

LIVING WITH

“I play drums to let out anger.”

—Abbie Seale, 18, Austin, TX

Abbie says playing different instruments helps her manage her anxiety.

ANXIETY

One in three teens has an anxiety disorder.

These high school students are speaking out about what it's like and how they cope.

By JESSICA PRESS



ABBIE SEALE, 18



MICHAEL FEENSTER, 16



SONYA VALLE, 16

ABBIE SEALE has always appreciated knowing the why behind everything. “I love science because it explains a lot about what we see around us. I love analyzing poetry and classic literature for the same reason. It is so satisfying to understand the way things work and what they mean,” she says. This logical sensibility is why, when Abbie developed anxiety in middle school, she felt so frustrated. “For two nights, I stayed up all night, staring at my wall, trying to figure it out,” she says. “I couldn’t make my brain believe that there was no threat to me.” She had been feeling so scared and overwhelmed that she’d started making up excuses to miss school, telling her mom her allergies were bothering her or that her stomach hurt.

DREW SMITH/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC, INC. (ABBIE SEALE); ALLISON SHELLEY/AP IMAGES FOR SCHOLASTIC, INC. (FEENSTER); TARA PILEY FOR SCHOLASTIC INC. (VALLE); SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (LETTERS)

Abbie's mom took her to see a counselor, who recommended Abbie visit a psychiatrist, a medical doctor whose specialty is mental health. Abbie now takes medication every morning to help treat her anxiety and has come up with many ways to cope. One strategy she uses is called a body scan, where she sits with her feet planted on the ground and concentrates on each part of her body by tensing it and then releasing it, starting with her feet and moving to her head. Doing this exercise redirects Abbie's focus away from her thoughts and into her body and its physical sensations.

Abbie also gets relief from playing music. She's taught herself how to play electric bass, ukulele, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, and drums. She likes to play the drums to let out anger and acoustic guitar when she needs to wind down. She also started her school's chapter of Active Minds, a national organization that teaches students about mental health through peer-to-peer education. "I wish Active Minds was around when I was first diagnosed to help me understand what I was facing and how to deal with it," Abbie says. "It means a lot to be able to provide that education and sense of belonging and [reassurance](#) for other people."

What IS Anxiety?

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time—a sense of uneasiness or worry about what might happen. A little bit can actually help us perform at our best in [pivotal](#) moments, like big tests or piano recitals. But anxiety disorders are mental health conditions in which these feelings occur too often, are too strong, or are out of proportion to the situation.

Source: KidsHealth.org

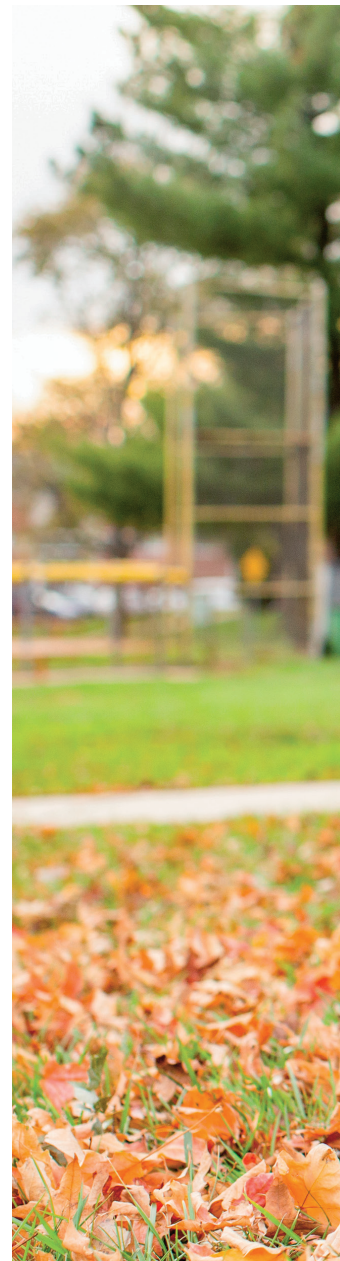
"I take photos to keep me calm."

—Michael Feenster, 16,
Baltimore, MD

WHEN Michael Feenster was a little kid, he always felt jittery and bothered for no apparent reason. "At first, I kept my unsettled feelings to myself," he says. "I thought maybe I was just paranoid."

Then, when he was 14, his grandmother became terminally ill, and that set off a constant feeling of depression and anxiety. Michael started having panic attacks, and he knew he needed help. As the youngest kid in a tight-knit family, he had a lot of people to turn to, but he went to his mom first. "I told her that I didn't know what was wrong with me," he says. Speaking up made everything better. "Once I said my thoughts out loud, they weren't as bad," he says. His mom made an appointment with a therapist, and while he was nervous about going, the alternative—staying "stuck"—was worse.

