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Attack of the Nerves

By Kirsten Weir

Butterflies in your stomach? Worries keeping you awake? Here's how to deal.

Kara C. is usually cool, calm, and collected. But like everyone, her nerves sometimes get the better of her. "In seventh grade, we had to do a play," says the 14-year-old from New York. "Sometimes I'd get nervous and start to forget my lines." Michigan teen Kevin P. has been through the same thing. "I had to do a speech in front of [the] class. It feels like a thousand beady eyes staring at you!" says Kevin, 15. "I couldn't concentrate enough to read my notes."

Have you ever felt as if you have butterflies fluttering in your stomach? That uneasy feeling is *anxiety*, and it happens to everyone. It is when you feel worried or uneasy. A little anxiety is a normal human reaction to stress. But sometimes anxiety can spin out of control. Luckily, you can learn to calm those feelings and move on.

Internal Alarm

Anxiety is similar to fear. When you are facing danger, your brain gets ready to make a quick decision: fight or run away. That is called the fight-or-flight reaction. The brain tells the body to release *adrenaline*, a chemical that triggers certain changes in the body. Your heart beats faster. You breathe more quickly. Your muscles tense, and you start to sweat. You might feel a little dizzy or sick to your stomach.

There are good reasons for the body's fight-or-flight reaction, explains William Shryer, a social worker in Danville, Calif. Anxiety is like an internal alarm that helps you stay safe. Fear of heights can keep you from falling off a cliff. Feeling nervous before a test can inspire you to study. "Anxiety is a good thing," he says.

Still, you can have too much of a good thing. "Normal anxiety decreases when the danger is gone," Shryer says. But when worry sticks around, it can get in the way of life. About 13 of every 100 kids ages 9 to 17 have what are known as *anxiety disorders*. For those kids, Shryer says, anxiety "is like a haunting monster."

In Control

Why are some people more anxious than others? Scientists aren't sure. Some kids might learn nervous behavior from anxious parents. Genetics and brain chemistry might also play a role.

Anxiety can affect your appetite and make it hard to concentrate. It can also keep you from getting a good night's sleep. Over time, constant stress from anxiety can damage your health, says Elizabeth Carll, a psychologist in Huntington, N.Y. Uncontrolled anxiety can lead to heart problems, stomach disorders, weight gain, and depression.

Luckily, there are ways to keep nervousness in check. Next time you feel anxious, try these stay-calm strategies.

Think positive. "More things go right than wrong, but we tend to remember the negative," Carll says. Focusing on good things can help keep nervous thoughts away.

Take a deep breath. Learn yoga or other stress-management tools, such as deep breathing or relaxation exercises. Turn to those techniques to calm yourself when you feel worry creeping in.

Find a shoulder to lean on. When you feel anxiety coming on, turn to a trusted friend or family member. Before tough tests or tryouts, try talking with friends or teammates.

Move your muscles. Exercise releases brain chemicals that can boost your mood and calm you down. "Exercise is great for an anxious person," Carll says.

Plan ahead. Being prepared can help. "If I procrastinate studying for a test, that ends up making me worry more, since I'm not prepared," says Kevin. Planning ahead works outside of school too. Kara was nervous about going to a birthday party where she would know only a few people. She made plans to have a friend introduce her to everyone right away. That way, she would get to meet everyone and wouldn't feel like an outsider. "They'll know who I am, and I'll know who they are," Kara says.

Get your Z's. Kids and teens need at least nine hours of sleep a night. Too little shut-eye can have an effect on brain function and emotions, which can make anxiety worse. "Sleep is so critical," Carll says.

With practice, you can learn to keep anxiety from taking over. But if worry is affecting your performance at school or in social situations, look to a trusted adult for some help. You may have

an anxiety disorder that can be treated with therapy or medication.

The good news, Carll shares, is that you can learn to control anxiety. With practice, she says, you can become better at dealing with anxiety—and even learn ways to keep yourself from getting overly stressed in the first place.

