

Matt (host): One of the most powerful tool for teen anxiety isn't a diagnosis, it's a daily practice parents can actually do at home. Today we're talking practical relief, how to spot when worry becomes a problem and what to do when your teen refuses help. I'm Matt Butterman. This is Nimble Youth. Welcome back to Nimble Youth, where we turn research and real world experience into calm practical steps for families.

My guest today is Sophia Vale Galano , licensed clinical social worker. She is the author of the new book, Calming Teenage Anxiety. Sophia was born in Los Angeles, raised in London and holds a master's in social work from NYU. Before building her private practice, she counseled students at a large public high school, provided group therapy and case management at a psychiatric hospital, has worked across residential, inpatient, outpatient, and educational settings, including serving as a primary therapist for young adult males in a long term, highly structured substance use program. She supervises associate social workers, consults with therapists in schools, most recently counseled at a small independent high school and brings complimentary training as a master level Reiki practitioner and yoga instructor.

She's also an expert consultant for Hollywood Health and Society and volunteers with animal rescue organizations. Sophia, welcome to Nimble Youth. It's great to have you.

Sophia Vale Galano: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So let's jump right into it. So what prompted you to focus your work on teen anxiety?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. So I have been working with teens and their families for over a decade and I love working with this population. I find it very rewarding, very fulfilling, but I really decided to kind of hone in on the teen anxiety sector a number of years ago and I kind of opened my book with this story where I would go and I would give talks at different high school, parent education talks, I would pick different subjects to speak about. So I would remember I gave presentations on vaping, depression, substance use disorders, And I remember I gave a presentation on teen anxiety and was really taken aback by the amount of parents that were attending the talk. I remember the room was just completely filled, all the seats were occupied, everyone and people were standing.

It really stood out to me. But parents were really looking for practical tools and ways to help their teen. There was a lot of conversation and I feel that there still are around how teenage anxiety is problematic and how it's on the rise and how it's very concerning, but there's a need for what to do. When parents wanted to learn what exactly to say to help their teens, what exactly not to say, and I would say what to do and what not to do. That really inspired me to also write my book to provide this kind of overview or sort of this practical blueprint for parents to reference so that they can begin helping their teens with very specific tools and techniques.

Matt (host): And that's a very good description of the book. It really is a kind of a roadmap for parents, a blueprint. So in your estimation, what tends to unlock trust early on?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. So I always like to preface, I let every parent listener know that what I describe is a general overview. So there are going to be emergency exceptions to what I say. So obviously if there is a teen that's suicidal, severe substance use, we're going to take a different approach. But what I've found overall that can kind of unlock trust is when parents come from, of course, this very loving and concerned place where they seek to or alleviate the problem through providing solutions where a teen is actually really wanting to feel listened to and feel heard and feel validated.

Often times when a parent, and again, from a very loving stance, says to their teen, Oh, you have anxiety. Have you tried meditating? Go for a walk. Go outside. Again, those are great solutions.

But the teen is like, Oh, you don't get it. You're not hearing me. You don't understand. And the parent is like, well, what did I do wrong? And the teen is then reluctant to come back to the parent and talk to them.

So it's a bit of this kind of communication barrier of the parent and the teen speaking different languages.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. And are teens most likely to open up in school at the home or just in one on one sessions with a therapist for instance?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. So I go into this extensively in my book because often times it doesn't happen in a traditional manner. So parents will say, well, I tried to sit down with my teen. I tried to have a conversation with them at the dining room table while we're looking at each other and they didn't open up to me.

Even sometimes therapists who let's say when I'm working with associates will say I have a teen client and they're just not getting into things with me. What I've actually found is really helpful is when we switch up the setting. So let's say a parent decides to actually have a conversation with the team while they're driving, while they're in the car, where there isn't the direct eye contact, when the therapist says, Hey, let's go for a walk outside of the office. So a part of my work helping parents and also helping therapists or other adults who want to help teenagers is encouraging them to kind of switch up the setting or to think very creatively about how and where they engage with the teen.

Matt (host): So use an alternate setting for the discussion, something that's not specifically, they don't think immediately this is going to be some sort of dive into their psyche, right? It's something, get them doing something else, distract them essentially.

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. And it's going to feel weird for the parent. Often times parents will say, I feel that this is too informal, too casual, or I feel that I, am I not taking this seriously enough?

But no, it's important to remember that we're working with a teen here, not another adult. They communicate in a very different manner.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So a lot has been written, about the sort of rash of incidents with teen anxiety, and some are actually calling it an epidemic, using a disease term. But why do you think that teen anxiety is so severe right now?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. I think there are a number of different reasons. I think, first of all, we have kind of these factors that are more kind of classic ongoing factors. So we talked about this at the beginning of the book, of what's contributing to the teen anxiety and how can we kind of help understand, which is this piece is more relatable to parents of teens today, is the hormonal changes, brain still developing, chemical changes, these kind of factors that parents experience in their own adolescence. But then on top of that, we have these newer factors, which are kind of more cultural changes and more kind of societal influences like social media and technology.

