

STAY CALM!

Psychologist **DR SARAH HUGHES** has a decade of clinical experience and a PhD in child and adolescent anxiety disorders. Her new book, *Skip the Drama: Practical, get-ahead strategies to survive your daughter's teenage years*, offers practical tips on raising teens susceptible to mental health and behavioural issues. In this extract, Dr Hughes equips parents with strategies to help their teenagers with anxiety.

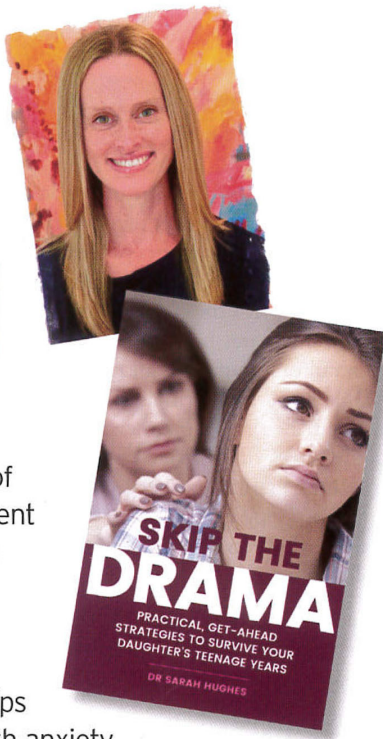
It's easy to mistake emotional outbursts for teenage drama, but it's important to make sure your daughter's meltdowns aren't a sign of something more. A 2015 survey examining the mental health of Australian children and adolescents found that nearly 8 per cent of all teenage girls aged 12 to 17 years are living with anxiety. Worldwide data is even more alarming. According to research cited by the National Institute of Mental Health, a whopping 30 per cent of teenage girls in the United States are affected by anxiety. Thirty per cent. And that doesn't take into account teens suffering from anxiety worse than what would be considered 'normal' but less severe than what meets criteria for an anxiety disorder, or teens suffering from anxiety that's still undiagnosed. It's a significant figure and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it makes anxiety the most common mental health disorder affecting teenage girls today.

HELP HER DIAL DOWN HER ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

When your daughter's anxious, her head will be drawn to worst-case scenarios, and small things -

even things that aren't worth worrying about - will trigger huge, over the top reactions. Her overly dramatic, frantic meltdowns might make you want to scream, but as frustrating as they are, they're not entirely her fault. Anxiety is a powerful emotion and it can affect not just how your daughter feels, but what she thinks as well. It makes worst-case scenarios seem more likely than they are and it will trick her into thinking she can't cope, even if she can. Once anxiety takes hold, your daughter will have a hard time thinking clearly and she'll need your help to get her thinking back on track - but there are a few things you need to keep in mind if you're going to be effective in your approach.

Trying to have a logical conversation with your daughter when she's in the midst of a meltdown won't work. Her anxiety will make it hard for her to take in much of what you say, and when she senses your frustration it'll only make things worse. What your daughter needs in moments of panic is a calm, soothing voice. Reassure her that you're there, remind her that her anxiety will pass, and help her to feel safe.



FACT

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TIP

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That's not to say that you can't help your daughter challenge her anxiety, because you can; but when it comes to anxiety, timing is everything. Wait until her anxiety has lessened, or if you know what her triggers are, get in well ahead of time and start the conversation early. Encourage her to talk to you about her fears, and when she does, listen but don't talk. And avoid comments like 'well that's just silly' or 'you don't need to worry about that' because they won't help your daughter any. Worse, they'll make her feel embarrassed and misunderstood, and you can bet it'll be the first and last time she talks to you about how she's feeling. If your daughter seems relatively calm, try to help her keep her worries in perspective.

Don't tell her what to think; instead, ask questions that will help her consider a different point of view. The exact questions you ask will depend a little on her area of worry, but questions like the ones below are good examples.

- Have you worried about this before?
- What happened last time you worried about this?
- Did what you were worried about come true or was your anxiety misleading?
- Putting aside what your anxiety's telling you for a minute, based on past experience, what do you think the actual likelihood is of this worst-case scenario happening?
- Is there anything we can do about this situation?
- What parts of the situation do you have control over?

Challenging anxious thoughts is a difficult skill and it's one your daughter will need to

practise, but over time it will become a tool she can use to better manage her anxiety. Help her to practise, but time your practice well, and be patient. The more frustrated you get, the more anxious she'll feel, and things will end badly. Stay calm enough for the both of you and she'll get there in the end.

PARENTING AN ANXIOUS TEEN 101:

AVOID AVOIDANCE

How you respond to your daughter when she's anxious is important. She'll want to avoid any situation - a class speech, a difficult assignment, social situations - that makes her feel anxious, and in fact the more anxious she is the more she'll want to avoid. Your love for her will compel you to do whatever you can to protect her from feeling stressed, but while helping her to avoid stress might seem like a good solution, the reality is, going along with her anxiety and encouraging avoidance will actually make her anxiety worse. When your daughter sidesteps anxiety-provoking situations she'll initially feel relief, but it's only a short-term solution for her distress. Avoidance prevents her from learning that worst-case scenarios aren't nearly as likely as her anxiety would have her believe, and this can make her anxiety worse in the long term.

Over time, avoidance can also undermine her confidence. It cheats her of the opportunity to see that she can cope with far more than she gives herself credit for, opening the door for anxiety to start infiltrating other areas of her life as well. **gr**

Skip the Drama by Dr Sarah Hughes is published by Exisle, rrp \$29.99.