



## Social Anxiety Coping Skills for Teens

Social anxiety can cast a long shadow over a teenager's life, making ordinary social situations feel overwhelming. For Christian teens, this struggle can also affect their spiritual joy and sense of connection with God. The good news is that social anxiety is a well-understood condition – both the Bible and modern psychology offer insights and tools to help. In this article, we'll take an integrated approach, drawing on **theology, psychology, neuroscience**, and **medicine** to explore effective coping skills for teens with social anxiety. You'll find practical tips reinforced by Scripture (using NIV translation) and supported by clinical research. Our aim is to encourage and equip teens (and those who care for them) to overcome anxiety and live a joyful life in Christ.

### Understanding Social Anxiety in Teens

**Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)** – often simply called social anxiety – is more than shyness. It is a common anxiety disorder characterized by intense fear of social or performance situations where one might be judged or scrutinized. A teen with social anxiety may dread things like answering a question in class, meeting new people, joining group activities, or even eating in front of others <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. The anxiety can be so strong that it feels uncontrollable and interferes with daily life. For example, *Mark, a 15-year-old*, found his chest pounding and mind racing at a simple birthday party, convinced everyone was watching and judging him – a classic panic response that caused him to flee the situation (a scenario shared by a Christian counseling article to illustrate social anxiety <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>).

Social anxiety often begins in the teen years, a time of rapid change. In fact, studies estimate around **9% of adolescents** suffer from social anxiety disorder <sup>5</sup>. Adolescent girls are affected more often than boys <sup>6</sup>. Moreover, overall teen anxiety has been on the rise – one international meta-analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic found about **20% of youth reporting clinically elevated anxiety symptoms** <sup>7</sup>. This trend makes it all the more important to recognize and address social anxiety in teens early.

**Signs and symptoms:** Teens with social anxiety experience both mental and physical symptoms. Mentally, they may be consumed with worry about embarrassing themselves or being rejected. They often replay social interactions in their head, fixating on any “mistakes,” and expect the worst outcomes in new situations <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup>. Physically, their bodies reveal the anxiety through sweating, blushing, trembling, a racing heartbeat, nausea or stomach aches, dizziness, or trouble speaking and making eye contact <sup>2</sup> <sup>10</sup>. It's common for anxious teens to avoid what triggers their fear – skipping school to dodge a class presentation, or staying home instead of attending a youth group event. Avoidance might bring short-term relief, but it reinforces the anxiety long-term <sup>11</sup>. Left unaddressed, severe social anxiety can lead to isolation, missed opportunities, low self-esteem, and even depression or substance abuse in some cases <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>.

On the positive side, **social anxiety is treatable**. With proper support, teens can learn to manage their fears and engage more fully in life. As we'll see, a combination of approaches – **spiritual, psychological**, and **medical** – offers hope. Before diving into coping strategies, however, it's important to set a compassionate, biblical perspective on anxiety.



## Biblical Perspective: Faith and Anxiety

The Bible addresses anxiety not with shame, but with comfort and practical guidance. **Feeling anxiety is not a sin** – it's a human experience that even faithful people in Scripture went through. *King David*, for example, candidly wrote, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy" (Psalm 94:19, NIV). Instead of chastising himself, he turned to God for comfort. *Jesus Himself* experienced deep anguish in Gethsemane, saying "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38, NIV). He responded by praying fervently (Matthew 26:39), demonstrating that turning to God in our distress is a faithful response. As Ed Stetzer observes regarding Christians and mental illness, struggling with anxiety or depression **"does not mean it is a result of something you've done or not done"** – it isn't simply a faith failure or personal sin <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> . We live in a fallen world where illness (including mental illness) exists, and God understands our frailty.

Scripture actually gives us **tools for anxiety**. One of the most oft-quoted passages is *Philippians 4:6-7*: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" This isn't a simplistic "just pray and it all goes away" formula; rather, it invites us to continually turn our worries into prayers, and it promises that God's peace will **guard** our hearts and minds. For a teenager with social anxiety, this might mean each time a fearful thought arises ("Everyone will laugh at me if I mess up my presentation"), they pause to pray ("Lord, help me, give me Your peace") and maybe recall a promise from Scripture ("You will be with me wherever I go," Joshua 1:9). Over time, this spiritual habit can noticeably calm anxious thoughts.

Another biblical strategy is **casting our cares on God**. *1 Peter 5:7* encourages, "*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*" The word "cast" literally means to throw or dump – God invites us to offload our worries onto His capable shoulders. Teens can do this in prayer or even through journaling (writing down fears as a way of handing them to God). The reason we can do this is because *God cares for us* deeply, like a loving Father. Similarly, *Psalms 55:22* says, "*Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.*" This assurance that God will uphold you can counter the fear of "what if I can't handle this?" that often plagues anxious minds.

