

# YOUNG ADULT ANXIETY





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*In this white paper, we provide an overview of the young adult struggle with common anxiety and various anxiety disorders. We focus on helping young adults identify, manage, and select proper treatment options for their anxiety.*

*This white paper is written for young adults struggling with anxiety, parents trying to help their young adult manage anxiety, or for anyone else needing advice on the topic.*

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## Young Adults Are More Anxious Than Ever But There Is Help

Anxiety is the most common mental health disorder in adults today. Seven out of ten say they experience daily stress and anxiety.

Forty million adults in the United States have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, characterized by persistent and severe anxiety that affects their success and overall happiness. Young adults are particularly vulnerable, as symptoms of anxiety disorders typically present before the age of 21.

“Millennials”, the young adult generation of today, are becoming known as the “anxious generation” as study after study shows higher levels of anxiety in their generation than ever before.

### **WHY ARE YOUNG ADULTS SO STRESSED?**

On the surface, Millennials have it all-- more confidence, intelligence, opportunity, creativity and technological savvy than past generations. But Millennials also generally have fewer, or less stable social support systems and more stress in academia and their careers. They are a generation of high achievers thrown into unprecedentedly competitive environments. This combination can lead to frequent feelings of failure, burnout, negative self-image, and anxiety.

But before thinking that this generation is lost, consider that anxiety is highly treatable. With a little help along the way, Millennials have as much, or maybe even more, potential than any previous generation to live happy, fulfilling lives.

**This paper on Young Adult Anxiety is broken down into the following sections:**

1. College is stressful. It is ok to ask for help.
2. Signs you (or a loved one) might have an anxiety disorder
3. Social anxiety or the “always embarrassed” disorder
4. Taking the edge off: Self-medicating for anxiety
5. For young adults: Tips for managing anxiety
6. For parents: How to help your child manage an anxiety disorder
7. Holistic nature-based adventure programs to treat anxiety

## College is Stressful. It is OK to Ask for Help.

In today's competitive world, high achieving youth begin college preparations as early as middle school (often earlier). Everything they do, from sports to community service, is informed by how it will make them look on college applications. By the time these students arrive at college they are anxious, overworked, and tired.

Add the new pressures associated with increased independence, a new social scene, and a challenging course load, and you get the modern phenomenon of “freshman burnout”.

One out of three college students across the United States drops out after their freshman year. While anxiety is not the sole cause of this high dropout rate, it is a common factor. Studies show that if a student who withdrew from school struggled with a mental health issue, they usually withdrew because of that mental health issue.

Anxiety is the most reported mental health issue on college campuses. In the past 12 months:

- **More than half** of college students reported feeling “overwhelmed” by their responsibilities.
- **Eighty percent** of college students reported that they frequently (or sometimes) experienced daily stress.
- **Twenty-one percent** of college students reported that anxiety had severely affected their academic performance.
- **Fourteen percent** of college students had been diagnosed or treated for anxiety disorders-- more than were treated for depression or any other mental health disorder.

College is stressful, and many students suffer from moderate to severe anxiety. Yet college does not have to be a cause of severe stress. Anxiety is manageable. Developing a healthy daily routine, getting outside, exercising, and talking with understanding friends and family can help. If the anxiety persists, seek help from a professional. Experiencing persistent, severe anxiety could be indicative of an anxiety disorder.

There are many options for college students struggling to manage anxiety. Some colleges offer free counseling sessions through mental health services departments. Others might refer students to off-campus health care providers. Remember, there is no shame in asking for help.

## Signs You (or a Loved One) Might Have an Anxiety Disorder

Some anxiety is normal. We are all familiar with that spike in adrenaline, racing heart and wide-eyed expression. Maybe it is triggered by public speaking, or perhaps by flying or by taking an important exam. Anxiety keeps us safe in dangerous situations by heightening our senses and awareness and warning us of potential threats. But there is a difference between common anxiety and an anxiety disorder.

When an intense level of fear or worry continues over time in non-threatening environments and begins to affect other aspects of life like work or school, it can be symptomatic of an anxiety disorder.

