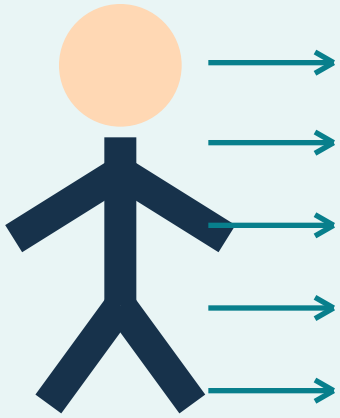
Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

A friendly, illustrated guide for kids, teens, parents, and grown-ups. Prepared for 24-7 Shalom Psychiatry PLLC.



Head: headache or dizziness

Heart: beating faster

Chest: tight or quick breaths

Belly: butterflies or nausea

Muscles: tense or shaky

A message for you

Anxiety can make your body feel strange, uncomfortable, or frightening. The feelings are real. They do not mean you are weak or doing anything wrong.

This book explains the body’s alarm system, how to notice symptoms, ways to feel safer, and when to ask an adult or healthcare professional for help.

How to use this guide

Read one page at a time. Children can read it with a trusted adult. The pictures are simplified learning diagrams, not medical scans.

1. Why worry can make your body hurt

Your brain and body are a team. They send messages to each other all day.



The alarm can sound even when there is no real danger.

Meet the body alarm

When your brain thinks something might be dangerous, it can turn on an emergency response called fight, flight, or freeze. Your heart may speed up, your muscles may tighten, and your breathing may change.

This alarm is helpful when you truly need to act quickly. But it can also switch on before a test, at bedtime, or when you are afraid of being judged.

A child-friendly example

Imagine a smoke alarm going off because toast burned. The sound is real, even though the house is not on fire. Anxiety can be like an extra-sensitive alarm.

Your body sensations are real, even when there is no immediate danger. A healthcare professional can help decide whether symptoms have another cause.

2. What happens inside the brain?

The brain has several teamwork systems—not one single “anxiety button.”



The alarm can sound even when there is no real danger.

The amygdala: spotting possible threats

The amygdala helps detect things that might be important or threatening. Think of it as one part of the brain’s lookout team.

The prefrontal cortex: thinking things through

The front of the brain helps you pause, consider evidence, make plans, and choose what to do next.

The hypothalamus and nervous system: sending signals

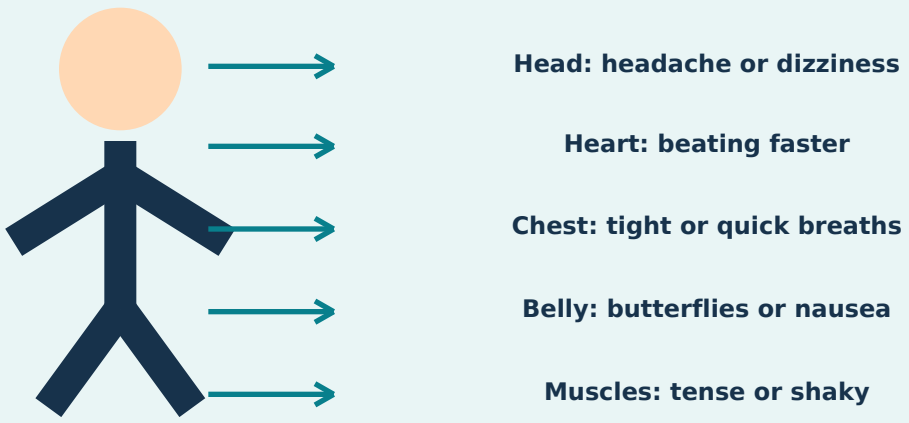
These systems help coordinate automatic changes in heart rate, breathing, sweating, and alertness. The sympathetic nervous system prepares the body for action.

The stress hormones

Adrenaline (epinephrine) and noradrenaline (norepinephrine) can increase alertness and physical readiness. Cortisol supports a longer-lasting stress response. These chemicals are normal; they are not “bad chemicals.”

3. A map of anxiety symptoms

Different parts of the body can respond to the same alarm.



Head and face

Headache, lightheadedness, feeling hot, blushing, dry mouth, or a tight jaw.

Chest and heart

A pounding heart, faster pulse, chest discomfort, or a feeling that you cannot get a satisfying breath.

