

Activities for Youth

Coping With Anxiety

Pre-Reading Discussion: 5 minutes

Ask everyone to write down a situation that makes them nervous [like asking someone out or talking to a stranger] and a few phrases about what “nervous” feels like [your palms are sweaty, your heart is racing]. Then ask for volunteers to share with the class. Ask the volunteers what they do to try to calm themselves down when they feel that way (or solicit ideas from the group). Write these ideas on the board.

Reading, Discussion, and Role-Plays: 40 minutes

Have the group read Victor Tanis-Stoll’s story, “Invader in My Brain: Living With Anxiety,” on p. 9 out loud. Afterwards, ask them to list ways that Victor’s anxiety keeps him from enjoying his life and doing everything he wants to do. [It keeps him from being able to do his homework; it makes him angry at himself; he avoids social situations; he stays silent even with his close friends; it keeps him isolated when he wants to be close to people].

Then ask them to list the ways Victor has tried to cope with his anxiety. What were some strategies that didn’t work out? [Smoking marijuana; avoiding people.] What were some that worked? [Drawing; watching TV; running track; talk therapy; medication; deep breathing; mindful thinking.] Write the strategies that worked on the board. Finally, ask what were some things he plans on doing? [Forcing himself into scary social situations; talking to people in his classes; making friends.]

Split the group into pairs and have them role-play for the group. Have one be Victor and the other be a student sitting next to him in class. Have the one playing Victor strike up a conversation with the other one. Tell the “non-Victors” that their goal is to boost Victor’s confidence by being friendly and showing him it’s worth it to reach out. Keep the role-plays short, a minute apiece, unless teens want to go longer.

Wrap-Up: 5 minutes

Ask everyone to look at the “calming down” ideas and strategies on the board, and then write down one new way they’d like to try to handle their own nervousness or anxiety. Also ask them to share ways they would make others feel more at ease. Ask for volunteers to share with the group.

Know Your Feelings

Pre-Reading Discussion: 5 minutes

Ask everyone to say how they know when they’re sad. They can’t use the word “sad” in their answers, but besides that, anything is OK. It could be a description of their body or a different way of behaving or they could name the cause of the sadness.

Reading and Discussion: 25 minutes

Read A.C.’s story, “Medicated Against My Will,” on p. 5 out loud.

Then ask participants to look back at the story and circle the places that show that A.C. is sad. Then share responses with the group. [She cried; she found it difficult to cheer her little sister up; once in the foster home, she stayed in her room a lot; “I yearned to hear my mother’s voice”; she barely sees her mother and then learns she’s in prison; she doesn’t feel connected to her foster family].

Ask if they think “sad” is the same as having depression and needing medication. Why or why not? [Evidence from the story that A.C. is not depressed includes that she is not suicidal; she has legitimate reasons to be sad; that she can appreciate good things like getting placed with her aunt and getting a good psychiatrist; other people notice she is better by the end of the story.]

Wrap-Up: 5 minutes

In this story, A.C. eventually got a doctor to take her off the pills in part by knowing and being able to describe how she was feeling. Ask the group to name a time they’ve figured out how they were feeling and why. Ask if they can think of good reasons for being able to identify how they feel and why [they won’t lash out at the wrong person; they will understand that the bad feeling will pass; they can make better life decisions if they understand what makes them happy and what angers or saddens them].