

Anxiety & Its Impact on School Systems

What Is Anxiety?

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines anxiety as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.”

Since the earliest days of humanity, the approach of predators and incoming danger sets off alarms in the body and allows evasive action. These alarms become noticeable in the form of a raised heartbeat, sweating, and increased sensitivity to surroundings.

The danger causes a rush of adrenalin, a hormone and chemical messenger in the brain, which in turn triggers these anxious reactions in a process called the “fight-or-flight” response. This prepares humans to physically confront or flee any potential threats to safety.

Types of Anxiety

Generalized anxiety disorder: This is a chronic disorder involving excessive, long-lasting anxiety and worries about nonspecific life events, objects, and situations. GAD is the most common anxiety disorder, and people with the disorder are not always able to identify the cause of their anxiety.

Panic disorder: Brief or sudden attacks of intense terror and apprehension characterize panic disorder. These attacks can lead to shaking, confusion, dizziness, nausea, and breathing difficulties. Panic attacks tend to occur and escalate rapidly, peaking after 10 minutes. However, a panic attack might last for hours.

Specific phobia: This is an irrational fear and avoidance of a particular object or situation. Phobias are not like other anxiety disorders, as they relate to a specific cause.



Agoraphobia: This is a fear and avoidance of places, events, or situations from which it may be difficult to escape or in which help would not be available if a person becomes trapped. People often misunderstand this condition as a phobia of open spaces and the outdoors, but it is not so simple.

Selective mutism: This is a form of anxiety that some children experience, in which they are not able to speak in certain places or contexts, such as school, even though they may have excellent verbal communication skills around familiar people. It may be an extreme form of social phobia.



Causes of School Anxiety

Social Stressors

Many kids experience some level of stress or anxiety in social situations they encounter in school.² While some of these issues provide important opportunities for growth, they must be handled with care and can cause anxiety that must be dealt with.

Teachers

A good experience with a caring teacher can cause a lasting impression on a child's life—so can a bad experience. While most teachers do their best to provide students with a positive educational experience, some students are better suited for certain teaching styles and classroom types than others. If there's a mismatch between student and teacher, a child can form lasting negative feelings about school or his own abilities.

Friends

While most students would say that friends are one of their favorite aspects of school, they can also be a source of stress. Concerns about not having enough friends, not being in the same class as friends, not being able to keep up with friends in one particular area or another, interpersonal conflicts, and peer pressure are a

few of the very common ways kids can be stressed by their social lives at school. Dealing with these issues alone can cause anxiety in even the most secure kids.

Bullies

Things have changed in the world of bullies. The good news is that the days of teachers looking the other way and parents leaving kids to deal with bullying on their own are mostly over. Many schools now have anti-bullying programs and policies. Though bullying does still happen at many schools, even those with these policies, help is generally more easily accessible than it was years ago.

Overscheduling

Much has been said in the media lately about the over-scheduling of our kids, but the problem still continues. In an effort to give their kids an edge, or to provide the best possible developmental experiences, many parents are enrolling their kids in too many extra-curricular activities. As kids become teens, school extra-curricular activities become much more demanding. College admissions standards are also becoming increasingly competitive, making it difficult for college-bound high school students to avoid overscheduling themselves.

Lack of Family Time

Due in part to the busyness of kids' lives and the hectic schedules of most parents, the sit-down family dinner has become the exception rather than the rule in many households. While there are other ways to connect as a family, many families find that they're

too busy to spend time together and have both the important discussions and the casual day recaps that can be so helpful for kids in dealing with the issues they face. Due to a lack of available family time, many parents aren't as connected to their kids, or knowledgeable about the issues they face, as they would like.

Not Enough Sleep

Unfortunately, this isn't just a problem that adults face. As schedules pack up with homework, extracurriculars, family time and (hopefully) some downtime each day, kids often get less sleep than they need. Operating under a sleep deficit doesn't just mean sleepiness, it can also lead to poor cognitive functioning, lack of coordination, moodiness, and other negative effects.⁴ Consider helping your family adopt some habits for better sleep.

