



THE INCOMPLETE GUIDE

for helping teenagers battle anxiety and depression.

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This guide is a supplement to the training for people involved in high school ministry held at Xenos on May 3, 2019. It's a response to the question "what can I do to help?" Disclaimer: These ideas are not substitutes for interventions by a mental health professional. However, anyone working with teenagers in ministry can access one or more of these tools.

No single idea is likely to be life-changing (but ya never know). These are tools which can help a person move forward a little bit. Try one or two at first, then add another one as the person is able. If they try but can't seem to do one of these ideas, no problem, just move to another idea. If they are doing some of these but don't think it's helping, encourage them to keep it up. These all support basic healthy living too!

Another bit of encouragement... Most teenagers - especially ones who are dealing with mental health issues - don't respond well to being told what to do. Mental health issues already give rise to feelings of powerlessness, worthless and defeat. My suggestion is to use these ideas by way of **modeling, encouraging and inviting**. You might enjoy doing some of these with the person and then talk about how it's going. Giving positive encouragement and having confidence that they can overcome is a huge part of the equation. May the Lord strengthen you in His love and wisdom!

TAKING CARE OF THE BODY

Our body, mind (with emotions) and soul are all one integrated system! It's important to take care of our body so our mind and emotions function optimally. Helping teenagers identify ways they can manage their physical self in a more healthy manner allows the other helpful tools to be more effective. Without adequate management of the body, fighting against depression and anxiety is much harder!

Get to Sleep!

Generally, more emotional recovery happens during sleep than any other time of day. Therefore, getting consistent sleep is a big help. Teenagers need about 8-10 hours of sleep per night.

Here's a great piece on teens and sleep:

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/teens-and-sleep>

Ingestion

Put healthy stuff into the body (fruits veggies, lean meat). Keep unhealthy stuff out (caffeine, alcohol, excessive sugar, etc.). Remember, our brains run on nutrients.

Take a good multivitamin. Many teenagers have questionable eating habits. Taking a multivitamin daily is an easy (and relatively inexpensive) way to boost the good nutrients helpful for good brain health. Taking a multi-

vitamin is not a substitute for medication, but can be an important supplement - especially if someone is taking medication.

For an intro to this topic, here's a decent article:

<https://www.bustle.com/p/can-vitamins-help-mental-health-these-7-supplements-may-have-mood-boosting-properties-8591288>

Get a move on!

Exercise has been shown to be a helpful supplement to battling teen depression. Exercise can have many benefits (improved confidence, mental clarity, improved energy levels, etc.). However, the benefits are usually pretty subtle. About 45 minutes of some form of cardio about 4 times a week consistently for 4 weeks is needed to create noticeable results for most people. It's a tall order, but a lot of teens can get into it.

Here are a couple quick articles on the topic:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/can-exercise-help-relieve-teen-depression-2016081010084>

<https://www.mindwise.org/blog/mental-health/exercise-in-teens-to-fight-depression/>

Just breathe

The easiest tool to help a person battling anxiety is deep breathing. Our alarm system which anxiety highjacks is called our fight or flight mechanism. It's also called the sympathetic nervous system. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us calm down.

Probably the simplest and most "accessible" helpful breathing technique is called "combat breathing," which is used in situations where stress reduction is critical. Simply inhale deeply for 4-5 seconds. Hold for 4 seconds. Exhale for 4 seconds. (Through the nose is good if you can do it.)

<https://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/Documents/health-promotion-wellness/psychological-emotional-wellbeing/Combat-Tactical-Breathing.pdf>

Slightly more advanced breathing exercises can be easily learned and practiced. It's called diaphragmatic breathing. This tool is really helpful to do 3-5 times a day. It can be done while focusing on an encouraging passage in scripture, or imagining a safe and peaceful place.

Here's a quick description of this breathing exercise (and a couple others):

<https://www.healthline.com/health/diaphragmatic-breathing#steps-to-do>

Stay clean

Don't do weed. Many of the teenagers I talk to believe they are experts in all things cannabis. Though many have some solid info on the topic, it is also true that many have consumed mis-information as well. Doing weed (THC in its various forms) in some cases may be helpful in the short term - as is alcohol. However, THC exacerbates the "problem" of anxiety and of depression. It is generally counter-productive to making meaningful strides in the battle against depression and/or anxiety.