**Our identity in Christ** is a powerful antidote to some of the root fears in social anxiety. Often, social anxiety whispers, "People will judge you – you're not good enough, you'll be rejected." But the Bible tells believers they are **accepted and loved by God** regardless of human approval. For instance, *Romans 8:38-39* declares that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. *Ephesians 1:6* says we are "accepted in the Beloved" (NKJV) – our acceptance comes from Jesus, not our social performance. And in *1 Samuel 16:7*, we're reminded that "*The Lord does not look at the things people look at...the Lord looks at the heart.*" A teen crippled by fear of others' opinions can find freedom in knowing that God values them for who they are, at the heart level. In fact, many with social anxiety tend to be very self-critical and hold themselves to perfectionistic standards <sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> . The Bible's answer is grace: "*All have sinned and fall short... and all are justified freely by His grace*" (Romans 3:23-24). Realizing that no one is perfect except Jesus (1 Peter 2:22) and that we all live by God's grace helps lower the unrealistic standards we put on ourselves. We can replace the harsh inner voice with God's voice of love: "*You are my child...you are precious in my sight*" (cf. Isaiah 43:4).

Finally, the Christian faith offers **community** and **fellowship** as a source of comfort. The Church is meant to be a place of "bearing one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Interestingly, research on religious coping in youth finds that **spiritual practices have the most positive impact when paired with a supportive faith**

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**community and combined with other coping strategies** <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> . Encouraging a socially anxious teen to participate in a loving youth group or to confide in a youth pastor/mentor can provide a safe space to gradually face social fears with people who will show Christ-like acceptance. God often works through “*Christian fellowship*” to help us overcome challenges <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> . Prayer with others, group Bible studies, or simply fun activities with church friends can remind the teen they are not alone. Knowing “the Lord is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9) and that His people are with you too can begin to loosen the grip of fear.

In summary, the Bible acknowledges anxiety but urges us not to stay stuck in it: “*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go*” (Joshua 1:9, NIV). God’s presence, His promises, and His people are all part of the faith-based toolkit for coping with anxiety.

## The Science of Anxiety: Brain, Body, and Mind

Understanding what’s happening in the body and brain during anxiety can remove some of the mystery and stigma. **Social anxiety has a physiological basis** – it’s not “just in your head” in the sense of being imaginary. When a teen with social anxiety faces a triggering situation (say, walking into a crowded cafeteria or speaking up in class), their nervous system kicks into “fight-or-flight” mode. The *amygdala*, a part of the brain that detects threats, may be overactive in anxiety disorders, firing off alarm signals of danger even when the situation isn’t truly dangerous. This triggers a surge of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Heart rate and breathing speed up, muscles tense, senses become hyper-alert – the body is preparing to escape or battle a threat. These reactions cause the familiar physical symptoms of anxiety such as a racing heart, sweating, shaking, dizziness, and that “choking” feeling when trying to speak <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> . Essentially, the body is *overreacting* to a social situation as if it were a life-or-death event.

For teens, there’s an extra layer: the adolescent brain is still developing its control centers. The frontal lobes (especially the prefrontal cortex), which help with rational thinking and regulating emotions, aren’t fully mature until the mid-20s. Meanwhile, the emotional brain centers are quite active. Research indicates that **teenagers often have very active emotion-processing regions of the brain, while their impulse-control and emotion-regulation regions are still maturing** <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> . This imbalance may explain why teens can feel emotions more intensely and have more difficulty managing those feelings. In social anxiety, a teen might *know* logically that a situation isn’t truly dangerous, but their brain and body still respond with intense fear because the “rational override” isn’t as effective yet. Understanding this can foster self-compassion: if you’re a teen who feels terrified giving a presentation, you’re not “crazy” – your nervous system is essentially misfiring, and developing brains are prone to extremes. The good news is that the brain can change and adapt (thanks to **neuroplasticity**). With practice, teens can strengthen the neural pathways that help calm fear and weaken the grip of anxiety. In fact, therapeutic techniques (like cognitive-behavioral exercises or exposure therapy, which we’ll discuss) leverage the brain’s ability to rewire, teaching it new, more accurate patterns of response.

Chronic anxiety can also take a toll on the body’s systems – it might disrupt sleep, affect digestion, and weaken the immune system over time. That’s why **healthy lifestyle habits** (sleep, nutrition, exercise) are often recommended as part of anxiety management. For instance, regular aerobic exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety levels by burning off stress hormones and releasing mood-boosting endorphins. A recent 2025 study of adolescents in China found that **physical exercise had a significant negative correlation with social anxiety (r = -0.32)**, meaning teens who exercised more tended to have lower anxiety; the study also noted that exercise builds self-confidence and healthier emotion regulation, which in turn alleviates

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social anxiety <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> . Exercise literally changes the brain as well – it increases calming neurochemicals and can promote growth factors that improve neural connections (one such factor is BDNF, which helps the brain form new circuits to overcome “fear ruts”). Similarly, practices like deep breathing or relaxation techniques counteract the fight-or-flight response by activating the parasympathetic nervous system (the “rest and digest” mode that slows heart rate and promotes calm).

Importantly, **modern medicine** shows that anxiety often has a biological component that is not under one’s immediate control – things like genetics and brain chemistry play a role <sup>28</sup> . Some teens are simply more prone to anxious reactions due to inherited traits (family history of anxiety) or temperament. Knowing this helps remove moral blame; you wouldn’t fault someone for having asthma, and in the same way, an anxiety disorder isn’t a character flaw but a health issue that can be treated. If needed, medical interventions (like anxiety medications) can address these biological factors, as we’ll explore in a later section. This understanding aligns with a Christian view that our bodies are part of God’s creation and subject to the Fall – sometimes they don’t function perfectly, and that includes brain functioning. It’s okay to seek healing for our minds just as we do for our bodies.