If chronic, the following symptoms are associated with anxiety disorders:

- Persistent feelings of apprehension, worry, or dread
- Feeling “jumpy” or irritable
- Panic attacks, fluttering heart, “fight or flight” feelings
- Sleep problems
- Irrational fears
- Muscle tension
- Digestive problems
- Severe self-consciousness, stage fright, or fear of social interaction
- Flashbacks to a traumatic event
- Compulsive behaviors or obsessions
- Self-doubt

There are several types of anxiety disorders including generalized anxiety disorders (GAD), social anxiety, panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and phobias. The causes are a mixture of environmental, personal, and genetic factors. It is often difficult to identify a single cause, though some therapists will explore the root of the anxiety in order to treat it.

It is important to understand that anxiety is not just mental. It is chemical. That means that it is difficult for someone with anxiety to simply use logical thought to reduce their stress. Saying things like “calm down” to someone with anxiety is typically unhelpful. However, all of these conditions are treatable with the right combination of strategies.

Treatment and management strategies for anxiety disorders include:

- Lifestyle changes
- Mindfulness exercises
- Exposure to nature
- Exposure therapy
- Talk therapy
- Treatment programs
- Medications

Remember that stress and worry are common, especially for young adults. But when these symptoms become chronic, persistent states of being, they could be indicative of an anxiety disorder. At that point, it is time to seek professional help.

Despite the overall effectiveness of treatment for anxiety disorders, two out of three cases in the U.S. go untreated. Denying or delaying treatment for an anxiety disorder can result in underperformance at work, trouble at school, physical sickness, and often substance abuse.

## Social Anxiety or the “Always Embarrassed” Disorder

We all experience shyness in social situations at some point in our lives. However, about 7 to 13 percent of the adult population experiences something that may look like normal shyness but is much more severe. Chronic, debilitating shyness or a deep fear of being embarrassed in front of other people or negatively judged is called “Social Anxiety” or “Social Phobia”.

### **Signs and symptoms of social anxiety include:**

- Constant fear of criticism or embarrassment
- Self-consciousness or embarrassment in social settings
- Negative self-image
- Difficulty being around people or speaking up in front of people
- Worrying for days or weeks before a social event
- Avoidance of social events, including classes or work
- Dwelling on or over-analyzing every social interaction
- Blushing, sweating or trembling when in the presence of other people
- Nausea brought on by social interactions
- Difficulty forming friendships or other relationships

Social Anxiety is the third most common mental health disorder among young adults, yet it is often ignored or associated with “normal shyness”. Left untreated, social anxiety can have a negative impact on the success of young adults, and make school and work almost unbearable.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are in a college lecture hall. Many of us would feel butterflies in our stomach a moment before raising our hand to answer a question in front of 200 unknown people. But for someone with social anxiety, even the possibility of having to speak in that lecture hall is something that could keep them from sleeping for weeks beforehand.

College is a place where social competency helps students succeed. Speaking up in lectures or during discussion sections gains the approval of the professor or tutor. Self-confidence during presentations generally results in a higher score. And when academic material gets tough, students are encouraged to reach out to their peers or tutors for help-- something that is easy for students with confidence, but nearly impossible for those with social anxiety.

Many students with social anxiety have learned coping methods, including intense preparation for social settings, and can still be very successful in school. However, they typically struggle more than their outgoing peers.

**Students with social anxiety have a tendency to:**

- Maintain self-image at all cost, even if their methods are harmful to long-term success.
- Skip classes where they might be asked to speak.
- Avoid participating in classes that they do attend.
- Avoid asking for academic help.
- Do poorly on projects with presentation elements where stuttering and embarrassment can be misconstrued as a lack of preparation.
- Avoid seeking help for their anxiety.

It is important to remember that social anxiety is not just shyness or a personality trait. It is a mental health disorder that should be treated as such. Criticism of academic performance is unhelpful to individuals with anxiety. Remember that it might be hard for a person to ask for help. Instead, offer to help them by setting up the first appointment with a mental health professional and support them through the process.

Social anxiety is treatable through talk therapy and calculated exposure to social settings. If left untreated, however, only about one-third of individuals with social anxiety will achieve remission within ten years. This is especially concerning given that social anxiety often coexists with depression and substance abuse disorders.



## Taking the Edge Off: Self-Medicating for Anxiety

People who struggle with untreated anxiety often try to “self-medicate” the symptoms away by using drugs and alcohol. These individuals tend to use mind-altering substances to “take the edge off” or numb their anxiety.