Stomach and bowels

Butterflies, nausea, belly pain, loose stools, constipation, or loss of appetite.

Hands, legs, and skin

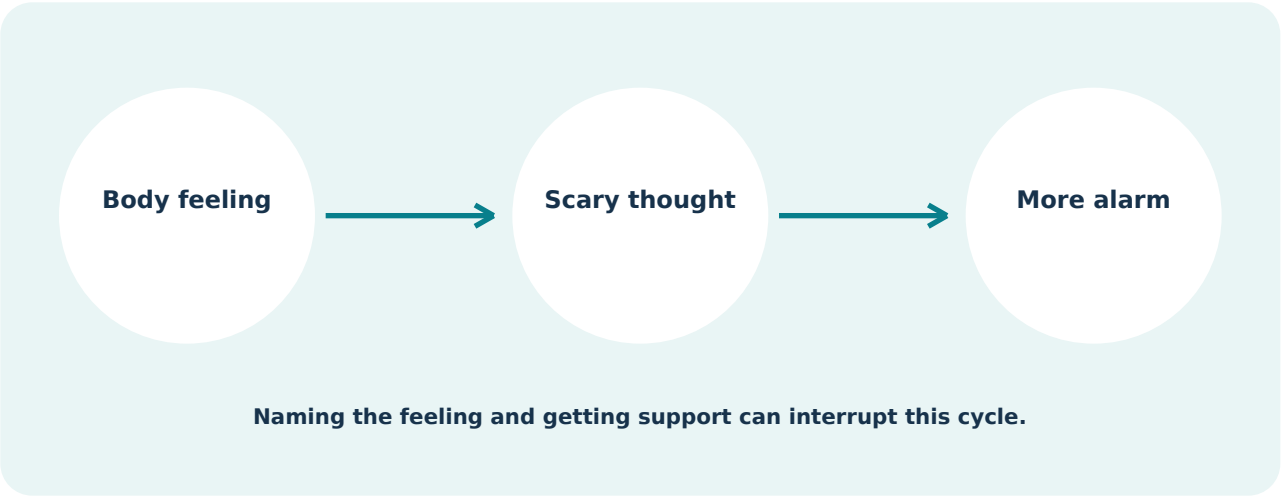
Sweaty palms, cold fingers, trembling, tense shoulders, restless legs, or goosebumps.

Important

Symptoms like these can also have medical causes. New, severe, or unexplained symptoms should not automatically be called anxiety.

4. Why does my heart beat so fast?

Your heart is a hardworking pump that sends blood around your body.



Naming the feeling and getting support can interrupt this cycle.

The simple explanation

When the alarm turns on, the sympathetic nervous system can tell the heart to beat faster. You may feel thumping, fluttering, or pounding.

What a child can say

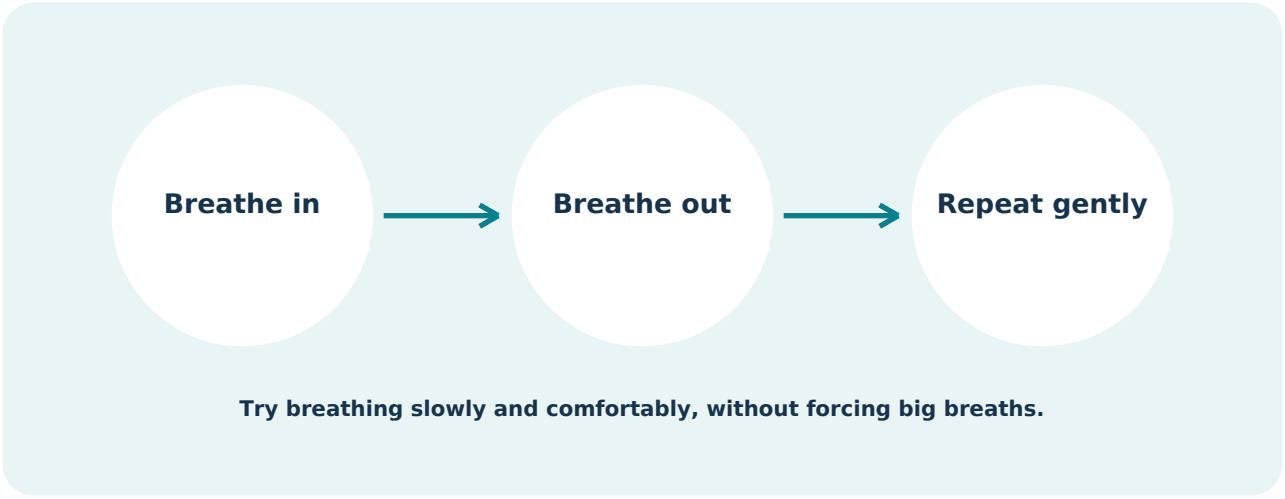
“My heart is racing because my body thinks I need to run. I can tell a grown-up and let my body settle.”