In summary, science affirms what Scripture also implies: we are whole beings, body-and-soul. Anxiety involves tangible physical processes that can be managed and re-trained. A teenager battling social anxiety can take courage that their condition is understood by doctors and counselors, and there are proven techniques to calm the body and mind. Next, we’ll delve into those coping strategies – integrating the **spiritual** and **practical** tools that together can help teens gradually break free from the bondage of social fear.

## Healthy Coping Strategies for Social Anxiety

Overcoming social anxiety is best done through a **holistic approach**. Think of it like a toolbox with multiple tools: some are spiritual (prayer, Scripture, faith principles), some are practical lifestyle changes (exercise, sleep, breathing techniques), and some are therapeutic (counseling methods or medical treatment if needed). A combination of these will yield the greatest benefit <sup>18</sup> . Every teen is different, so it’s okay to experiment and find which tools work best. We’ll break down the coping skills into categories, but remember they can work synergistically – for example, practicing a breathing exercise can go hand-in-hand with saying a silent prayer, or therapy can go hand-in-hand with Bible study. An integrated plan addresses the **whole person**: spirit, mind, and body.

### 1. Spiritual Practices and Faith-Based Coping

*Journaling and meditating on Scripture can ground a teen in God’s truth amid anxiety.*

For Christian teens, faith is a tremendous source of strength against anxiety. Here are some spiritual coping skills that have both biblical basis and, in many cases, supportive research:

- **Prayer and Surrender:** As discussed earlier, turning anxieties into prayer is a core strategy (Philippians 4:6-7). Encourage the teen to have honest conversations with God about their fears. This isn’t about reciting a ritual prayer to “make it stop,” but about developing a habit of *casting cares on the Lord*. Some teens find it helpful to use a **prayer journal** – each night, write down the social worries of the day or the ones looming tomorrow, and then write a prayer entrusting each to God. This act of externalizing the worry onto paper and symbolically handing it to God can bring relief. In

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one survey of teenagers coping with stress, many found that “believing in God and praying can actually help reduce stress and block anxiety”, as brain scans have shown prayer triggering calm in regions associated with emotional regulation <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup>. Whether or not a teen has access to brain imaging, they can trust that **God hears their prayers** (1 John 5:14) and promises wisdom and help when we ask (James 1:5).

- **Meditating on Scripture: Replacing anxious thoughts with God’s truth** is essentially a form of biblical cognitive restructuring. For example, if a teen is stuck in a loop of “Everyone will think I’m stupid if I make a mistake,” they can counter that with a scripture like *Isaiah 41:10*: “So do not fear, for I am with you... I will strengthen you and help you.” Or *2 Timothy 1:7*: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” These verses reaffirm that the teen is **not alone** (God is with them) and that fear is not from God. Some youths memorize a short list of “combat verses” and repeat them in moments of panic. This isn’t a magical incantation, but it **shifts focus** from the feared scenario to God’s presence and promises. It’s aligning one’s thinking with Scripture – much like how therapists encourage replacing distorted thoughts with factual ones, Christians replace them with *ultimate* truths. Notably, a study in the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* found that incorporating scripture-based cognitive reframing (for instance, reminding oneself of one’s identity in Christ) was an effective faith-based coping strategy for anxiety <sup>31</sup>. Teens might keep verse cards in their wallet or a Bible app on their phone with highlighted verses for quick access during anxious moments.
- **Worship and Music**: Music can powerfully affect mood and anxiety. For many Christians, listening to worship music or hymns when feeling anxious brings comfort. One remarkable case study in a medical journal described how a patient with severe social phobia experienced relief by focusing on a particular Christian hymn (“Be Still My Soul”) – essentially using the music and lyrics as a therapeutic focus for meditation and calming <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup>. Singing along (even quietly to oneself) can also regulate breathing and redirect the mind to praising God rather than spiraling in fear. King David often dealt with distress by singing praises – as he wrote, “I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears” (Psalm 34:4, NIV). In church youth gatherings, actively participating in worship songs can gradually build confidence, since the focus is on God, not on oneself.
- **Community and Fellowship**: As mentioned, encourage the teen not to withdraw from **supportive relationships**. Avoiding all social contact will only reinforce anxiety <sup>11</sup>. Instead, identify safe people who can form a support network – perhaps a few close friends, a youth pastor, a mentor, or a Christian counselor. Regular fellowship (like attending youth group or a Bible study) provides gentle exposure to social interaction in a caring environment. Research on adolescents shows that *religious coping is most effective when linked with religious community support* <sup>34</sup>. Simply put, *sharing struggles with trustworthy, empathetic people lightens the load*. It also helps combat the lie that “I’m the only one feeling this way.” Often, others in the church have gone through similar battles and can share testimonies of how God helped them. Galatians 6:2 instructs believers to “carry each other’s burdens” – letting a teen know that others are praying for them and checking in can impart hope. Teens might also consider joining a **Christian support group** if one is available for anxiety or mental health issues. Knowing that peers (including other Christians) face anxiety and overcome it can normalize the experience and reduce shame.