Young adults with panic and social anxiety disorders are particularly likely to develop alcohol dependence and abuse problems. About 10 to 20 percent of people with panic disorders abuse alcohol or other drugs (more are just frequent users), with the vast majority reporting that the panic disorder triggered the substance abuse. Post-traumatic stress disorder is also a predictor of substance abuse.

While most people with anxiety report that self-medication helps reduce panic or severe anxiety in the moment, alcohol and drug use can make anxiety worse over time.

Substance abuse can trigger more anxiety by stressing social relationships, threatening job security or academic performance, and by causing body systems to become overactive and brain chemicals to become further unbalanced. The anxiety caused by substance abuse patterns then triggers the need to further self-medicate, completing the self-destructive cycle of “comorbid” disorders.

The intertwined nature of anxiety and substance abuse makes treatment extremely difficult. Substance abuse decreases the effectiveness of anxiety treatment, and this dual diagnosis also increases risk of suicide. Substance abuse can also trigger more severe mental health disorders like schizophrenia.

Dual diagnosis anxiety and substance abuse patients are often unpredictable and volatile. People with anxiety disorders have a higher rate of relapse and more severe withdrawal symptoms. The “12 Step Program” and other traditional substance abuse programs are also less effective in this population.

As such, any treatment program considered for this population must be prepared for, and have expertise in, dual diagnosis cases. An integrated approach that incorporates talk therapy with experiential, nature-based therapy can have a higher rate of success than other single-approach programs.

It is best not to delay treatment for severe anxiety. Particularly in these cases of dual diagnosis, the sooner treatment is started, the more effective it is likely to be.

If you or a loved one is struggling with anxiety, remember that asking for help is the first step to recovery.

## FOR YOUNG ADULTS: Tips For Managing Anxiety

While it can seem overwhelming at times, anxiety is highly manageable. Here are some tips for managing stress and anxiety in daily life:

### **GO OUTSIDE**

Go on a hike. Have a snowball fight. Jump in a pile of leaves. Even if you don't have a lot of time, take your books outside and study under a tree. Contact with nature and natural light is proven to significantly reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety.

### **PRACTICE MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness meditation can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and panic in patients diagnosed with anxiety disorders. Find a guided mindfulness meditation on YouTube and sit in a comfortable position focusing on your breath. If that is too difficult, do an active meditation while jogging, swimming laps, or any other repetitive, low impact exercise. Even 10 minutes of mindfulness exercises per day can make a difference in overall anxiety levels.

### **BREATHE**

Concentrating on one's breath by counting how long it takes to inhale and exhale distracts the mind and calms emotions. Breathe slowly. Count to five as you inhale. Hold for five. And exhale for five. Exhalation forces the body to relax and releases muscle tension.

For other tips and guided breathing exercises, download an app called "Breathing Zone".

### **CONNECT TO YOUR SENSES**

Grounding exercises that focus on the five senses can stop a panic attack in its tracks. If you feel an overwhelming sense of anxiety, sit down (preferably outside) and out loud name five things you see, five things you feel, five things you hear, and five things you taste or smell. (i.e. I see my feet. I see a maple tree. etc.) Then move on to four, then three, then two, then one. Notice how your emotions have shifted once you get yourself into the present moment.

**EXERCISE**

Even if it's 20 minutes every few days, exercise is a great tool for managing anxiety. Exercising releases natural chemicals in your brain that make you happier, more alert and energetic, and increase cognitive processing. Not only is this great for your mood, but that cognitive boost helps you focus in order to check more things off of your stressful to-do list.

**BUILD A DAILY ROUTINE**

Manage stress by limiting the chaos that causes it. Develop a morning and evening routine that includes self-care and hygiene, exercise, and proper nutrition. Give yourself enough time for all of your responsibilities and also structure in free time. Unplug from technology at least an hour before bedtime in order to ensure that you have a proper sleep cycle and are getting at least 8 hours of sleep per night.

**REDUCE CLUTTER**

Excessive clutter overloads our minds with stimuli and signals to our brains that there is work to be done, making it hard to relax. Clutter-free environments lead to an organized and focused mind.