Extreme Anxiety

Sometimes feelings of worry take over a person's life. When that happens, it is often because of an *anxiety disorder*. There are several kinds of anxiety disorders.

Generalized anxiety disorder causes extreme worry and dread for no obvious reason.

Phobias are intense fears of specific things, such as spiders (*arachnophobia*) and open spaces (*agoraphobia*). One of the most common anxiety disorders among teens is social phobia, which causes extreme anxiety in social situations.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) causes near-constant anxious thoughts, such as fear of germs. OCD sufferers try to relieve those thoughts with rituals such as frequent hand-washing.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety that develops after experiencing a terrifying event. Soldiers can return from war with PTSD, for instance.

Panic disorder causes sudden attacks of terror and fear of losing control. People having a panic attack may feel tingling in the arms, shortness of breath, and a racing heart.

About You: How Music Affects Your Moods

Music can change how you feel. Learn the keys to how music connects with your mind and body.

It had been a hard week for Jack. His parents had to cancel the family's spring vacation to Disney World. He studied the wrong chapter for his science test. And his basketball team almost lost a game when Jack missed an easy shot.

Jack, age 11, slammed his bedroom door. He pressed the play button on his CD player and plopped onto his bed. As his favorite song played, Jack thought about the coming weekend. After a few minutes, he called to his sister in the next room. "Hey, how about shooting some hoops?"

Music can be just what you need when you're feeling down. The right song can make you smile as you daydream about that new girl or guy in class. It can make you feel like getting up and dancing. It also can calm you down when you're worried. In the movies, music sets the mood, whether it's a horror scene or a happy ending.

Besides changing how you feel, music may help make your brain work better. It may even help keep you healthy.

Why does music have these powers? It may be because people's bodies have natural rhythms, such as a heartbeat and pulse. Different kinds of music can affect you in different ways. Changing your mood can be as easy as pressing the "play" button.

Music to Soothe and Relax

Soft music with long, gentle notes is what many people play to relax. At an exhibit in 2000 at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City, visitors could lie down on the city's largest futon bed. They closed their eyes, put on headphones, and listened to music by more than 60 "sound artists."

Most retail stores play "background" music. The longer shoppers stay in a store, the more likely they are to buy something. So, stores try to play music that their shoppers enjoy.

If you want to relax at home, try listening to nature sounds. Or look for music with a single

instrument you like, such as a piano, flute, or guitar. Maybe just hearing a single voice soothes you. Try different types of music to learn what helps you relax.

Music to Heal

For people who are sick, music can do more than just help them relax. It may help make them well again. Doctors in ancient Greece believed that music was just as important as medicine in treating patients.

Today, some doctors believe music is a healer. It is sometimes used to help reduce pain after surgery or during difficult treatment. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital in New York City uses music therapy to help cancer patients. Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, plays music to soothe irritable infants. Studies have even shown that music may help boost the body's immune system.

When you're sick, try listening to soft, relaxing music. Or if you're just feeling down, play a favorite song and tell someone how it makes you feel. A group of teens suffering from depression shared their favorite songs with each other. Each teen explained why he or she liked the song. After talking about it, the teens said they felt better.

Music to Learn

Playing music while doing homework helps keep your brain in shape. When you listen to a sound, it travels from the ear to the brain by electrical signal. Listening involves learning, memory, and emotions.

Many studies have tried to explain how music and learning go together. In 1993, a study was published that linked listening to Mozart with improving the brain.

Don Campbell, who studied the powers of music, believed music could make people--even babies--more creative, smarter, healthier, and happier. In 1997, Campbell wrote the book *The Mozart Effect*. The term was originally created by a researcher in 1991. In the book, Campbell described how listening to Mozart helps brain and body functions.

After the book was released, many people exposed their children to music, especially classical music. Several hospitals across the country even offered parents of newborns free CDs of

classical music.