If we have them kind of bundled together, we got this whole nice mixed bag that's contributing to teen anxiety. So I personally don't believe that it's just one factor. I don't believe, oh, it's just because of a smartphone or it's just because of social media, but no, it's kind of the combination.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. It's an aggregation of all these factors.

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes.

Matt (host): And so, but, and then we call it an epidemic. Do we risk sort of oversimplifying the situation?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. I hear you. I hear you. Yeah.

Yeah. Again, I think it's tricky and not one size fits all. And when I know we'll probably get into this later, but when we put kind of a blanket label just to describe it as a whole, sometimes that can be problematic. I think sometimes identifying and labeling it can be very empowering and sometimes it's not appropriate. So that can also be difficult for people to identify, is this actually anxiety?

Is this something that would cause concern or is this kind of standard behavior?

Matt (host): Right. So early on in the book, you begin to helping parents spot anxiety and sort of determining what's natural. We would call it teen angst or just all these changes that are going on in their lives. What's the how does that sort of normal uncertainty in development, how does a parent determine whether it's that or whether it's something more maladaptive, like a teen, a real teen anxiety problem that needs being addressed?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. And it's a great question. Oftentimes this is what bring parents to come and see me in the first place that they're like, I'm confused. What's going on here?

And I really want to normalize how confusing it is that oftentimes is really not black or white. And it's easy to mislabel or disregard a teen's anxiety because at times it can look like you know quite unquote normal teenage behavior. For any parent that let's say has disregarded it, it's okay and it's understandable and there's always room for growth and improvement. It's a big part of my work is encouraging parents not to be too hard on themselves. But really what I recommend is using mindful observation in terms of how often and to what extent a teen feels anxious.

So I often reference this example, it might sound quite simple, but it can be a helpful starting point, which is, let's say there is a teenager that is about to take a math test and the teen is feeling stressed, they're feeling nervous, They seem anxious. They're feeling overwhelmed. However, they go and they take the test. They sit through the test. They're able to go on with their classes, complete their other assignments, attend their extracurriculars or proceed with their socialization and they move on.

Okay, is that something we're going to want to completely overlook? No, but we're going to want to take a very different stance and a different approach to the teen that let's say has a panic attack before the math test, or the teen that is so nervous that they throw up before the math test or the teen that is so overwhelmed they refuse to go to school or they can't complete their other assignments or they're no longer interested in their extracurriculars or socializing that's when we're going to want to take a closer look. With that being said, we're going to want to know how often that happens. So if let's say a teen has that type of response and it happens once a year, we're not going to completely overwrite it and say it was nothing. We're going to note that and we're going to watch this space, but once again we're going to take a different stance than the teen that this happens to once a week or multiple times a week or once a month or multiple times a month.

So it's really again assessing without judgment more curiosity of how often and to what extent.

Matt (host): So frequency and severity, I guess you might say, right?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, exactly.

Matt (host): Right. So at what age do young people start to display signs of this maladaptive anxiety? And do you see that it's perhaps coming on earlier in life?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. When I think it fluctuates and varies. So I always let people know that that type of parent will say, well, my child is 12. They're not teenagers yet.

And they're kind of refusing to go to school. They want to stay in their room all day. They are dropping out of their extracurriculars, but they're not 15. What does that mean? Versus the parent where they say, okay, well, none of this has happened until my teens turn 16.

So I'm really confused. So it really is not a one size fits all. I will say that I do note that anxiety is occurring kind of earlier and earlier for children today. Again, generalized statement, for parents to remember that it might not occur right on the thirteenth birthday or right when the teen entered what we would call adolescence, they might still be a preteen or it might kind of pop up later and that's okay too. It isn't really black or white.

Matt (host): And how much does the child's temperament, there are children of course, who are just seem to be more highly sensitive than others are. How does that sort of shape what follows, what shows up in their behavior?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. I believe that that can impact it as well, of course. Teens are, of course, our children in general, more sensitive, and we want to be very mindful that they might be prone to some more anxiety. However, a child that's also developed some strong coping skills or emotional regulation techniques, they might still be able to kind of get through it. They can still be sensitive.

It doesn't mean that they're necessarily going to have anxiety. So if there's a parent that's listening that let's say has an eight year old child that's very sensitive, never want to instill fear that, okay, because they're sensitive, it definitely means that they're going to have anxiety. I think it also depends on the child, their unique experiences, their resources available for them, the relationship they have with the adults in their life. Knowing that there is a sensitive child, just remember want to be extra mindful around it.