- **Service and Outreach:** It might seem counterintuitive, but sometimes *servicing others* can help anxious teens take the focus off their own fears. Volunteering in a church or community project – maybe helping with children’s ministry, a service day, or a mission project – provides structured social interaction around a task, rather than unstructured small talk (which is harder for socially anxious folks). It also builds a sense of purpose. A teen might discover, for example, that when they’re distributing food at a soup kitchen or playing guitar in the youth worship band, they feel less self-conscious and more fulfilled. Over time, this boosts confidence in social settings. Additionally, helping others is living out Christ’s love, which fosters joy. It echoes Isaiah 58:10’s promise that when you “spend yourself on behalf of the hungry,” *“your light will rise in the darkness.”* In other words, focusing outward can bring light into one’s own dark anxious places.

In implementing spiritual practices, it’s important that parents and mentors **encourage without pressuring**. Anxiety won’t evaporate overnight just because a teen had a devotional time. It’s a gradual process of “renewing the mind” (Romans 12:2). The goal is to cultivate an atmosphere of **grace**, not guilt. The teen shouldn’t be made to feel that if they still have anxiety, they must not be praying enough or trusting God enough – that would be a misapplication of faith that only increases anxiety! Instead, affirm every small step of faith they take, and remind them that God is patient and compassionate. As *Psalm 103:14* says, *“for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.”* The Lord understands this struggle deeply and is walking with them through it. Ultimately, spiritual coping brings a perspective that *transcends* the immediate fear: knowing that in Christ, **eternal victory** is assured. Jesus told His disciples, *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33, NIV). That promise can empower a teen to face the troubles of today with courage rooted in ultimate hope.

## 2. Lifestyle and Self-Care Strategies

God has designed us as holistic beings, so caring for our bodies and daily habits can greatly affect anxiety levels. In tandem with prayer and spiritual growth, teens should also be coached in **practical self-care and coping techniques** for anxiety. These are often simple to learn and can make a big difference in managing symptoms:

- **Deep Breathing and Grounding Techniques:** When panic hits, one of the fastest ways to signal the body to calm down is through controlled breathing. An anxious teen’s breathing often becomes rapid and shallow, which can cause lightheadedness or tingling and further panic. **Slow, deep breaths** counteract this by activating the vagus nerve, which tells the brain to relax. A popular method is the 4-7-8 breathing: inhale for 4 seconds, hold 7 seconds, exhale 8 seconds. Even a simpler one is the 5-5-5 method: inhale 5 seconds, hold 5, exhale 5. As the Focus on the Family counseling team suggests, guiding a teen to do a *“five senses check-in”* can also help them stay present <sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup>. For example, have them pause and silently name: 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can touch, 2 things they smell, 1 thing they taste. This **grounding exercise** shifts focus away from scary thoughts to the concrete “here and now,” often reducing the intensity of an anxiety surge. Teens should practice these techniques in calm moments too, so that when anxiety spikes, they’re ready. Research confirms that such mindfulness and breathing exercises reduce the physical stress response <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup>. Taking slow breaths while perhaps saying a silent prayer like “Lord, fill me with Your peace” combines physical and spiritual calming.
- **Regular Exercise:** As mentioned earlier, exercise is a natural anxiety reliever. Encourage teens to find physical activities they enjoy – it could be team sports, dance, skateboarding, swimming, biking, or

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even just brisk walks. Exercise not only burns off excess adrenaline, but it can improve sleep and mood. One study noted that even playful activities (the research cited *baseball and sand play*) helped alleviate social anxiety symptoms in adolescents <sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> . The key is consistency: aiming for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days. Parents can help by being active together (family bike ride, hiking, etc.), which also provides bonding time. Exercise also builds confidence as teens gain skills and see their body get stronger, which can carry over into social confidence. It's like giving the brain a dose of positive neurotransmitters (endorphins, serotonin) and a break from ruminating thoughts.

