes place. With both student and parents on the same path, the entire family begins to heal. The wilderness therapy program should work with the family to help them understand each participant's issues, goals, and treatment path.
- ✓ **6. Specialized Training**

All wilderness therapy field guides should be trained and certified in CPR and first aid. Wilderness therapy field guides should also be trained in mentoring the teens and young adults that come through the program. Therapists should be trained in their area of expertise or specialty (i.e. substance abuse treatment, depression and anxiety treatment, family therapy. etc.)
- ✓ **7. Individualized Treatment Plans**

At a reputable wilderness therapy program, all students should receive an individualized treatment plan based on their personal needs, strengths, goals, and issues. The individualized plans should be carefully monitored by licensed therapeutic staff members.
- ✓ **8. After Care and Transitional Support**

Progress doesn't stop the day a student leaves treatment. Therapeutic staff members should ensure that the student has established supports to assist in a smoother transition back into the "real world." In addition, the families and the students should receive recommendations on the support and level of aftercare support necessary to continue the progress made during treatment. This is vital to providing lasting help for anxiety and depression in teens and young adults.
- ✓ **9. Clinical Model**

While every student should receive an individualized treatment plan, a reputable wilderness therapy program should have a clearly defined clinical model that is based on mental health field best practices.

## Conclusion

While anxiety and depression are often overlooked in teens and young adults, research shows that recognizing the signs early, and getting your child treatment early on, are the best ways to help him or her.

Being there for your child through the treatment for anxiety and depression is vital in their transition into a happy, well-adjusted adult. While no parent wants to send their child away, sometimes doing the right thing isn't always the easy thing. In order to provide help for your child's anxiety and depression, it is important to select a treatment program that is reputable, credible, and effective in addressing teens' and young adults' individual issues.

## Resources

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<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression-and-exercise/art-20046495>

<http://www.childmind.org/en/posts/articles/mood-disorders-teenage-girls-anxiety-depression>

## Additional Resources

For additional resources on helping your child, please visit our website's resource section:  
<http://aspiroadventure.com/parent-resources/suggested-reading/>



*This white paper was sponsored by Aspiro Adventure, the pioneer of Wilderness Adventure Therapy. Aspiro Adventure offers safe, effective, and clinically-sophisticated treatment options for adolescents and young adults.*

## **About Aspiro Adventure**

Aspiro Adventure's Wilderness Adventure Therapy program was uniquely crafted to assist students and their families in creating lasting, life-long emotional changes through compassionate, intentional, research backed, and safe outdoor adventure therapy programs. The professionals at Aspiro Adventure understand individuals don't come with instructions, and every student is unique, capable, and amazing in their own right.

Aspiro Adventure focuses on helping adolescents, young adults, and their families through difficulties that occur when various behavioral, cognitive, or developmental issues are present. Research shows that engaging individuals on a personal level with strategic and intentional activities will aid in developing the tools and skills necessary to engage life in a healthy and positive way.