Not everyone was convinced about the Mozart effect. Many doctors said babies who hadn't heard music were no worse off. Others believed more research was needed.

Experts suggest playing slow music to help you concentrate while you study. It may even improve your memory. But if you find yourself singing along, try playing music without words. Also, try to match the type of music to the type of learning. For example, if you're reading about the U.S. Civil War, playing upbeat music may be distracting. You may not remember later what you read.

Music for Energy

If you want more energy, however, upbeat music works. Say you have to clean your room from top to bottom. Turn on a fast song and you may find yourself working at a speedy pace. When exercising or playing sports, choose fun, fast music. Evelyn, age 12, points out that rock music "gets you moving faster."If you want to help yourself wake up in the morning, try playing music with a steady beat. For some people, soothing music is better than lively music early in the day.

Finding the Right Music

Discovering new types of music and favorite artists can be fun. For example, different websites that provide music give you recommendations based on your selections.

No matter what style of music you like, you can use it to help you. The right music can add to a good mood or turn around a bad day. Just ask Jack. After listening to his favorite song, he put his tough week behind him and played a great game of basketball with his sister.

Take Action: Take a Mood Music Poll

Across the top of a sheet of paper, write the following as column headings: your name, age, and the names and ages of three other people you have chosen to survey. Choose people of various ages, including at least two people over age 25. Write the question and categories below down the left side of the paper. Ask people why they chose each type of music. Fill in the answers for yourself and for the others.

What type of music do you like best for:

Relaxing?

Waking up?

Studying or reading?

Doing chores?

Feeling happier?

Now compare the answers. Did age seem to affect what types of music people chose for each category? Did anyone give similar answers? If you're not familiar with a type of music mentioned, ask to hear an example. Do you agree that it sets a certain mood?

How to Say What You're Feeling

"I can't believe that you forgot to come over and study with me last night!" shouted Sherri as she walked down the hall toward her best friend, Taylor. "You're so thoughtless sometimes. You just don't care about anyone but yourself!"

"You're being ridiculous, Sherri," replied Taylor. "I didn't come over because I had to stay late at baseball practice. I called and told your dad. I guess you didn't get the message."

"Because of you," Sherri said, "I failed today's math test. Go away and leave me alone."

Sherri spent the rest of the day upset at Taylor. She was so mad, she wanted to scream. Now she would have to work hard to make up for today's low test score.

Have you ever been really angry with one of your friends or someone in your family for letting you down? Have you wanted to scream or yell, or even strike out and punch something? Everybody has emotions like this, but the key to controlling them is recognizing what you are feeling and why, as well as understanding what you can do about them.

Finding the Real Feeling

Sherri really is angry. But if she took the time to look at her feelings, she'd realize that the person she's angry with is herself. It wasn't Taylor's responsibility to make sure she studied for the math test; it was hers. When she didn't do well on the test, she blamed her friend because that was easier than admitting she had messed up.

Think about how you feel sometimes. You might think you are feeling down or depressed when actually you're just tired. Did you stay up extra late last night? Did you have to get up earlier than usual this morning? Before you put a label on how you are feeling, look at what is going on in your life for clues. Sherri thought she was angry at Taylor, but what she was really feeling was guilt. Learning to recognize your real true feelings is the first step in knowing what to do with them.

Now What?

Once you have a handle on your honest feelings, it's time to do something with them. Yelling at

your parents, siblings, or friends is rarely the solution to any conflict. It will just increase the negative feelings you have, and the problem won't be solved. Working through your emotions so you can work out problems takes a number of communication skills that you will need to learn. You'll use these skills for the rest of your life.

The first key to sharing how you feel and resolving a conflict is picking the right place and time to talk. Don't try to discuss your curfew with your dad as he is flying out the front door late for work. Don't try to smooth out the argument with your brother when he is in the middle of writing a report. You need to choose a time and place that will allow you both to give your full attention to the situation. And you should avoid having to worry about time limits or interruptions.