Matt (host): So the first step, as you say, is to just engage your child in conversation.

Sophia Vale Galano: And

Matt (host): So how do you determine if a next step needs to be taken if they need help outside of the house?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. So obviously I'm biased as a therapist. I'm going to encourage everyone that anytime is a great time to reach out for more support that doesn't have to check these boxes. But what I would say is to note to, again, the severity of how much the teen is suffering and struggling. Again, I would say that even if the teen isn't suffering and struggling and they express wanting more support, of course, to provide that for them and be supportive of that.

But if let's say the parent or the adult is noticing that the child is clearly in distress and is struggling and that can look different for a number of people. So even if let's say the teen, let's reference that math test example, we're going to want to encourage them to get support. Even if that happens once a year, but it really affects the teen, we're going to want to encourage them to get support. Maybe we have a different type of conversation with the teen that happens once a month. But either way, I think the more support the better for any child that we have here to

really work with the teen and with the child in terms of what support would look like to them and what would feel best.

Matt (host): Right. So the next question I want to ask is how can parents best support an anxious team? But before we get into that, one of the things you bring up in the book is that anxiety is often influenced by the home environment. And so sometimes families that are just naturally more anxious, maybe the parents. One have sort of a step that can be taken is for the parents to, first of all, just take care of themselves, do things that can reduce their anxiety and perhaps even start therapy themselves, right?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, yes, yes, definitely. A teen is rarely going to say, mom, dad, I'm so anxious because you have a very hard time setting boundaries and practicing self care. My teen sees me so stressed all the time because my life is really stressful. Life is stressful, me by example, and being so that maybe it kind of brings up a new type of energy to the environment.

Matt (host): Modeling the behavior you want to see in your child is kind of the first step, right?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, exactly.

Matt (host): So what are some, some other things maybe if you can give us like three repeatable moves that parents can take to help support their teen with anxiety?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. So first there's a reason, I really want to hone it in everyone's mind that it's really listening actively, being curious versus seeking to alleviate or provide a solution. And in doing that, it's very helpful to ask open ended questions in order to get the teen to engage versus a yes or no question. Like you said, of course, unless an emergency, but I'd love to hear more about that.

What was that like for you? It sounds like that experience was really, really difficult. How did you get through it? Now these questions are going to facilitate a little bit more back and forth. With that being said, it kind of leads me to sort of step two here is for parents also to remain patient that it's going to take time.

So if let's say there is one conversation with the teen and even if it was a minute long or thirty seconds or five minutes to not get discouraged and recognize that it's kind of opening the door and to keep revisiting at another time. To remember that you're helping your teen grow into an adult versus say like a child. So you want to work with the teen versus for the teen.

Matt (host): And going back briefly to the idea of the home environment, one thing that you bring up in the book is that a holistic approach to anxiety is potentially very helpful. Things like exercise, going outside and engaging with nature, the Reiki, the yoga. And then you also have a background as an art therapist, right?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yeah. So I'm a trained artist. I have a fine art degree. So what I'll often do is I'll do art with my clients in the session, but I'm not a registered art therapist. I kind of integrate it in and sprinkle it depending on the client and the client's need.

But this is also where I come from this approach of it's again, a one size fits. Also traditional talk therapy can be very beneficial for some teens, but not for all. Some teens actually work better when they're doing art during a session, or they're working with someone where it's like more active and it's more movement based and there's kind more of that exercise component or it's walking therapy or working with a coach that's going to get out and do kind of more structured activities, or they're going to talk while I go on hikes or obviously depending where you're living, but that it's, it's important to remember that again, there's not just one concrete way of getting support.

Matt (host): So if a parent recognizes the problem and wants to reach out and get their child help, what do they do if the child is resistant to getting help?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes. Yes. And that is very, very difficult. So I just want to put that out there that it's understandable for parents to really feel that strain and that hardship. Obviously if the parent feels they've checked all the boxes in terms of having these conversations with the teen, help can actually look like this or support can look like that.

It doesn't have to be traditional therapy, but the teen is like, no, no, no, absolutely not. I don't want to see anyone. Okay, let's take a step back again, unless in an emergency situation, we don't want to force a teen to go and sit in therapy. Generally speaking, this is where I'd say it's very important for the parent to again do their own work in terms of making sure they have their own self care and their own support because this is so challenging. That's again a way of leading by example and practicing modeling.

Then also, and this is another topic that I go into in my book with more specific examples, we want to be very mindful of not enabling our teen. So if a teen is not, I mean, generally speaking, we want to do that, but particularly with a resistant teen, if a teen is not willing to get support, let's reference that earlier math example, that teen that's throwing up before the math test but refuses to go get help, we don't want the parents saying, okay, I'm going to email your teachers and make sure that you can get an extension on this or a retake. No. What is that doing if a teen's not willing to get support? Maybe it's going to be a different story if, let's say, the teen is actively getting support or getting help.