- **Sleep and Diet:** It's hard to overstate the importance of **good sleep** for mental health. Teens need around 8–10 hours of sleep, but anxiety can disrupt sleep, and conversely lack of sleep makes anxiety worse – a vicious cycle. Encourage good sleep hygiene: a consistent bedtime, limiting screen use at night (since blue light and social media can provoke anxiety or insomnia <sup>41</sup> <sup>42</sup> ), and perhaps a calming pre-bed routine (like reading Scripture or listening to gentle music). If a teen struggles to fall asleep due to a racing mind, techniques like writing worries in a journal then closing it, or doing a relaxation exercise in bed, can help signal the brain to shut down. Nutritionally, a **balanced diet** supports a stable mood. Skipping meals or consuming lots of sugary, caffeinated drinks can crash energy and mimic anxiety symptoms (heart palpitations, jitters from caffeine). So, it's wise to eat regular, healthy meals. Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids (like fish, walnuts) and magnesium (leafy greens, nuts) are thought to support brain health and calmness. Of course, treat foods are fine in moderation; the point is to avoid extremes that stress the body. Also, drinking water and staying hydrated (an often overlooked factor) can prevent some physical stresses. Basically, a teen's body needs to be cared for to fight anxiety – it's part of stewarding the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
- **Limiting Social Media and Screen Time:** Today's teens face the added social pressure of the digital world. Constant social media use can significantly heighten social anxiety. Seeing curated, perfect images of others can feed insecurities ("I'm so awkward compared to them"), and the immediate feedback of likes/follows can become an obsession for validation. **Studies have found correlations between heavy social media use and increased anxiety and depression in young people** <sup>43</sup> <sup>44</sup> . For instance, one study noted that teens who spent over 5 hours per day on devices were significantly more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor (such as depression or substance use) compared to those who spent only 2 hours a day <sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> . While correlation isn't causation, it's telling that "*fear of missing out*" (*FoMO*) and the pressure to be always available online can seriously stress teens <sup>41</sup> <sup>47</sup> . The clear takeaway: **moderation in digital life**. Teens should be encouraged to take breaks from social media, turn off notifications that aren't necessary, and not use the phone right before bed. Parents can help set reasonable limits (like no phones during family meals, or a cutoff time at night). Replacing some online time with face-to-face interactions (or simply rest and hobbies) can reduce anxiety triggers. It might be tough initially – many teens feel anxious *without* their phone! – but gradually they often realize they feel mentally healthier with balanced use. If a teen uses a lot of social media, one practical step is a **social media fast** for a week to see how it affects their mood. Often, they report improved mood and less anxiety after the initial withdrawal. **Pro-tip:** Encourage usage of screen time trackers or app timers to self-monitor usage. And remind teens that what they see online is often not the full reality; comparing themselves to others' highlight reels is unfair. Instead, building real-life connections and engaging in meaningful offline activities will serve them better in the long run.



- **Hobbies and Creative Outlets:** Channeling anxious energy into creative or productive outlets can be very therapeutic. Activities like art, writing, playing a musical instrument, or coding – anything constructive that the teen enjoys – provide a sense of accomplishment and positive identity beyond social status. It’s especially helpful if some hobbies have a social component in a low-pressure setting. For example, if a teen likes video games, perhaps cooperative games with one or two friends (with voice chat off if that helps) could be a social outlet. If they enjoy reading, a small book club could gently exercise social skills around a shared interest. The aim is to find **healthy distractions and interests** that improve self-esteem and reduce time dwelling on fears. In Christian context, even spiritual disciplines can become fruitful hobbies: some teens take up **Scripture journaling** (drawing or decorative writing of Bible verses), which both occupies their mind creatively and keeps truth in focus. Others might enjoy apologetics podcasts, Christian fiction, or youth conferences that grow their faith while providing positive social interaction. Again, balance is key – a mix of solitary recharging activities and some social ones is ideal.
- **Routine and Small Challenges:** Creating a daily routine can give a teen a greater sense of control, which anxiety often tries to steal. When life feels chaotic, anxiety grows. But a routine of when to wake, study, relax, exercise, pray, etc., provides stability. It should include small *achievable* goals, including social goals. For example: “Today I will greet one classmate” or “This week I will answer one question in youth group discussion.” These *“small steps to face fears”* are exactly what therapists recommend <sup>48</sup> <sup>49</sup> . Celebrate each step achieved. If it was too hard, scale back (maybe just making eye contact and smiling at someone as a first step). By systematically doing slightly uncomfortable things, teens prove to their brain that nothing terrible happens, and the anxiety response diminishes over time. This approach is essentially **exposure therapy** in daily life, which we’ll touch on more in the therapy section. Parents can help by gently nudging but also respecting limits – like the Focus on the Family counselors advise, *“give them a bit of pressure”* with small challenges but also allow breaks if it becomes too overwhelming <sup>50</sup> <sup>51</sup> . This titrated exposure builds resilience step by step.

In integrating these lifestyle strategies, it helps to remind teens that **self-care is not selfish or un-Christian** – rather, it is maintaining the vessel God has given them. Elijah the prophet, when he was so anxious and depressed that he wanted to die, was first instructed by an angel to eat and rest (1 Kings 19:4-8) before anything else! Only after that did God address Elijah’s spiritual needs. In the same way, eating well, sleeping, exercising, and taking mental breaks can be seen as obedience to God’s intent that we care for our bodies and minds. It’s part of loving ourselves as God loves us, which enables us to then love others (Mark 12:31).

### 3. Therapy and Counseling Approaches

Professional therapy can be a game-changer for a teenager with social anxiety. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**, in particular, has a strong track record. Experts consider CBT the “gold standard” psychotherapy for social anxiety disorder <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> . What is CBT? It’s a structured approach that helps individuals identify anxious thoughts and beliefs, challenge them with evidence and truth, and gradually change their reactions through new behaviors. For a Christian teen, CBT techniques often align well with biblical principles – for instance, capturing lies and replacing them with truth (2 Corinthians 10:5) parallels the idea of identifying distorted thoughts and replacing them with realistic ones.