The Skill of Listening

Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Think about watching television. You often hear the words and music of the commercials, but are you listening to them? Notice how your attention shifts when the commercial ends and your show comes back on. The same thing can happen during a conversation. It's easy to daydream when someone else is talking, or to think about what you are going to say as soon as they finish. But both of these actions mean you aren't listening. Really listening to what the other person is saying is an important part of understanding how he or she is feeling and what the problem actually is. To do this, you need to do the following:

- Make and keep eye contact.
- Ask questions if you don't understand something or didn't hear it properly.
- Respond immediately when asked about something.
- Give your full, undivided attention.
- Nod now and then.
- Never interrupt.

The Skill of Responding

After you have listened closely to someone explaining his or her thoughts and feelings, it's your turn to speak. Before you start talking, however, try doing a "reality check," a skill that makes sure you understand what you've just heard. You *paraphrase* (PAIR-uh-fraze; summarize) the person's words to show that you were listening and that you are trying to understand his or her

side of the story.

For example, imagine if Taylor had responded to Sherri's anger by saying, "Sherri, you are feeling really angry at me because I didn't show up last night and help you study for the math test. You didn't do well on it, and you think that it's my fault."

Do you think that Sherri would have gotten so angry if she had realized that Taylor was truly listening to her?

Now it's your turn to express your feelings. Make this part easier for everyone by learning to use "I" messages instead of "You" messages. Start your statements with "I." This will let you express how someone's behavior makes you feel. Instead of "You are so thoughtless," you might say, "I felt really sad when you didn't come over." Taylor's statement "You are being ridiculous" could be turned into "I feel really angry inside when you yell at me, Sherri." Messages that start with "you" will make a person feel defensive, while "I" statements express a feeling.

Take a look at how each of these statements makes you feel when you read them:

"You didn't call me like you said you were going to!" or "I felt really disappointed when you didn't call last night."

"You always make me late!" or "I am late to school when you aren't ready on time."

It's important to realize that your life will be full of emotions. But, learning to recognize what you are honestly feeling and then learning how to deal with it are even more important. Listen, respond, and communicate!

It Feels Good to Laugh

By Eric Messinger

No joke: Laughter is good for you.

At age 11 in sixth grade, Jason was a very good student and an accomplished athlete. But one of his favorite talents had nothing to do with either school or sports: He loved to tell jokes.

"If the red house is made out of red bricks, and the blue house is made out of blue bricks, what's the green house made out of?" he asked me.

"Green?" I wondered aloud, sensing that it was probably a wrong answer.

"Glass!" he responded. "Get it? It's a greenhouse, with plants and everything."

Jason told all kinds of jokes, from silly ones with stupid punch lines to others that had clever wordplays. "I like to make my friends laugh," he said, "and sometimes I like telling jokes because it makes people feel better, like if someone's a little sad."

Jason may even be a better friend than he realized. Making people laugh not only improves moods but may also improve health. Several studies have found that laughter has a positive effect. A good laugh boosts the *cardiovascular system.* That's your heart and blood. It also helps the *immune system,* your disease fighters. Laughter may even help you withstand pain.

Health Screenings

Dr. Michael Miller has been studying laughter's influence on the heart and blood system. He teaches at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. In one of his studies, Miller had people watch two movies. One movie was very serious. The second was very silly. He then measured how much their blood vessels expanded after watching each kind of movie.

That is important information to know. When a blood vessel expands, it's often a sign that certain chemicals are being released into the blood. Those chemicals help a person maintain a healthy heart. They prevent blood from clotting where it shouldn't and arteries from becoming clogged with *plaque.* That's a sticky substance that can build up on artery walls.

Miller found that when people watched a funny movie, their blood vessels expanded and blood flow increased. How much? As much as it would have if they had gone to the gym for a 15- to 30-minute workout.