When to get urgent help

Chest pain with fainting, severe breathing difficulty, collapse, or concerning new symptoms needs urgent medical evaluation. Do not assume it is a panic attack.

5. Why is breathing suddenly difficult?

Anxiety can change how quickly and deeply you breathe.



Try breathing slowly and comfortably, without forcing big breaths.

Fast breathing and strange feelings

Breathing too quickly can lower carbon dioxide in the blood and contribute to tingling, lightheadedness, and a feeling of breathlessness.

Try a gentle reset

Relax your shoulders. Breathe in gently through your nose if comfortable, then breathe out slowly. Do not hold your breath or force very deep breaths.

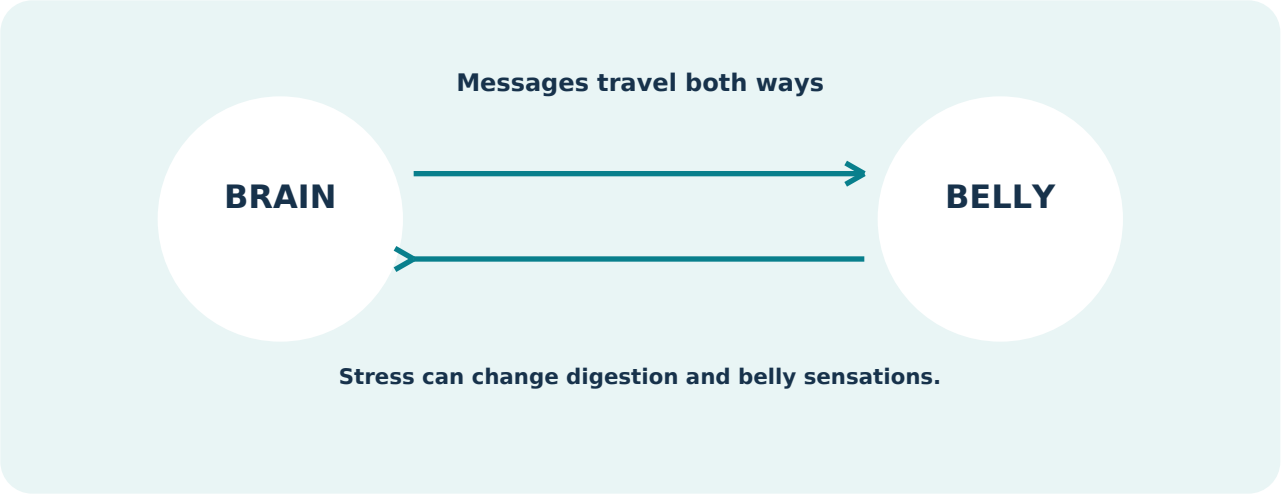
If breathing is severely difficult, new, or accompanied by blue lips, confusion, or chest pain, seek emergency care.

A useful reminder

“I can slow down. I do not have to fight my breathing.”

6. Why does anxiety upset my stomach?

The brain and digestive system are always talking.



The gut–brain connection

Stress can affect movement in the intestines, gut sensitivity, appetite, and nausea. This helps explain “butterflies” before a performance or stomach pain before school.

What helps

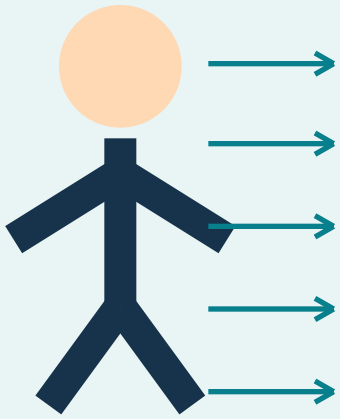
Regular meals, water, a predictable routine, supportive conversation, and calming skills may help. A clinician should evaluate persistent or worsening abdominal pain.