"I told my therapist I thought I had [paranoia](#)," Michael says. "But he explained that it was actually called anxiety—that feeling of it being hard to settle down." His therapist worked with a nurse practitioner to find medicine to help Michael, which



SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (BACKGROUND)



"A mental health issue is just like any other health issue," says Michael.

he now takes every morning and night.

In addition to therapy and medication, Michael has learned deep breathing techniques he can use during anxious moments. He tunes in to his breath and shifts his focus back to the present, instead of letting his brain fast-forward to what-ifs and fears about the future.

Michael also stays busy with many activities that help him manage his anxiety—he runs track, loves playing video games, and is especially passionate about photography. "I love the experience of

exploring and seeing things through my camera," he says. "When I focus on my pictures, it takes up so much of my attention that there's no room for anxiety."

The more Michael talks to his therapists, friends, and family about his experiences, the less power the anxiety has over him. "I want people to know that a mental health issue is just like any other health issue," he says. "There's nothing wrong with it. The only problem is if you ignore it and don't treat it."

“I journal for perspective.”

—Sonya Valle, 16, Chula Vista, CA

FOR YEARS, Sonya Valle had a secret: Starting in middle school, she would have moments where she suddenly felt so nervous, she thought she might faint. “My heart would race, and I’d start panicking, but I wouldn’t know why,” she says. Sonya kept these feelings to herself, ashamed that there was something wrong with her. So she tried to go about her normal life. She’d act in school plays and go hiking and camping with her school’s outdoor club, without anyone having any idea that she was suffering inside.

Then, one day during her freshman year science class, Sonya had what she later learned was an anxiety attack. “My face got really hot, and my whole body felt paralyzed,” says Sonya. “It seemed like the walls were closing in on me.” She left the classroom and went to the bathroom to try to calm down. When that didn’t work, she walked to the school counselor’s office.

“My counselor explained the symptoms of anxiety, and I was shocked by how many of them I related to,” she says. That shock soon gave way to relief. “Learning about anxiety made me feel like I wasn’t alone, because other people experience the same thing,” she says.

Sonya has learned that the most helpful thing she can do to keep anxiety at bay is journaling. “I try to write when I’m having good days so that when I’m feeling anxious, I can reread those entries and be reminded that things aren’t always bad,” she says.

Sonya still experiences anxiety once or twice a week, usually when she’s struggling with schoolwork or when things are stressful at home—her heart beats fast, her cheeks get hot, and her palms get sweaty. But she now knows that those feelings, while difficult, are not permanent. “It’s OK to not be OK,” she says. “The feeling of anxiety won’t last forever.”

**JOIN
ACTIVE MINDS!**
This school club—
which Sonya and Abbie
belong to—works to remove
the stigma associated with
mental health issues.
For more info, go to
activeminds.org.



Learn to H.A.L.T.!

When you're feeling HUNGRY, ANGRY, LONELY, or TIRED, your anxiety is more likely to flare up. Ask yourself if any of those factors could be triggering your anxiety, and then build in the self-care you need. Here are some great options from psychologist Shane G. Owens, an assistant director of campus mental health at Farmingdale State College in Farmingdale, New York.

If you are in crisis, call 911 immediately, and text HOME to 741741 to reach Crisis Text Line's 24/7 confidential support.



● **EXERCISE:**
When you work up a sweat, your endorphins, or feel-good hormones, kick in and start flowing.



● **TUNE IN:**
Whether you sing, play an instrument, or have a go-to playlist, music can soothe your nervous system.



● **TAKE A BATH:**
It changes your body temperature, which can act like a "refresh" button for your brain!



● **SIT IN NATURE:**
Being outdoors has been shown to lower blood pressure and have a calming effect.



● **WRITE, DRAW, PAINT:**
Journaling and doing art can help channel your feelings in a safe and productive way.



SPEAKING OUT TO REMOVE THE STIGMA

JONAS KOLKER, 18, a high school senior from New York, believes that sharing his experience with anxiety is the best way to help others. That's why, when he was a freshman, he told his story in a Tedx video. The video, where he talks about his anxiety, has been viewed on YouTube more than a half a million times. "Even though mental health issues are so common, the subject is still taboo for many people," he says. "I wanted to share something I knew a lot of people deal with privately and hopefully show that these experiences are not only normal, but surmountable." Now Jonas gets messages from teens around the world thanking him for making them feel less alone. You can watch Jonas' video on the Tedx YouTube channel.