Okay, of course, we don't want the parent to be jumping in and rescuing all the time, but we want to be very, very, very mindful that the parent does not do that if the teen is completely resistant to getting support. Why would they need to get support if the parent is doing that for them?

Matt (host): Yeah. And another thing that you mentioned is, that can be helpful is to give the team choices basically on how to get therapy and even involve them in the choice of the therapist as well.

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, yes, totally, totally. And for parents also not to get discouraged if the teen visits one therapist and doesn't feel it's a good fit. Oftentimes, like I and these are caring, meaning parents will see me and say, well, my teen just hates therapy. And then I say, okay, well tell me a little bit more about the therapy experience. And they say, well, we sent her to this guy who's an 80 year old man and she didn't want to talk to him.

Okay, obviously not saying, or an 80 year old male therapist isn't going to be great for a 14 year old girl, then no, not the case, but maybe it wasn't the right fit. Maybe it's time to kind of go back to the drawing board and explore a little bit more and have a conversation with the teen of what would feel best for you. Would you want a therapist that maybe specializes in certain areas? Do you want a therapist where maybe you're not just sitting face to face in the therapy session? What would feel best for you?

What are you open to trying here and helping the teen? I want to say decide for themselves, helping them feel that they are definitely deciding for themselves.

Matt (host): So any other advice you'd have for parents facing the issue of teen anxiety?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yeah. So overall, I encourage parents to kind of find this nice balance of normalizing and validating the hardships that they are experiencing. I know I've said this before, but recognizing that it is very, very hard on this subject, and if a parent has done it wrong or incorrectly, it's okay. It's understandable for parents not to get down on themselves, to get discouraged, to validate their feelings and also recognize that there is hope for change and that it's not a lost cause and to maintain optimism while still validating the challenges of it.

Matt (host): So, I'm gonna, you're, you're going to be the victim of a, of a new questioning round here.

Sophia Vale Galano: Or survivor, survivor of the questioning rod.

Matt (host): There you go. There you go. Not a victim. So it's called the lightning round. And I'm just going to ask you four questions here.

And, if you can give us a quick yes, no, or depends, and then, you can add one sentence, in the response. So probably a way of, the topic, but we'll get, we'll give it a shot.

Sophia Vale Galano: Let's do it. I like it.

Matt (host): All right. So number one, are phones usually the main driver of teen anxiety?

Sophia Vale Galano: No, I personally don't believe that it's the only driver or the main driver. I think there's multiple factors.

Matt (host): Number two, is labeling anxiety helpful or can it backfire?

Sophia Vale Galano: It depends. I think at times it can be very empowering. Other times it can, depending on the, I don't want to speak too much about it, but it depends if it's going to lead to kind of more enabling or rescuing behaviors.

Matt (host): We'll give you a pass on the extra sentences there. So number three, do school accommodations risk over accommodation sometimes?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, I think so. Okay. Let me change. Yes depends. I think obviously not one size fits all, but I have seen that occur.

Matt (host): And the fourth is, and final one is, can exercise and sleep changes noticeably reduce anxiety within two weeks?

Sophia Vale Galano: I would say it depends because of the two week mark without the two week mark, I would hard say yes.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. Gotcha. Very good. So for listeners who want a starting point tonight, single page or practice from Calming Teenage Anxiety, your new book, would you have them try first?

Sophia Vale Galano: I would have them try the section on how to create an open dialogue because that goes into significant detail about using that curious inquisitive approach, which can be applied to all areas of the book. Now we can apply that to having conversations about anxiety specifically about finding more support, about healthy self esteem, facilitating independence. That's really kind of the foundation to all of this.

Matt (host): Well, Sophia, thank you very much. This was very generous and genuinely useful for our listeners. The book is called Calming Teenage Anxiety and it's out now, is it, or coming soon?

Sophia Vale Galano: Yes, it's out. It's at bookstores, Barnes and Noble, Amazon, Penguin Random House, independent bookstores have it too. So it's all over the place.

Matt (host): And it's, you have a website for it too. Is it just it's calmingteenageanxiety.com. Is that right?

Sophia Vale Galano: So you can go through my website, which is www.sophiogalano.com. Or again, you can find it on Amazon or Penguin Random House or Barnes and Noble. But yes, the full title

is Calming A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Teenager Cope with Worry. But if you search Common Teenage Anxiety, it will pop up.

Matt (host): Excellent. Excellent. Well, thank you again for your time and for your insight today.

Sophia Vale Galano: Thank you so much for having me.

Matt (host): Absolutely. And if this conversation helped you or someone you love, please follow Nimble Youth and leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts and other major podcast platforms. It helps other families find us. I'm Matt Buttermann. See you next time.