"Laughter should not replace exercise, but it certainly should be part of a healthy lifestyle," says Miller. "Everyone should try to get a good laugh in every day."

Laugh to Feel Better

Like a multivitamin, laughter brings a range of health benefits into your daily life. Laughing boosts your immune system. Just look at the work of Dr. Lee Berk, of Loma Linda University in California. He is, by the way, a friend of Hunter "Patch" Adams's. If that name sounds familiar, it's because Adams is a funny doctor who became so famous that a movie was made about him. His interactions with his patients were like comedy routines.

Berk doesn't do bedside standup, but he does research humor. He has shown that laughing can lead to an increase in antibodies and other cells that fight bacteria, viruses, and other body "invaders."

Other studies show that laughter might be helpful for people in hospitals. An organization called Rx Laughter (*Rx* is the medical abbreviation for "prescription") sponsored a study about humor in the hospital. The results suggest that laughter might help children deal with painful medical treatments.

The study involved children between the ages of 8 and 14. The kids placed their hands in cold water for as long as they could while watching funny old TV shows, such as *I Love Lucy.* Guess what happened? The kids were able to withstand pain for a longer period of time when they were watching a funny video than when watching no video. Those who laughed more felt less pain.

"This means that humor can distract you from thinking about a painful procedure but also has the potential to make it seem less painful," says Dr. Margaret Stuber, the main researcher for the study. She works at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Good Humor

As Stuber also points out, an "injection" of humor may even be good for your emotional health. Physical and emotional health are connected. "If you can say to yourself that [a medical treatment] wasn't as bad as you thought it would be, then you're less likely to have nightmares, fears about going to the doctor, and other related anxieties," she says.

No one is saying that laughter can cure a horrible disease. But given how much anxiety health problems can cause, researchers like Stuber are looking closer at laughter. They think laughter can almost always play a helpful role in someone's medical treatment. "Humor ... allows you to take a step back and relax," she says.

You Think You're Funny?

Some people seem funnier than others. But you know what? Most people can improve their sense of humor with a little practice. How? Here are some tips.

- **Look for humor all around you.** Sometimes it is obvious, such as the jokes people tell. Other things are not necessarily intended to be funny but can be if you look at them in a slightly different way. Funny things can include newspaper headlines or something someone says that could be interpreted more than one way.
- **At dinnertime, share the funny things you observed or heard during the day with the rest of your family.**
- **Set up a humor center at home,** such as a bulletin board or the refrigerator, where you can post funny things you want to share.
- **Read a joke book.**
- **If something makes you laugh, think about what would have made it even funnier.**
- **Take photographs or pictures from magazines and make up your own funny captions.**
- **Hang around with people you think are very funny.**

The tips are from Louis Franzini. He's the author of *Kids Who Laugh: How to Develop Your Child's Sense of Humor.*

Focus: Understanding How the Brain Works

Riddle: What's the size of a grapefruit, weighs 3 pounds, and contains 10 to 50 billion cells, each of which sends 50,000 messages per minute? Answer: Read on...

If you think the answer is a computer, you're close. Actually, it's the computer you carry around with you every day: your brain. Experts see many similarities between the "command center" in your head and the digital box you may have in your home. But nothing can beat the brain for its blockbuster powers. It may be only the size of a grapefruit and look like a wrinkled blob of pinkish-gray jelly. But the brain has amazing abilities. If you give it proper care, it can often achieve great things.

What's on Your Mind?

The brain is constantly remaking itself. For instance, when the brain analyzes new information, it compares it with what has been learned. The process forms new connections or new pathways in the brain.

Memory and Learning. There are about 500 trillion possible connections among the neurons of the brain! Two processes are responsible for using these connections: memory and learning. For example, when you learned the multiplication tables, you created certain connections in your nervous system. The more you practiced multiplying, the faster and smoother those connections became. The *hippocampus* (part of the brain stem) also helps you learn or remember. It changes short-term memories—memories of things that happened a couple minutes ago—into long-term memories that are kept for years. That's why you may still remember the day you learned to ride a bicycle.