Never ignore red flags

Severe abdominal pain, blood in stool or vomit, dehydration, ongoing vomiting, or unexplained weight loss needs medical assessment.

7. Shaking, sweating, headaches, and tense muscles

The body may prepare to move even when you are sitting still.



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Shaky hands or legs

Adrenaline and muscle activation can make you tremble. Some people feel wobbly or restless.

Sweaty palms and feeling hot

Sweat glands can respond to sympathetic nervous system activity. Blushing and temperature sensations can also occur.

Headaches and tight muscles

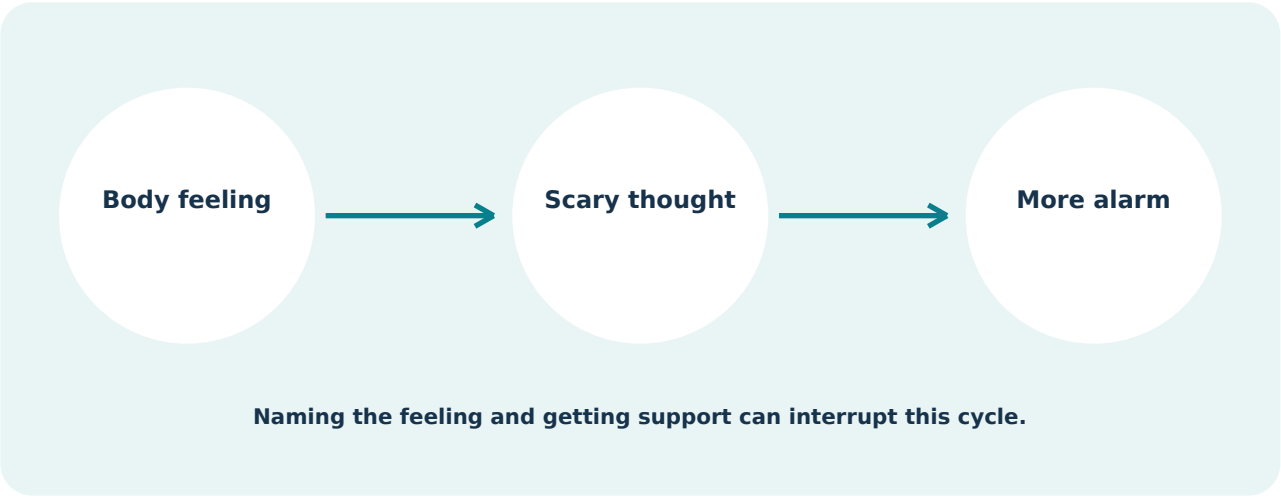
Stress-related muscle tension may contribute to headaches, neck pain, jaw clenching, or sore shoulders.

Simple relief ideas

Stretch gently, unclench your jaw, relax your hands, sip water, and take a short movement break. Persistent or severe symptoms deserve medical attention.

8. Dizziness, tingling, and feeling unreal

These sensations can be scary, especially when they happen suddenly.



Dizziness or tingling

Changes in breathing and stress responses may contribute to lightheadedness and tingling around the mouth or fingers.

Feeling detached

Some people feel as though the world is dreamlike or they are watching themselves from far away. This can occur during intense anxiety, but needs evaluation when new or persistent.

A grounding game

Name five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste. Change the activity if any sense is uncomfortable.

Safety

Fainting, weakness on one side, trouble speaking, seizures, or sudden severe headache require urgent assessment.

9. Anxiety, sleep, and tiredness

A tired brain can find it harder to handle big feelings.



Why sleep becomes difficult

Worry and physical arousal may make it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. Poor sleep can then increase irritability and worry the next day.

A kid-friendly bedtime plan

Keep a regular sleep schedule, make the room comfortable, set aside screens before bed, and share worries with a trusted adult earlier in the evening.

When to ask for help

Frequent nightmares, loud snoring, severe daytime sleepiness, or long-lasting insomnia may need a separate sleep evaluation.

10. What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden wave of intense fear or discomfort.



What it can feel like

A racing heart, trembling, sweating, chest discomfort, dizziness, nausea, chills, tingling, and fear that something terrible will happen. Symptoms often rise quickly.