In practice, a **therapist (psychologist or licensed counselor)** might work with the teen on things like: recognizing the negative self-talk that fuels anxiety (“Everyone must think I’m weird”), evaluating those



assumptions (“What evidence do I have? Maybe that’s my fear talking, not reality.”), and then testing them through gradual **exposures**. Exposure therapy is often a component of CBT where the teen, with guidance, faces feared situations in a controlled, step-by-step way so they can learn that they can handle it and the feared outcomes don’t materialize (or aren’t as catastrophic as imagined). For example, a therapy “exposure hierarchy” might have steps like: say hello to a store clerk, then later try initiating a short conversation, then eventually practice giving a presentation in front of the therapist or a small group of peers in a safe setting. Over time, these exercises **desensitize** the fear response <sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> . Research documented by the National Institute of Mental Health notes that **CBT with exposure can help a person learn and practice social skills and is highly effective for social anxiety** <sup>52</sup> <sup>56</sup> . In fact, multiple studies show about 60–80% of youths with anxiety disorders see significant improvement or full recovery with CBT <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> .

There are also specialized programs like the **Coping Cat**, which is a CBT-based treatment workbook for anxious youth, and group therapy formats where several socially anxious teens practice together. Group CBT can be uniquely helpful for social anxiety since it provides real-life interaction practice in the therapy itself <sup>59</sup> . Many teens find comfort realizing in a group that “I’m not the only one who feels this way,” which reduces shame. If group therapy feels too intimidating initially, one-on-one therapy is perfectly fine – the therapist can build rapport and tailor the pace to the teen’s readiness.

Beyond CBT, another therapy approach gaining traction is **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)**. ACT still involves facing fears, but emphasizes accepting anxious feelings without judgment and committing to action in line with one’s values despite the anxiety <sup>60</sup> . For instance, a Christian teen might learn to notice “Okay, my heart is racing and I’m sweating; that’s just my body’s alarm, I can accept it’s there” and then still choose to participate in youth group because sharing in fellowship is valuable to them. Mindfulness exercises (learning to let thoughts pass without hooking into them) are part of ACT. Studies are showing ACT can also be effective for social anxiety <sup>61</sup> . A skilled therapist will often blend techniques from CBT, ACT, and other modalities to find what works for the individual teen.

**Biblical counseling** or **Christian counseling** is an option many families consider, since it integrates psychological technique with Christian faith. A Christian counselor can incorporate prayer, scripture, and spiritual discussion into therapy sessions if the teen is open to that. They can also address moral/spiritual issues that sometimes accompany anxiety (like guilt, existential questions, etc.) in a biblically grounded way. The key is to ensure the counselor is properly trained in treating anxiety disorders and is not dismissive of the clinical side. A good Christian counselor will not just say “pray more” but will utilize evidence-based therapies (like CBT) **and** weave in faith as a source of strength and meaning. As one Christian mental health resource puts it, the best approach often combines “*relying on the Lord, Scripture, and prayer to work on spiritual issues alongside using medicine or therapy for physiological and psychological aspects*” <sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> . In other words, it’s not either/or; it’s both.

For teens who have experienced **trauma or bullying** that underlies their social anxiety, a counselor can also provide trauma-focused therapy or family therapy if needed. Sometimes unresolved hurt or family dynamics contribute to the anxiety (“social anxiety often have been victimized in the past by some sort of trauma or an overbearing, critical parent,” as one article noted <sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> ). Counseling can help unpack those root issues in a safe environment and bring healing with God’s truth to counteract any lies the teen believed about themselves.

Parents should be supportive of counseling and **frame it positively** – it’s not that something is “wrong” with the teen, rather this is like tutoring for the mind, or training with a coach to learn new skills. In the same

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way we'd get a physical trainer to recover from a sports injury, a therapist is a trainer for overcoming anxiety. Many teens feel relieved once they start counseling and realize it's a judgment-free zone to work through their fears.

If in-person therapy is hard to access, consider these alternatives: - **School resources:** Many schools have counselors or psychologists who can provide short-term support or run anxiety coping skills groups. - **Online therapy or apps:** There are teletherapy options and even CBT-based apps designed for teens (some freely available) that teach anxiety management skills in a guided way. - **Support groups:** Either in person or online forums (moderated by professionals) for teen anxiety where they can share and learn from others. - **Pastoral counseling:** Meeting with a youth pastor or mentor knowledgeable about mental health can supplement professional therapy by providing spiritual encouragement and accountability in using the coping strategies.

The main point is that **no teen should feel they have to fight social anxiety alone**. God often works through people – including trained counselors – as instruments of His healing. Seeking help is an act of wisdom and courage. Proverbs 11:14 says, “in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Reaching out for counseling aligns with biblical wisdom.

#### 4. When to Consider Medication (Modern Medicine and Anxiety)

Sometimes, despite one's best efforts with therapy, lifestyle changes, and prayer, social anxiety remains very intense or debilitating. In such cases, **medication** can be a valuable tool as part of the treatment plan. This is an area where some Christians feel uneasy – they might worry that taking medication is a sign of weak faith or that it could be harmful. It's important to address these concerns with truth and facts:

**Is it okay for a Christian to take anxiety medication?** – Yes. Nowhere does the Bible prohibit using medicine. In fact, the Bible mentions medicinal remedies positively in a few places (for example, a balm in Gilead in Jeremiah 8:22, or Isaiah's use of a fig poultice for Hezekiah's illness in Isaiah 38:21). Most notably, Paul advises Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach ailments (1 Timothy 5:23) – essentially a medicinal use of wine for health reasons, rather than telling him to only pray for healing <sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup>. This shows practical medical wisdom is not opposed to faith. **Medications are part of God's common grace** – the knowledge and skill to develop treatments is a gift God has allowed for the good of humanity. As one Christian medical group states, “*Medicines are not sinful, and there is no biblical restraint against using them. We would not condemn a diabetic who takes insulin... Believers can take advantage of physicians' and researchers' wisdom and skills.*” <sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup>. In the same way, if a teen's anxiety is rooted in part in brain chemistry imbalance or is causing such impairment that they can't engage in therapy or daily life, using a prescribed medication to improve their brain's functioning is wise. It's comparable to using glasses to see – it helps correct something physical so that the person can function and even engage spiritually and mentally more effectively.

