

Helping Your Teen Through Anxiety & Depression

Four Lies That Fuel Anxiety and Depression in Teens

If you discovered, quite by chance, that your normally trustworthy teen had been telling bold-faced lies, would you be shocked? Then ready yourself for this: if you have an anxious or depressed adolescent, they are almost certainly telling lies every day.

Your teen is never "caught in the act," because those lies are told in secret. They are the lies discouraged kids tell *themselves*.

For nearly everyone, the lies begin at an early age. We are all prey to negative thoughts that run through our mind almost continually, a disparaging play-by-play commentary that ridicules not only our actions, but even other thoughts we have. In their book, *Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed?*, psychologists Archibald Hart and Catherine Hart Weber suggest that "as much as 77 percent of self-talk during an average person's day is negative and berating in nature."

When all that negative self-talk is allowed to continue unchecked and unchallenged, [anxious children in particular](#) are at risk of coming to harmful and irrational conclusions about themselves and others. Little by little, their self-esteem can be whittled away by false assumptions that they may never voice out loud. Consider this assumption, for example:

I always put my hand up first, but the teacher never picks me. She doesn't like me.

By adolescence – the onset of an intensely self-conscious phase fraught with extreme mood swings – mastery over private thoughts becomes especially important. A teen who hasn't learned to beat back self-reproaching falsehoods can find their thoughts spiralling down to some dark places.

Alyssa didn't meet me at lunch. I sat in the caf by myself while everyone stared at me. I have no real friends. Everyone thinks I'm a loser.

I'll never pass this course. How am I supposed to choose a career when I'm not good at anything at all?

To preserve a healthy sense of self, kids need to learn how to "talk back" to their negative thoughts with **truth-based self-talk**; they need to be taught how to confront irrational lies and discern the truth about themselves and others in every situation.

A teen with healthy, truth-based self-talk, for example, might approach the first situation above like this:

Alyssa didn't meet me at lunch. It was so embarrassing sitting there by myself, but at least I wasn't the only one eating alone. From now on I'll meet Alyssa at her locker first.

Truth-focused thinking (as in this latest example) helps head off descent into a depressive, "hopeless" funk by diverting emotional energy in a more positive direction. As Drs. Hart and Hart Weber explain:

"Healthy thinking is able to go directly to problem solving. Irrational, inaccurate thinking . . . on the other hand, can't move you directly to problem solving because the real problem hasn't yet been identified."

Four lies to watch for and challenge

That "irrational, inaccurate thinking," as Drs. Hart and Hart Weber describe it, turns out to be surprisingly widespread – even among mature adults. In 1980, psychiatrist David D. Burns published a now-widely-circulated list of ten common patterns of pessimistic thinking.¹ Burns' "[checklist of cognitive distortions](#)" could equally be called a checklist of false assumptions.

Here are just four of Burns' "cognitive distortions" to watch for in your teen:

All-or-nothing thinking: You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

- Tell-tale signs of all-or-nothing thinking are words like "always," "never" and "every."

Overgeneralization: You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat, or you reach a broad conclusion based on just one bit of information.

- Example thought: *Amy doesn't want to come to my party. I bet nobody's going to show up.*

Jumping to conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

- Example thought: *My friends went to the mall on Saturday, but they didn't invite me. That proves they don't like me anymore.*

Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.

- Example thought: *I feel stupid and unlovable, therefore both are true.*

What parents can do

"Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being," cries the Psalmist, "and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom." (Psalm 51:6) Through this, and many other Scriptures, God urges us to safeguard the quality of our thought life. But overcoming a habit of falling into erroneous, negative thoughts is not easy. Here are some ways you can help your child "take every thought captive to obey Christ."

Help your teen understand that negative thoughts aren't harmless. *Negative thoughts become feelings, and those feelings often dictate actions and outcomes.* Although negative thoughts may not be based on reality, they lead to *real actions*. Study Burns' list of cognitive distortions together, and be honest with your teen about the ones *you* tend to fall into. Be careful not to imply that your child is "too negative"; Burns' list will help them realize that many people struggle to be optimistic thinkers.

In casual conversation, gently challenge false statements and steer your child to the truth. Make a habit of asking, *Is that really true? Let's look at the facts.* Or rephrase your child's negative statements into truth-based statements: *You don't always forget your homework. You forgot one day this week,*

that's all. (Be cautious, however, about challenging your child's statements when he or she is in the grip of strong emotions, either angry or sad. Intense moods call for *empathetic listening.*)

Champion Philippians 4:8 as a helpful "litmus test" for honesty and logic in self-talk. Encourage your teen to test a funk to see if it flunks the first part of the Philippians 4:8 test:

When I consider what I am telling myself right now:

*Is it **true**? What are the real facts?*

*Is it **honourable**? Does it honour others? (Colossians 3:13-14) Does it honour who I am as a follower of Jesus?*

*Is it **right**? Even if my thoughts are based on truth, is it right to keep thinking this way?*

*What is a **pure**, unbiased way of looking at this? How does God's Word apply to this situation?*

*What would be an **excellent, praiseworthy** plan to deal with this?*

*What is a likely **positive outcome**? (Resolve to focus thoughts and prayers on that outcome.)*

Help your child draft their personal "code of ethics" with respect to guarding their thoughts. Here's one example:

I commit to optimism:

To believe the best about my future,

To believe the best about others,

*And to worry only about what I **know** to be true.*

*And when **real** difficulties do arise*

I commit myself to God my Father

Believing that He has planned good things for me

*And through this trial, will help mature the good **in** me.*

Nail down negative thoughts. Encourage your child to *write down* recurring negative thoughts. Check them against Burns' list of cognitive distortions, or apply the Philippians 4:8 test, then list the real truth of the matter alongside each negative thought. Urge your child to write down some positive action steps that may resolve the issue, then choose one or two to act on.

Imagine a mentor. Anxious children are typically very harsh with themselves in their self-talk. One helpful habit is to imagine sharing their thoughts with someone who loves them unreservedly. Envisage what that person would say. Which thoughts would they accept as valid, and which thoughts would they lovingly challenge as unhelpful or untrue? (Christ Himself would be an ideal mentor to imagine sitting right alongside, or perhaps a grandfather figure.)

Pray for your child and encourage them in the Word. Healthy, lasting self-esteem flows from a child who trusts – regardless of how they feel in the moment – that they are God's unique creation, already made "more than good enough" by Christ's sacrifice, and intensely loved by their Heavenly Father. Remind your child that His Spirit knows who they *really are*, and moves them forward toward all they are meant to be. The fickle judgements of friends and peers – and even their own self-assessment – simply don't count.

"Gift" to your child God's promises of His unfailing love: create a beautiful journal, text them to your child, make or buy a pack verses. Encourage them to memorize their favourites.

I. Burns, David D: Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy. (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1980)

For further reading:

Is Your Teen Stressed or Depressed? by Dr. Archibald Hart and Dr. Catherine Hart Weber.

Mom, I Hate My Life! by Sharon A. Hersh.

For younger children: Advice from Anxiety Canada on [healthy thinking for younger children](#) (AnxietyCanada.com)

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If you liked this article and would like to go deeper, we have some helpful resources below.