Emotions. The brain also files away learned emotions, such as anger and pleasure. Parts of the temporal and frontal lobes help us recognize danger and experience fear. When this happens, the brain sends out a "fight or flight" message to the body, and stress hormones start preparing you for action.

Pain. The brain takes charge of pain, too, but not in just one area. That's because pain is a

complicated sensation. It depends on a combination of memories, attitudes, and emotions. And these important files are located in different parts of the brain.

Scientists don't completely understand how the brain handles pain signals. They do know that the "ouch" effect varies from person to person. In other words, your reaction to pain may differ from that of your best friend. This is true even though your bodies release the same pain-relieving chemicals called *endorphins* (en-DOR-fins). This may partially explain why some athletes continue to perform even though they sprain an ankle or break a bone.

Photos and Faces

Even after you're fully grown, your brain will continue remaking itself. Scientists know the brain is a work-in-progress.

They know this thanks to high-tech imaging techniques, such as magnetic resonance imagery (MRI) and positron emission tomography (PET). The MRI snaps detailed pictures of the brain. The PET scan reflects brain activity.

Recently, experts at the National Institute of Mental Health discovered that the age of 11 to 12 is a good time to learn loads of new skills in areas such as language, math, and music.

Being able to handle math doesn't mean the maturing brain can handle everything. The brain has to "prune" or throw out certain useless connections. So it's not always able to interpret situations correctly and make "good calls." And the pruning process is not complete until early adulthood. That means teenagers and younger kids may have some problems making decisions and coping with certain emotions, such as anger.

> **Look Into My Eyes**
>
> When people get angry, scared, or feel other strong emotions, their faces usually reveal their feelings. For instance, when you feel sad, your mouth may frown and your eyes may lose their sparkle.
>
> But looks can be deceiving, particularly to kids and teens. Their brains are sometimes not mature enough to interpret all facial signals correctly. So they jump to the wrong conclusions.
>
> Have your classmates make faces indicating a particular emotion. How do they feel?
>
> Tired?

> Ashamed?
>
> Guilty?
>
> Fearful?
>
> Timid?
>
> Angry?
>
> Make up your own mind. Then discuss your conclusions with your friends and classmates. Do they agree or disagree? What does your teacher think?

Even reading facial expressions can be hard for many teens. A study of Massachusetts teens showed this. The teens could not tell whether someone's face showed anger or fear. And recognizing the difference is crucial information when you're trying to react properly to someone.

It takes time and lots of work for young brains to mature. Some of that work is accomplished during sleep. The brain eliminates certain information stored in its short-term memory. Without enough sleep, the brain can't do this job. That's why younger kids and teens should not shortchange themselves on sleep.

Problems and Progress

As with every other part of the body, the brain can develop problems. These include tumors, strokes, mental retardation, headaches, and Alzheimer's disease.

Fortunately, science is finding ways to help more people prevent or recover from brain diseases. Experts now know people can help to create and recreate the shape of their brain. A recent study showed that kids with reading problems can often retrain their brains through special word games. And people who suffer strokes can often relearn to walk. Other parts of their brain can take over the functions the damaged parts used to perform. Different physical and surgical therapies help to make this possible.

Take "Brandi," a young girl with severe epilepsy (brain seizures). Doctors removed a large part of Brandi's brain to reduce the number of seizures. And they did this without Brandi losing important abilities. Her brain created other nerve paths as she relearned how to eat, speak, and move like other kids.