What medications are used for social anxiety? Typically, the first-line medications are **antidepressants** such as **SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors)** or **SNRIs**, even if the person isn't “depressed.” These have an anti-anxiety effect by gradually adjusting serotonin levels and promoting better nerve communication in brain circuits that regulate mood and fear. Common SSRIs (like sertraline, paroxetine, fluoxetine) have been studied in teens and can significantly reduce anxiety symptoms over a course of weeks <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup>. They are not habit-forming. They do take time (4–6 weeks often) to reach full effect and a doctor will monitor for any side effects (which are usually manageable, like upset stomach or headache early on). Another class sometimes used is **beta-blockers** (like propranolol) which are not for daily use but

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can be taken before specific anxiety-provoking events (such as performance or public speaking) to block the adrenaline effects (steadying the heart and shaking). These can be helpful for the “*performance anxiety*” type of social anxiety, e.g., a teen musician with stage fright <sup>72</sup> <sup>70</sup> . **Benzodiazepines** (like Xanax or Ativan) are fast-acting anti-anxiety meds, but in teens and generally, they are used sparingly if at all, because they can cause sedation, dependence, and don’t address the root problem <sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup> . Doctors usually avoid benzodiazepines for long-term treatment in adolescents; they might be considered in very acute situations for short periods. The overall strategy with medication is *start low, go slow* – find the lowest effective dose that helps the teen engage better with therapy and life. Medication alone is **not** a magic cure; it’s most effective when combined with therapy (for example, an SSRI can lower the anxiety enough so the teen can fully participate in CBT exposures, which actually **build lasting skills**). This combined approach is supported by research – some studies indicate the combo of CBT + SSRI can outperform either alone in youth anxiety <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup> .

Addressing fears: Some teens worry, “Will medication change my personality or turn me into a zombie?” The goal of medication is actually the opposite – it’s to **restore** the person’s ability to live their life. A well-chosen medication at the right dose should not dull a teen’s intellect or personality; it should merely dial down the excessive anxiety signals. The teen will **still be themselves**, just with less crippling fear. They might actually feel “more like myself” because they’re no longer paralyzed by anxiety. Another fear: “Does taking medicine mean I don’t trust God enough?” Absolutely not. Taking medicine can be an act of stewardship of one’s health. If you trust God to provide for your needs, consider that He may be providing help *through* the medicine. A great quote I once heard: “*Prayer can move mountains, but don’t be surprised if God hands you a shovel.*” Sometimes God’s help comes in the form of practical tools that we must pick up. In the words of a Desiring God article, medications can be seen as **gifts of God’s grace** – they can be used rightly or wrongly, but in themselves they are provision, not a replacement for God <sup>77</sup> <sup>78</sup> . We still ultimately rely on God as the healer, but He can use medicine to bring about healing, just as He uses doctors and therapists.

If a decision to start medication is made, it should be done in consultation with a qualified **psychiatrist or pediatrician** (often a psychiatrist is preferable for nuanced understanding of mental health meds). Parents and the teen should ask questions about benefits, side effects, how long medication might be needed, etc. Generally, for an anxiety disorder, a course of medication might be needed for at least a year, alongside therapy, and then a careful taper off to see if coping skills are sufficient on their own. Some individuals may need longer-term medication – and that’s okay if it’s managing a chronic condition. There should be no shame in that, just as a person with asthma might need an inhaler long-term.

One more word: **Prayer and medication are not at odds**. A teen can pray for God’s blessing on the treatment process. They can also continue spiritual growth while on medication. In fact, reducing the anxiety may free them to engage more deeply in Bible reading, fellowship, etc., which they might have avoided before out of fear. It’s similar to how someone with severe depression might use an antidepressant to lift the fog enough so they can get out of bed and seek God more actively again.

Of course, medication isn’t always necessary for every case of social anxiety. Many mild to moderate cases can be managed with therapy and lifestyle changes alone. But for **severe cases**, medication can be a godsend to get a teen over the hump. The decision should be individualized, made with medical advice, and covered in prayer for wisdom. James 1:5 is applicable: “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God... and it will be given.” God can guide families in whether adding medication is the right step. And if it is chosen, it should be viewed as one piece of the holistic approach, not a crutch or a cop-out.