A calm response

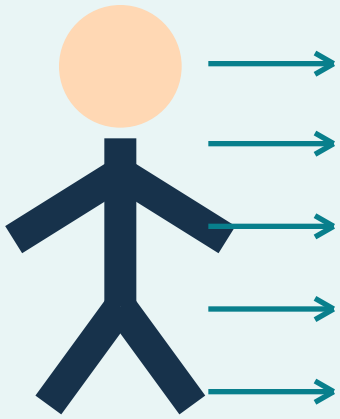
Move to a safer, quieter place if possible. Speak in short, reassuring sentences. Encourage comfortable, unforced breathing and stay with a supportive adult.

Important difference

A panic attack is not the same as panic disorder. Repeated attacks plus ongoing worry or avoidance may warrant evaluation. First-time or unusual symptoms should be medically assessed when indicated.

11. How anxiety looks different in children

Children do not always say “I feel anxious.” Sometimes their bodies speak first.



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Common clues

Repeated stomachaches before school, headaches, tearfulness, clinginess, irritability, frequent bathroom visits, trouble sleeping, or avoiding activities.

What adults can say

“I believe that your tummy hurts. Sometimes worry can make our bodies hurt. Let’s check what you need and work on it together.”

What to avoid

Do not accuse a child of pretending, punish symptoms, or promise that nothing bad can ever happen. Listen, assess, and respond with calm support.

School partnership

Teachers and caregivers can coordinate predictable routines, supportive check-ins, and gradual return to avoided activities when appropriate.

12. A simple plan when the alarm goes off

Four steps can help you feel more in control.



Step 1 — Notice

“My hands are shaky. My belly feels tight.”

Step 2 — Name

“This might be my body alarm. I can ask for help.”

Step 3 — Support the body

Plant your feet, relax your shoulders, breathe comfortably, and look around for signs of present safety.

Step 4 — Choose the next small action

Ask a trusted adult for support. Return to a manageable task when ready. Avoiding every scary situation can sometimes make anxiety grow.

Practice when calm

These skills are easier to use during anxiety when you have practiced them on ordinary days.

13. What treatment can help?

There are effective ways to treat anxiety, and children deserve care that fits their age.



The alarm can sound even when there is no real danger.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

CBT teaches people to notice anxious thoughts, understand body reactions, practice coping skills, and gradually face feared situations. Exposure-based techniques are often important for anxiety disorders.

Parent and family support

Caregivers can learn how to respond with warmth while reducing patterns that unintentionally maintain avoidance.

Medication when appropriate

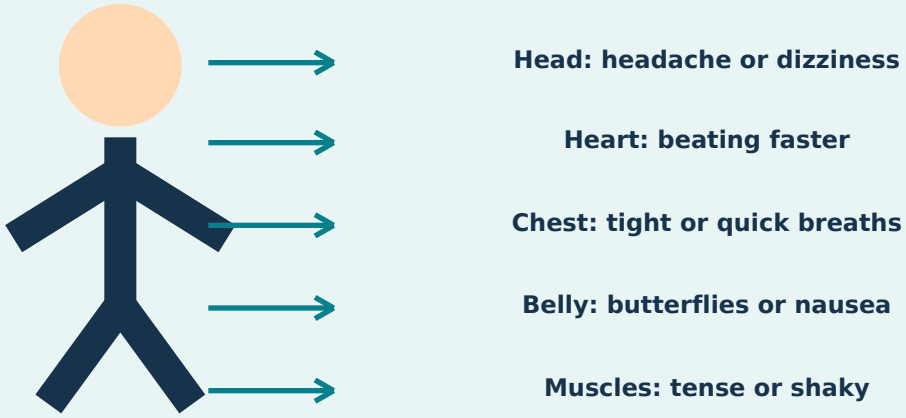
For some children and adults, clinicians may recommend medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), often alongside psychotherapy. Medication choices require individualized evaluation, monitoring, and discussion of benefits and risks.

Not every symptom needs medicine

Supportive routines, therapy, medical assessment, and school or family accommodations may be sufficient for some people.

14. When should we seek medical help?

Anxiety is common, but it should never be used to dismiss a potentially serious medical problem.



Emergency warning signs

Seek emergency help for severe chest pain, serious difficulty breathing, fainting with concerning symptoms, new weakness or difficulty speaking, seizure, severe allergic reaction, or immediate danger of self-harm.