Brain Boosters

To make the best use of your brain cells, here are some tips on taking care of your command center:

- **Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet** based on the Food Guide Pyramid. A recent study of English girls found that dieting lowered their IQs. The teens did not get enough iron-rich foods, such as nuts, lean meat, and leafy green vegetables.
- **Exercise regularly.** You need to refresh and reenergize your brain with enough oxygen. Swim, bike, play team sports, or just go for a walk in your neighborhood.
- **Sleep 8 to 10 hours every night.** Your brain needs this downtime to carry out its tasks.
- **Do not use drugs or alcohol.** New studies say that kids and teens who abuse alcohol or use other drugs may damage their brains. This damage can lead to memory loss when they're older.
- **Drink fewer caffeine-containing beverages** such as colas. They can cause you to feel anxious and irritable. They are also addictive.
- **Listen to music you enjoy.** It relaxes the nerves. Now experts say it also may increase your math abilities. Researchers recently found that second-graders who received piano lessons did better on a math test than kids who didn't get music lessons.
- **Keep learning new things.** Reading a lot today can improve your memory as you grow older. Find interesting hobbies, join school and community clubs, and reach out to people and places.
- **Work at staying emotionally healthy.** Depression, anger, and anxiety can harm your brain. So can the stress hormones your body releases.
- **Protect yourself from head injuries.** Wear a helmet that fits properly during sports activities such as rollerblading and bicycling. (The helmet should be approved by a national agency such as the American National Standards Institute.) Also, wear your seat belt in the car. Car crashes account for 44 percent of all brain injuries, says the Brain Injury Association. Dive only in the deep ends of pools. And stay away from guns.
- **Make time for relaxation.** Close your eyes and do nothing for a few minutes each day.
- **Avoid pesticides and other harsh chemicals.** Wash fruits and veggies well before eating them, or buy organic foods. Take precautions when getting rid of dangerous chemicals such as household cleaners. Poisonous fumes can harm the brain.

- **Cut back on TV** so that your brain won't become a "couch potato."
- **Learn how to prevent brain injuries.** Suggest to your principal that your school become a HeadSmart School. You and your classmates will get a one-day program on how to prevent brain injuries. For more information, check out www.biausa.org, or write to The Brain Injury Association, 105 North Alfred Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. You may also call the Brain Injury Association's Family Helpline at 1-800-444-6443.

The brain is constantly developing and maturing. Your brain will continue to steer you in the right direction if you respect it and its ability to grow and change.

Cool to Be Kind

By Kirsten Weir

Put yourself in somebody else's shoes.

Amanda O. was in fourth grade when her mom passed away. Amanda had been bullied before, and, incredibly, older kids at school teased her about her devastating loss. "People bullied me about how I looked, how I dressed. They bullied me about my mom," says the 14-year-old from El Paso, Texas.

Amanda told the principal, who called the bullies' parents. Amanda also confronted the kids herself. "I said, 'You didn't know my mom. She was my best friend. If you lost a best friend, how would you feel?'"

The bullies backed off, and Amanda felt good about standing up for herself. She may not have realized it at the time, but Amanda was asking her tormentors to have a little empathy.

"Empathy is a matter of learning how to understand someone else—both what they think and how they feel," says Jennifer Freed, a family therapist and codirector of a teen program called the Academy of Healing Arts.

In other words, empathy is being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Many people who bully others are particularly weak in that department, says Malcolm Watson, a psychologist at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. "Bullies don't tend to have a lot of empathy," he says.

Everyone is different, and levels of empathy differ from person to person. "Some people are more highly sensitive than others. They will naturally feel what other people feel," Freed says. "Others don't understand emotions in other people as well."

The good news? "Empathy is something you can learn," Freed says. In fact, she adds, teaching empathy to prevent bullying is more effective than punishing bullies after the fact. And anyone can learn it. In her teen programs, she says, "every semester we see bullies change their behavior."

Jose L. Pelaez/Corbis

Volunteering is a good way to develop more empathy, experts say.

You don't have to be a bully to benefit from developing empathy. Having compassion for others is a valuable skill that everyone should work to improve, she says. "I think everyone needs to develop more of it."

