When Worry Takes Over: Anxiety in Teens
By Destiny Smith

All of us experience anxiety. But some teens experience such extreme anxiety that they have trouble getting through everyday life. Dr. Sandra Pimentel is an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University and associate director of the Columbia University Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders. She spoke with YCteen about the different types of anxiety and how to cope.

Dr. Sandra Pimentel: “Anxiety is our response to something we perceive to be threatening or dangerous. It doesn’t have to be threatening or dangerous, but we believe it to be.”

Everyone worries; you’re supposed to worry and feel anxious at times. It becomes an anxiety disorder when the worry or anxious feelings become excessive, more than the actual situation calls for. Do you avoid situations because they make you too nervous? Does it hold you back from being with your friends, or from making friends? Does it mess things up in terms of how you feel about school, or your self-esteem? If your anxiety is starting to get in the way of everyday activity, that’s a good sign that you should get help.

Dr. Pimentel: “Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders that kids and teenagers experience. One out of every eight kids has an anxiety disorder.”

There are a few categories. There’s generalized anxiety disorder, where people worry a lot about everything. Social anxiety disorder is when people worry excessively about social situations, what people think about them.

Panic disorder is where people have panic attacks, with a lot of physical symptoms and the feeling that they are about to die or that something really terrible is going to happen to them. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, is a category of anxiety where people have intrusive thoughts that compel them to do some particular behavior. Separation anxiety disorder is where a kid gets scared of separating from Mom or Dad. That’s normal for a 2- or 3-year-old, but when you see it in older kids, it’s a problem.

Dr. Pimentel: “As you go through development, you experience different phases of things that may scare you, like a kid who’s scared of monsters and the bogeyman. Social things become more important in your teens, so social anxiety disorder comes out in teen years, typically. There are different academic challenges, so kids worry more about performance in school. Panic attacks also tend to have their onset in teen years.”
Dr. Pimentel: “Anxiety is meant to protect us by making us act. If you have a test or presentation you’re worried about, you’re more likely to study or prepare. But when people are stuck in anxiety, they’re not planning or coping. It’s like running in place. You’re not using the anxiety as a push to say, “What can I do about this?”

You also get stuck in a certain thought pattern. For example, if someone has a fear of being unsuccessful, they might get stuck thinking, “I did poorly on this one exam; that means I’m going to be a failure in the future.” They start to make things more negative than they actually are. It’s like if a radio station keeps playing that sad song, you get in a sad mood. If you’re thinking only about being unsuccessful and being rejected, jumping to only negative conclusions, these distorted ways of thinking overestimate how bad it will actually be.

Dr. Pimentel: We’re social people and meant to share feelings with others, whether those feelings are anxieties or happiness, anger, etcetera. It’s good to be able to talk to friends about things that make you nervous or anxious, and if they can help you problem-solve or come up with ways of coping, good. But a lot of times when people get anxious, they want reassurance that everything’s going to be OK, and we can’t over-rely on people to make us feel better. It’s about developing your own sense of how to cope with anxiety.

Dr. Pimentel: Sometimes a teen says, “I’m worried.” I say, “About what?” and they say, “Stuff.” It’s important to think specifically about what worries you: I’m worried about what to say when I ask him or her out; about SATs; about college. Then you can break down your fears: What do you think you’re going to say wrong when you go on the date? What do you worry you’ll have trouble with on the SATs? Come up with a plan and prepare, setting realistic expectations about what you can and can’t do. That’s using anxiety in a good way.

Another thing is to eat well and get enough sleep. If you’re tired, you’re less likely to deal with stress in a good way. Exercise to give your body an outlet, even if it’s just going for a walk. Yesterday I had a day with no breaks, but I forced myself to take a five-minute break to walk around the block. It’s important to say, “OK, this is funny but I’m going to do it.” That’s another thing: Things are much easier to deal with if you have a sense of humor about them. And talk to people. Find a friend, or talk to a parent or a counselor. For more information on different types of anxiety disorder, coping with anxiety, and getting help to treat anxiety, visit the website of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America at adaa.org, or contact the Columbia University Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders: anxietytreatmentnyc.org, 212-246-5740.

Answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper. The first two questions can be answered in 1-2 sentences. The third question needs a full-page, well thought out response.

1. Who is the intended audience for this article, and how do you know that?
2. What was the author’s purpose for writing this article, and how do you know that?
3. How have you or someone you know been affected by anxiety?
4. How does Steven in Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie deal with anxiety?