**REACH OUT TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

Don't be afraid to reach out to the people closest to you for help. Friends and family are great outlets for venting stress and for giving advice. And they are equally great sources of laughter and fun. The Mayo Clinic calls laughter one of the best stress-busters around.

**AVOID CAFFEINE, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS**

Caffeine might seem like the answer to getting through college or a double shift at work, but it can also make you jittery, increasing the feeling of anxiety or panic. Try a caffeine-free tea instead to boost metabolism and calm the nerves.

Alcohol and other drugs may numb anxiety momentarily, but keep in mind that over time they can worsen the anxiety.

**SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

If you continue to have anxiety, it could be time to seek professional help. Take a trip to your college mental health clinic, or find a therapist in your area. If you are struggling to call, ask a friend or family member to set-up the appointment for you. There are many options for treating anxiety from talk therapy, to experience-based programs, to medications for severe cases. A professional can help identify the best combination of treatment for you.

## FOR PARENTS: How to Help Your Child Manage an Anxiety Disorder

It is hard to watch a loved one struggle with anxiety. The emotional roller coaster of ups and downs can make you feel powerless to help them. But there are some things you can do to support their process.

**Here is a list of advice for parents with a child struggling with anxiety.**

- **Educate yourself on anxiety disorders.** It is important to be familiar with the process your child is going through in order to understand where they are coming from and to make the best choices in terms of treatment options. However, be wary of “over-diagnosing” your child via the internet.
- **Encourage treatment.** Anxiety is highly treatable. Assist in making the first appointment with a mental health specialist if your child is afraid to ask for help. Go with them to the appointment for moral support.
- **Make yourself available.** Spend time with your child. Do fun things together. Laughter and being outside are some of the best ways to relieve anxiety. Also, let them know that you are available for a call if they need you.
- **Help them set realistic goals.** Managing anxiety is a slow process. Help your child set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely) goals to measure their progress. Measure goals based on individual improvement. Remember that for someone dealing with anxiety, just going to a class could be a significant step forward.
- **Reinforce positive behaviors.** Give praise for things that your child does well, rather than focusing on consequences for negative behaviors. Encourage healthy behaviors such as exercise and proper sleep patterns.
- **Check in.** Ask about their experience. Ask how you can help, but don't nag. Learn when to take a step back.
- **Listen.** Don't judge, and don't assume that you know what your child will say. Acknowledge that you don't know what their anxiety feels like.
- **Forgive.** Recognize that there will be ups and downs during your child's process. Forgive them for their bad moods, outbursts, and mistakes. Try to keep yourself from getting frustrated. Forgive yourself too, for not being perfect either. And remember that it doesn't help for you to blame yourself.

- **Set boundaries.** Just because you are your child's biggest supporter does not mean that you can't set limits. Set boundaries around expectations about things like curfew, money, and drug and alcohol use. Hold your ground without getting angry or yelling if your child tests those limits. Consistency is important.
- **Take care of yourself first.** Helping a child with anxiety can be exhausting. Remember that you have to be healthy in order to help them get healthy. Maintain your own lifestyle, routine, and responsibilities. Take time for yourself.

## Holistic Nature-Based Adventure Programs To Treat Anxiety

While talk therapy is still a popular option for those who struggle with anxiety, it is not the only option available or even the most effective. Young adult therapy is moving away from enclosed rooms and out into the world, where nature and adventure drive the therapeutic experience. This type of experience-based therapy, sometimes known as Wilderness Adventure Therapy, is proving to be more effective in treating anxiety than traditional one-dimensional options.

- A program to treat young adults with anxiety should have the following elements:
- Adventure
- Intentional exposure to nature
- Group therapy
- Individual talk therapy
- Clinical sophistication and preparedness for dual diagnosis
- A holistic approach that encompasses wellness aspects including a good nutrition program, yoga or other mindfulness practices, and daily physical activity.

**Adventure** activities like hiking, rafting, climbing, or surfing allow students to confront perceived limitations and push past them. One of the most effective treatments for anxiety is "exposure therapy" or intentionally exposing the person to anxiety-inducing situations over time. In overcoming challenges associated with adventure, a student faces anxieties and learns effective coping skills through personal experience.