## Encouragement and Hope for Anxious Christian Teens

Facing social anxiety is undoubtedly challenging, but **there is so much hope**. Both the testimony of others and empirical evidence show that teens *can* overcome or significantly manage this condition. Treatment success stories abound: for example, in one outcome study, **after 12 weeks of CBT, about 80% of teens with social anxiety were rated as much or very much improved**, and many no longer met the criteria for the disorder <sup>57</sup> <sup>79</sup> . We also hear real-life stories, like a once-withdrawn teenager who, after months of counseling and gradual exposure, was able to join his school's drama performance and even enjoy it; or the shy girl who thought she'd never make friends but after practicing social skills in group therapy and youth group, found herself with a small circle of close friends by the end of the year. Progress often happens in **small increments** – a few steps forward, maybe a step back, but overall moving in the right direction. It's important to celebrate those small victories: *"I answered a question in English class today,"* or *"I went to the mall with two friends for an hour,"* or *"I introduced myself to the new kid at youth group."* Each of these is evidence of courage and growth. Keep a journal of these achievements; on a bad day, looking back at them can remind a teen how far they've come.

For Christian teens, **our source of ultimate hope is Jesus**. He is the firm foundation that doesn't shake even when we feel shaken. Remind the teen of Jesus' tender invitation: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11:28-29, NIV). Anxiety is truly wearying – it's a heavy burden on the soul and body. Jesus wants to lighten that load. He doesn't scold us for carrying it; instead He offers help. Encourage teens to cultivate their *personal relationship with Christ*: through daily prayer, reading the Gospels to see Jesus' compassionate character, and maybe reading or listening to testimonies of other Christians who have dealt with anxiety. Knowing that the *Savior of the world cares for them personally* (1 Peter 5:7) can instill a sense of worth and courage.

Also, emphasize that *joy is still possible*. Anxiety might cloud it for a time, but joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) that God can grow even in adversity. Sometimes, teens feel guilty that they aren't "rejoicing always" as Philippians 4:4 says. It's key to clarify that biblical joy doesn't mean a constant bubbly emotion; it's a deeper sense of security and hope in God. That can coexist with the struggle. As paradoxical as it sounds, many people find that as they walk through anxiety with Jesus, their **faith deepens** and their joy on the other side is even more profound. They can truly appreciate the peace "that passes understanding" because they knew what it was like to lack peace. One young man with social anxiety shared that his condition pushed him to depend on God for every little thing, and in doing so, he developed an intimacy with God he might never have otherwise – *"When I am afraid, I put my trust in You"* (Psalm 56:3) became his daily motto, and he saw God come through in countless small ways, which built his confidence not only socially but spiritually.

Community encouragement is crucial too. Family members should recognize the courage it takes for the teen to face anxiety and **speak life to them**. Proverbs 12:25 astutely notes, *"Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up."* Caregivers and friends: give those kind words liberally! Remind the teen of progress you've seen: *"I notice you've been making eye contact more, that's awesome,"* or *"Thank you for sharing your thoughts in group today – what you said was really insightful."* These affirmations can counter the negative self-image that often comes with social anxiety.

It's also helpful for the teen to have a few **go-to verses or affirmations** for moments of fear. We've mentioned several throughout; some favorites among many young Christians include: - *"I can do all this*



*through Him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13) – a boost when facing a challenge. - *"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?"* (Psalm 27:1) – a reminder that God is bigger than people's opinions. - *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you"* (Hebrews 13:5) – you never walk into a social situation alone; Jesus is by your side. - *"Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you"* (Psalm 55:22) – you don't have to carry the worry, God will carry you. - *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me"* (Psalm 23:4) – God's presence in the scariest moments.

Some teens make custom phone lock screens with a calming Bible verse, so when they feel anxious at school, they can discreetly look at their phone for that reassurance. Others keep a small cross or object in their pocket as a tangible reminder that *"Jesus is here with me."* Little faith reminders like that can interrupt the spiral of fear and bring a grounding sense of God's nearness.

Finally, consider the role of **gratitude and service** in finding joy again. Anxiety tends to be inward-focused (one's own fears); gratitude and serving others turn us outward. Encourage the teen each day to jot down or pray thanksgivings for even the small things – a good meal, a kind friend, a favorite Bible verse, a step of progress. Gratitude has been shown in positive psychology research to improve mental health and reduce anxiety by shifting attention to positive aspects of life <sup>80</sup> <sup>81</sup> . And serving others (as mentioned before) not only helps exposure, but it cultivates meaning. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35) – often, as teens engage in helping others, they find their own fears diminish and a sense of joy and purpose grows.

**In conclusion**, social anxiety in teens is a formidable foe, but not an unbeatable one. With a compassionate, multi-faceted approach – grounded in **Christian faith** and supported by **practical interventions** – teens can learn to cope, thrive, and step into the abundant life Christ wants for them. It won't always be easy and it won't be instant, but progress is possible. The Lord who calmed storms can certainly calm the storm in an anxious heart. He often does this through the wise use of therapy, community, and healthy habits as we've outlined. Encourage teens that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and that **God is for them** in this journey. Romans 8:31 reminds us, *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* – not even anxiety can ultimately defeat a child of God who is held in His mighty hands.

Let every anxious Christian teen hear this: *You are not alone, you are deeply loved, and with God's help, you will overcome.* The path to freedom may have ups and downs, but it leads to a place of greater confidence, peace, and joy. As Psalm 94:19 said, when anxiety is great within us, God's consolation can bring us joy – **a joy that is deeper than our fears and anchored in the unshakable love of Christ.**

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