Emotional Intelligence

Last year, researchers from the University of Michigan reported that empathy among college students had dropped sharply over the past 10 years. That could be because so many people have replaced face time with screen time, the researchers said. Having empathy is about understanding other people. Today, people spend more time solo and are less likely to join groups and clubs.

Freed has another explanation. Turn on the TV, and you're bombarded with news and reality shows highlighting people fighting, competing, and generally treating one another with no respect. Humans learn by example—and most of the examples on TV are anything but empathetic.

There are good reasons not to follow those bad examples. Humans are social by nature. Having relationships with other people is an important part of being human—and having empathy is critical to those relationships. Researchers have also found that empathetic teenagers are more likely to have high self-esteem. That's not all. In a book titled *The Power of Empathy*, psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli writes that empathy can be a cure for loneliness, depression, anxiety, and fear.

Empathy is also a sign of a good leader. In fact, Freed says, many top companies report that empathy is one of the most important things they look for in new executives. Good social skills—

including empathy—are a kind of "emotional intelligence" that will help you succeed in many areas of life. "Academics are important. But if you don't have emotional intelligence, you won't be as successful in work or in your love life," she says.

What's the best way to up your empathy quotient? For starters, let down your guard and really listen to others. "One doesn't develop empathy by having a lot of opinions and doing a lot of talking," Freed says. Here are some great ways to dig beneath the surface and really get to know other people—and to boost empathy in the process:

- Volunteer at a nursing home or a hospital. Challenging yourself to care for others is a great way to learn empathy, Freed says.
- Join a club or a team that has a diverse membership. You can learn a lot from people of different ages, races, or backgrounds.
- Spend time caring for pets at an animal shelter.
- Once a week, have a "sharing circle" with your family. Take turns listening to one another talk, without interrupting.

Playing Your Part

With bullying such a big issue in schools around the country, experts are looking more closely at empathy. Many schools are teaching teens how to tune in to others' feelings. Often, kids who bully others come from homes where empathy is in short supply, says Watson. Teaching them empathy skills can help squash their aggressive behavior. Just focusing on the bullies and their victims isn't enough to stop the bullying crisis, though. To do that, everyone in school must show some empathy.

Have you ever watched a classmate being teased or pushed around, without intervening? Imagine that victim was your little brother or a close friend. How would you feel about the situation then? It takes both courage and empathy to confront a bully or to report an incident to a teacher. It may not be easy, but working together is the best way to make schools safer, Watson says.

That makes sense to Patrick K., a 16-year-old from South Carolina. He was bullied in middle school and lived in constant fear. One day one of his tormentors threatened to kill him and later threw a rock at his head during gym class.

Fortunately, Patrick's family moved to a new school district not long after that incident, and things are much better at his new school. But he wasn't content to just sit back and let other kids suffer the way he had. He became a teen ambassador for Love Our Children USA's STOMP Out Bullying campaign.

Last year, Patrick saw a classmate getting pushed around at school. He immediately reported the incident to the principal and a guidance counselor. The school called the kids in to sort out the problem, he says. Patrick doesn't think he did anything special. "I feel that everybody should be treated with respect," he says. "I just felt like it was the right thing to do."

Expressing Empathy—Creatively

If you've ever been called nasty names, you know how awful it feels. Here's your chance to help others understand what it's like to walk in your shoes. The No Name-Calling Week Creative Expression Contest wants your poems, artwork, essays, music, and videos! Tune in to your artistic side to illustrate how name-calling has affected you and your peers. This year, No Name-Calling Week will run January 23–27. (But being kind is cool any week of the year.) Learn more at www.nonamecallingweek.org.

Chris Price/Istock

In 2010...

- **50 percent** of high school students admitted that they'd bullied someone in the past year.
- **47 percent** of high school students said they had been bullied or teased in a way that seriously upset them.

Source: National survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2010