**Nature** and physical contact with the natural world is proven to relieve stress and anxiety as well as increase feelings of connectedness with self and others. The human body and brain evolved to have a positive reaction to natural patterns (trees, forests, flowers, clouds etc.) as well as natural light, so even just being outside can make a subtle shift in our moods. Returning the body to its normal circadian rhythm (waking with the sun) also helps reduce stress.

**Group and individual therapy** provide a good balance of support and accountability for young adults as they go through their own individual therapeutic processes. Individual talk therapy provides clinical depth to the student experience, and allows students to explore the root causes of their anxiety. A group of peers fosters therapeutic mentorship and also provides a safe space in which students can try new coping skills.

**A holistic approach** to wellness is important for programs designed to help young adults. Good habits around self-care, hygiene, and organization relieve subtle triggers of anxiety. The best programs for young adults with anxiety would also include a focus on nutrition for a healthy mind and body, daily exercise, time for journaling or reading, and some mindfulness practices whether it is yoga or meditation.

**Wilderness Adventure Therapy** works because of the combination of therapeutic techniques and external stimuli. In other words, in a holistic program, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. By simply taking time away from all of the stressors of “real life” and distractions like cellphones and social media can be refreshing for young adults suffering from anxiety-related burnout. Wilderness Adventure Therapy programs are highly effective and can be a good option for young adults with anxiety who are struggling in the mainstream of life. These programs generally last from 2-3 months and can often fit into a gap semester or year.

## Conclusion

Anxiety and anxiety disorders are common mental health issues for young adults. If left untreated, these conditions can lead to self-destructive behaviors like substance abuse. However, anxiety is also highly manageable. Lifestyle changes including routine, diet, exercise, exposure to nature, and mindfulness practice can reduce symptoms of anxiety.

Remember that it is always ok to ask for help. Help can come from friends and family or from a professional. Sometimes it is necessary to take time away from a normal routine to work on oneself and learn to manage anxiety. Wilderness Adventure Therapy programs provide a unique opportunity for young adults who need extra support.

## Resources

American College Health Association National College Health Assessment Spring 2014  
[http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/ACHA-NCHA-II\\_ReferenceGroup\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_Spring2014.pdf](http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/ACHA-NCHA-II_ReferenceGroup_ExecutiveSummary_Spring2014.pdf)

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America  
<http://www.adaa.org>

“Anxiety and Substance Use Disorders: A Review” (Joshua P. Smith, PhD and Sarah W. Book, MD)

The British Psychological Society  
<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-25/edition-4/social-anxiety-higher-education>

Inside Higher Education  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/30/colleges-dont-always-help-mental-health-issues-student-survey-shows>

The National Alliance on Mental Illness  
<https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders/Overview>

The National Institute of Mental Health  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/social-phobia-social-anxiety-disorder-always-embarrassed/index.shtml>

“Nature Experience Reduces Rumination And Subgenual Prefrontal Cortex Activation” (Gregory N. Bratmana, J. Paul Hamiltonb, Kevin S. Hahnc, Gretchen C. Dailyd, and James J. Grossc)  
<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/28/8567.abstract>

“Social Anxiety: The elephant in your classroom?” (Graham Russell, PhD)

“‘They Can’t Even’: Why Millennials Are The ‘Anxious Generation’” (Karol Markowicz)

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**This white paper was sponsored by Pure Life Aspiro, a research-based Wilderness Adventure Therapy program for young adults, located in the beautiful country of Costa Rica. Pure Life by Aspiro offers safe, effective, and clinically-sophisticated treatment options for young adults.**

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## **ABOUT PURE LIFE ASPIRO**

The professionals at Pure Life Aspiro Adventure understand that the transition between adolescence and adulthood can be stressful. Pure Life's Wilderness Adventure Therapy program was uniquely crafted to provide a once in a lifetime opportunity for young adults to develop a higher level of intrinsic motivation, coping skills, and core identity giving them the tools to thrive.

Pure Life Aspiro helps young adults by providing a strengths-focused, integrated therapeutic model with an emphasis on holistic wellness; individual and group therapy; social skills and leadership training; life planning; and vocational development. Through cultural immersion, community service, and adventure based activities, our students develop the skills and experiences necessary to get them through this transition so they can thrive and flourish on their own.







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