

# insights

## 5 steps to helping your anxious teen achieve their goals

by Dr Jodi Richardson



*Anxiety and avoidance go hand in hand. Since anxiety is a response to a perceived threat or danger, it's perfectly natural that when your teen is feeling anxious, turning away from whatever is provoking that feeling feels like the logical thing to do. However, while this might feel like a helpful strategy in the short term, it only serves to make the anxiety worse over time. Helping your teenager to identify what matters most and to set goals is a way to help them turn in the direction of what's important, taking their anxiety along for the ride.*

We all have things we want to do and achieve, and teenagers are no different. Helping them formulate their goals, plan how they're going to achieve them and then supporting their progression will do wonders for their mental health.

### **Foundations of a flourishing teenager**

In addition to building their self-confidence, striving towards a goal creates opportunities for your teen to engage in activities that hold meaning, experience the positive emotions that come from progress, enjoy the sense of pride and achievement that comes from accomplishing their goal, and experience opportunities to connect with you and others on their journey, building relationships. Each and every one of these outcomes are the foundations of flourishing.

### **Instead of waiting for the anxiety to pass**

The process of setting goals and then setting out to achieve them is going to help your anxious teen practice what's called 'goal-directed action'. Instead of waiting for anxiety to pass, goals empower teenagers to choose behaviours that move them in the direction of what they care about, despite their anxiety or other obstacles. All along this will build in them the strength, courage and confidence to live a vibrant, meaningful, rich life.

#### **1. Start with values**

To create meaningful goals it's important to start with values. We all have them. They're the things in life that matter to us most. Our values are our principles and the standards of behaviour that we uphold ourselves to. They come from within us, and we're free to choose them. Teenagers each have their very own set of values, though if you start by asking them what they are, you're bound to be disappointed. Being able to name your values is a really hard thing to do without any resources. It's much more effective to give your teen an opportunity to choose their values from a list. Get them to start by casting a wide net. Here's a list to get you both started.

Values

Acceptance	Accuracy	Achievement	Adventure	Altruism	Ambition
Assertiveness	Authenticity	Belonging	Being the best	Boldness	Calmness
Caring	Cheerfulness	Challenge	Commitment	Community	Compassion
Competitiveness	Connection	Contentment	Contribution	Control	Cooperation
Courage	Curiosity	Creativity	Dependability	Determination	Diligence
Discretion	Discipline	Elegance	Empathy	Encouragement	Enjoyment
Enthusiasm	Equality	Excellence	Excitement	Expertise	Fairness
Faith	Family	Fitness	Flexibility	Forgiveness	Freedom
Fun	Generosity	Gratitude	Health	Honesty	Honour
Humility	Independence	Industry	Inquisitiveness	Intimacy	Joy
Justice	Leadership	Legacy	Love	Loyalty	Make a difference
Mastery	Mindfulness	Obedience	Openness	Order	Originality
Patriotism	Perfection	Persistence	Preparedness	Professionalism	Prudence
Quality	Reliability	Resourcefulness	Respect	Responsibility	Rigor
Safety	Self-control	Selflessness	Self-reliance	Sensitivity	Serenity
Success	Skilfulness	Speed	Spontaneity	Stability	Strategic
Tolerance	Supportiveness	Thankfulness	Thoroughness	Thoughtfulness	Timeliness
Understanding	Uniqueness	Unity	Usefulness	Vision	Vitality

## 2. Evaluate top values

When your teen has circled the values that are important to them it's time to start a conversation about what was chosen and why. You'll know whether or not to carve out time to talk or to casually throw a question their way. Open-ended questions are always good. You could simply start by saying, "Tell me a little about why you chose 'originality' as a value " and then see where the conversation goes. It's a good idea for you to create a values list too, then compare lists. Sharing your values and showing your teen you remember and respect their values and why they matter is a wonderful way to strengthen your bond and understanding of each other.



## 3. Choose a value to work towards

With a clearer understanding of what's important to them, your teen can begin to look at their values and contemplate what they can do to live more fully by them. It's natural at this stage for some teens to feel disconnected from their values, now that they can see them in black and white. This is their opportunity to start reconnecting with their values by choosing a value to 'work on'. A value to align their behaviour with as they move forward.

## 4. Time to set a goal

Say your teen chose 'adventure' as a value but struggles to do adventurous things because their anxiety gets in the way. Have them name something adventurous that they can set themselves as a goal. With their recognition that adventure is one of their carefully chosen values combined with a willingness to move in the direction of this value, your teenager is already taking a step towards doing what matters despite their anxiety. In his work with anxious teenagers, Dr Chris Peterson talks to teens about considering 'the good stuff' and 'the challenging stuff' as two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. Talk to your teenager about the challenging 'stuff' they might encounter as they pursue their goal and how they might handle any challenges that arise.



## 5. Start Small

Small, achievable goals are the place to start. Your adventurous teen might like to start by walking to the local shops alone to build confidence step-by-step towards the ultimate goal of an overseas gap year after school finishes. Remind them to reward themselves for achieving small goals, and to be kind to themselves if they don't quite get there the first time.



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