Here are a couple good articles on the topic:

<https://www.psychom.net/marijuana-for-anxiety-in-teens/>

<https://www.drugrehab.com/addiction/drugs/marijuana/anxiety/>

TAKING CARE OF THE MIND AND SOUL

Cell phone use / Screen time

This is a mixed bag for sure. A simplistic reduction of "screen time" is not necessarily the solution here. However, studies are showing that lots of interaction with certain kinds of digital media can exacerbate or even potentially lead to mental health issues. For example, too much gaming over a period of months can increase social isolation as well as social anxiety. Also, scanning social media for how amazing others' lives seem can increase a sense of inadequacy and hopelessness. We know about FOMO (fear of missing out), which can be enhanced by our digital connectivity. But a bigger issue for teens is often FOBLO (fear of being left out)... Talk with the teenager about their digital consumption. You may figure out together where some of their use is increasing stress or discouragement. You may also stumble upon where their use seems more like an obsession or addiction. If this is the case, helping them wean down - or even taking a social media sabbatical - can be amazingly helpful.

Here's a well done and more academically oriented article on this topic (worth the read):

https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/140/Supplement_2/S76

Here's a less rigorous article:

<https://health.usnews.com/health-care/patient-advice/articles/2018-03-16/is-screen-time-a-serious-threat-to-mental-health> (iGen by Jean M. Twenge was mentioned in this article. This book is on my summer read list!)

For higher achievers... encourage them to NOT interact with social media or digital communication while studying. This can be a huge stress relief. Having the phone (or tablet or screen) alerting with notifications has been shown to significantly increase the time it takes to complete studies and decrease retention of material. Most teenagers would rather murder than give up their phone for 3 hours. So, have them not touch, look, or be alerted for 55 minutes. Then they get 5 minutes to communicate. Then, shut it down & get back to the grind. Think of the reduction in stress (i.e., anxiety) if time spent doing homework can be reduced by 30% & be more effective!

Anxiety doesn't get a vote

Don't give anxiety a vote. If anxiety had its way, it would make us live in a shoebox and never come out. Consider what you would choose if anxiety wasn't whispering in your ear. Then, do that! Anxiety might not leave you alone when you do this. So, work to ignore that anxiety just highjacked the alarm in your body and brain. If you take back some territory that anxiety has restricted for you, anxiety might become weaker. The opposite is true as well (generally). When we give anxiety a vote and limit ourself, anxiety grows and wants to take more territory from our life.

Extinguishing thinking VS Inflammatory thinking

When we have strong feelings, as humans we often justify (fortify) those feelings with thoughts/beliefs. For example, if I'm mad that my friend ate my last cookie, I say things in my head like: "what a jerk - who does that!" "what else will they steal?" "I'd never do that to a friend" "that was the best cookie ever, and now I'll never experience it" "I'm not going to just let it go!" etc.

As you can see, these thoughts all support being mad and offended. They are examples of "inflammatory thinking."

In order to get past being mad, I need to add some "extinguishing thinking" like: "it was just a cookie" "yeah, I've done crap like that to my friends too." "I could do violence or forgive. Hmmm. I guess I'll forgive."

When a person is feeling depressed, they tend to think about all the thoughts and beliefs which support their emotional experience (inflammatory thinking). It can be helpful to add thoughts and beliefs which are true, but not in support of what depression is whispering them. One possible way to do this is to write on one side of paper the things depression is saying. Then, write on the other side, the things that can be believed which are not what depression is saying, but what I would rather believe - or what hope would say (extinguishing thinking).

Remember, we can't lie inside our head to make ourselves feel better. So, if the positives are TOO positive, it's not helpful. For example, if I were to write down "life is wonderful," well, it might just be too unbelievable. But if I wrote down, "it's possible that life could get better someday," well, I could maybe believe that.

Reduce put-downs

Studies show the average American adult hears around 2,500 self-evaluative messages in their head every day! Yikes. If even half of those are negative, think of the put downs that are going on. What a joy stealer, a confidence stealer, a motivation stealer, a hope stealer! Encourage the teen to identify the most frequent put-down(s) they hear in their own head. Help them to find a truth-filled encouragement to replace it. Then check in to see if they have been able to catch the put-down and replace it with the truth-filled message. Discouragement warning: This takes practice!