Arrange a healthcare visit

Make an appointment for persistent or recurrent symptoms, worsening school avoidance, sleep or eating changes, unexplained weight changes, or symptoms that interfere with daily life.

Possible alternative explanations

Asthma, heart rhythm problems, thyroid disease, anemia, dehydration, medication effects, caffeine, infections, and other conditions can resemble or worsen anxiety symptoms.

A note about safety

If a child talks about wanting to die or hurt themselves, take it seriously and seek immediate professional help. In the United States, call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for immediate danger.

15. Practice page for children

Use these prompts with a parent, teacher, counselor, or another trusted adult.



My body signals

Where do I feel worry? My belly? My chest? My hands? My head?

My worry thermometer

GREEN: I feel mostly calm. YELLOW: I notice early signs. RED: I feel overwhelmed and need support.

My helpers

Who are three trusted adults I can talk to? What words can I use to ask for help?

My next small step

Choose one calming strategy and one brave, manageable action to practice this week.

Remember

You are more than your anxious feelings. With practice and support, your body alarm can become easier to understand and manage.

Detailed references and further reading

Authoritative clinical, public-health, and research sources. Links are provided so families and professionals can explore the evidence.

1. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Anxiety Disorders.

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders

Why it matters: Overview of anxiety disorders, symptoms, and treatment.

2. NIMH. Panic Disorder: When Fear Overwhelms.

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/panic-disorder-when-fear-overwhelms

Why it matters: Panic symptoms, assessment, and treatment.

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Anxiety and Depression in Children.

https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/about/about-anxiety-and-depression-in-children.html

Why it matters: Childhood anxiety signs and treatment.

4. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP). Anxiety Disorders Resource Center.

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

Why it matters: Family resources and clinical context.

5. American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). HealthyChildren.org: Anxiety.

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/default.aspx

Why it matters: Parent-facing emotional health education.

6. World Health Organization (WHO). Anxiety disorders.

https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/anxiety-disorders

Why it matters: Global overview of symptoms and care.

7. National Health Service (NHS). Anxiety disorders in children.

https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-disorders-in-children/

Why it matters: Accessible child and parent guidance.

8. National Health Service (NHS). Panic disorder.

https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/

Why it matters: Physical panic symptoms and treatment.

9. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH). Relaxation Techniques: What You Need To Know.

https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/relaxation-techniques-what-you-need-to-know

Why it matters: Evidence and cautions for relaxation strategies.

10. U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). Anxiety in Children and Adolescents: Screening.

https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/recommendation/screening-anxiety-in-children-and-adolescents

Why it matters: Evidence-based screening recommendations.

11. Walter HJ et al. (2020). Clinical Practice Guideline for Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Anxiety Disorders. J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry. 59(10):1107–1124..

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.005

Why it matters: Major professional guideline for youth anxiety treatment.

12. Creswell C, Waite P, Cooper PJ (2014). Assessment and management of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents. Arch Dis Child. 99:674–678..

https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2013-303768

Why it matters: Clinical review of assessment and management.

13. James AC et al. (2020). Cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents. Cochrane Database Syst Rev..

https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD013162.pub2

Why it matters: Systematic review of CBT evidence.

14. Craske MG et al. (2017). Anxiety disorders. Nat Rev Dis Primers. 3:17024..

https://doi.org/10.1038/nrdp.2017.24

Why it matters: Detailed review of anxiety biology and treatment.

15. Mayer EA (2011). Gut feelings: the emerging biology of gut–brain communication. Nat Rev Neurosci. 12:453–466..

https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3071

Why it matters: Scientific explanation of gut–brain signaling.

16. McEwen BS (2007). Physiology and neurobiology of stress and adaptation: central role of the brain. Physiol Rev. 87:873–904..

https://doi.org/10.1152/physrev.00041.2006

Why it matters: Physiology of stress response.

17. Kessler RC et al. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 62:593–602..

https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593

Why it matters: Epidemiology and age of onset.

18. American Psychiatric Association (2022). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR)..

https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787

Why it matters: Diagnostic framework; not a self-diagnosis tool.

Educational notice: This guide is not a diagnosis, treatment prescription, or substitute for emergency medical care. Brain and body diagrams are conceptual illustrations.