Focus on right now

Anxiety tries to get us to think negatively about the future. Always about the future, whether it's 5 years from now or 5 minutes from now. WHAT IF this? or WHAT IF that? When you hear the "WHAT IF'S" in your head, tell anxiety to go away! Then, focus on right now. Don't debate the "what if's." Acknowledge it, then shake it off and focus on RIGHT NOW!

Notice your gratitude

Gratitude is a wonderful antidote for depression. If the teenager has trouble getting out of the blocks on this one, helping them with items to get started can be very helpful. If the teen wants to stop after each one and have a dialogue about it, then fine. But watch for that dialogue turning into reasons the teen shouldn't be grateful or should be focused on the "crap" side of life. If that's going on, then encourage the teen to just make a list and not discuss until several items are on the gratitude list. This keeps the focus on gratitude for several minutes. Here are a few forms of this tool:

Consider writing out 10 or 20 reasons you are thankful. You will be surprised how many you can come up with once you get going!

Maybe write down seven on a card (or in your phone) that you can look at a few times a day to remember how grateful you truly are!

Keep a "gratitude journal" and jot down a couple things each morning and a couple things you are grateful for at the end of your day.

For every crap sandwich the teen identifies, identify 3 things the teen is grateful for and encourage them to really notice their internal gratitude.

Holy name repetition

This is a fun one! Explore some of the holy names of God and what they mean. Write down 3 to 5 favorites. Then recite each of them 5 times OUT LOUD. Do this 3 times a day. Also, another version is to write down 3 phrases of praise about God - who He is. Like, "Lord God of all creation, You are mighty and worthy to be

praised!" Then recite all 3 of these out loud 3 times a day. Sure, this seems like no biggie, but if done every day for 30 days, depression is lessened for many people.

Read the Word

Being a Christian doesn't mean we are immune from mental health struggles. But our faith life can help! Ask the Lord to increase your peace as you walk with Him and feed on the Word. Most folks find it easier to trust the Lord when we read even just a little bit of scripture each day. Psalms are great. Another piece of encouragement is to not try to find the answers to the problem of depression or anxiety. Just soak in the beauty of the Lord. Read gospel stories and be amazed at who Jesus is and how He loved people.

Serving others

One of depression's most powerful tricks is to get us focused on ourself. The Lord doesn't need us to be 100% before we can serve others in meaningful ways. Depression tries to discourage this idea by saying things like, "Don't I have to feel encouraged in order to encourage someone else?" NO!!! If any of us were to wait until we were whole before we served and cared for others, we would never do it.

Encourage the teen to reach out through service of others. It could be a work camp, a day of service, or something official (like setting up for an event or meeting). But, it could also be reaching out to someone else, sending a message of encouragement, drawing someone a picture (and pray for them while drawing), or praying for someone else.

Don't go it alone

God built us to have relationships with one another. Encourage the teen to share their struggles with trusted friends or family members - or a professional if needed. We don't have to struggle alone! If teens are together sharing, take caution that it doesn't just become a dump-fest. Sometimes teens can try to out-do one another in the amount/type/duration of their crap. Expressing their experience(s) can be helpful, but it's good to not stop there. Move also in to talking about the things that are in alignment with Ephesians 4:8. (Maybe even encourage each teen to identify a positive in each category of Eph 4:8 (true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, etc).

GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Your org may have steps, tools or tips for you with this one. If so, follow them! Here a couple quick ideas.

Consult or inform your leader that you are encouraging the teen to seek mental health services.

Engage the parents

When you are able to identify that the teen has a supportive (or somewhat supportive) parent, encourage the teen to talk to their parent about getting help. Offer to be with them for that conversation if they would like the support. Let them know you can either share with their parent your observations, or not. If you share with the parent, it is helpful to focus on measurable and observable items.

If they want to have the conversation on their own or with you present, it can be helpful to do a practice run of the conversation so the teen has an idea of what they want to say. Anxiety and depression have a way of making a conversation seem easy in one moment and in the next moment, seem impossible. The teen may need a couple or few stops and starts to get this ball rolling, so don't give up!