Learning Styles Mismatch

You may already know that there are different styles of learning—some learn better by listening, others retain information more efficiently if they see the information written out, and still, others prefer learning by doing. If there's a mismatch in learning style and classroom, or if your child has a learning disability (especially an undiscovered one), this can obviously lead to a stressful academic experience.⁵

Homework Problems

Kids are being assigned a heavier homework load than in past years, and that extra work can add to a busy schedule and take a toll.

Test Anxiety

Many of us experience test anxiety, regardless of whether or not we're prepared for exams. Unfortunately, some studies show that greater levels of test anxiety can actually hinder performance on exams.

Poor Diet

With the overabundance of convenience food available these days and the time constraints many experiences, the average child's diet has more sugar and less nutritious content that is recommended. This can lead to mood swings, lack of energy, and other negative effects that impact stress levels.⁷ Learn more about stress and nutrition and how to ensure your family gets proper nutrition even when you're busy.

Noise Pollution

Believe it or not, noise pollution from airports, heavy traffic, and other sources have been shown to cause stress that impacts kids' performance in school.

Lack of Preparation

Not having necessary supplies can be a very stressful experience for a child, especially one who's very young. If a child doesn't have an adequate lunch, didn't bring her signed permission slip, or doesn't have a red shirt to wear on "Red Shirt Day," for example, she may experience significant stress. Younger kids may need help with these things.





looking like anger, so if you see this, try taking a movement break.

You probably already have some favorite ways to do this, but if you're looking for some ideas, check out our video above. You can also get the free set of printables for that right here.

Try walking and talking

Building on the moving idea, if you have a student that needs some one-on-one attention, try the "On My Walk" activity. I used to have a student who struggled a lot with anxiety, and this worked great with her. After a couple of loops around the playground with me, everything would feel a little better. Our walk served three purposes: 1. It removed her from the situation.

2. It gave her a chance to explain the issue to me. 3. It got her blood pumping, which clears out the anxiety-producing energy and brings in the positive exercise endorphins.

Focus on the positive by having students keep a gratitude journal

The brain is incapable of producing anxious thoughts while it is producing positive thoughts stemming from gratitude. If you can trigger a positive train of thought, you can sometimes derail the anxiety. I knew a teacher who had his fifth graders keep gratitude journals, and every day they would record at least one thing they were thankful for. When his students seemed overwhelmed by negativity or mired in anxiety, he'd

encourage them to reread their journals.



Practice deep breaths

When people slow down their breathing, they slow down their brain. When I notice that one of my kids is struggling with anxiety, I'll often lead the whole class in a breathing exercise. It helps the child who is overwhelmed and usually a few other kids too. Sometimes, I'll do it just because the whole class is squirrely and we need to focus. Slow, deep breaths are the key. This article about belly breathing describes the process I like to use with my kids. It works every single time.

Take a break and go outside

Being out in nature can also calm an anxious brains. Sometimes just a change of scenery is what makes the difference. Breathing the cool air or making time to notice chirping birds can also calm an overactive worrier. Asking students to carefully observe their environment can help them turn the focus away from their worries and toward something more tangible: How many different kinds of trees do you see? How many different bird songs do you hear? How many different shades of green are in the grass?

Talk openly about anxiety

Don't set anxiety up as something you want (or should) get rid of. It's part of life, and it's not realistic to think it'll go away completely. You can help students see and understand this in your own actions. Check out this great article of what you should (and shouldn't) do when working with kids dealing with anxiety.

Get kids moving

Exercise helps anyone who is feeling anxious. Anxiety can end up

Quotes About School Anxiety

"Never give up your desire to be what you want to be. Stay focused, persistent, and relentless." - Debasish Mridha MD

"Positivity, confidence, and persistence are key in life, so never give up on yourself." - Khalid

"No amount of regretting can change the past, and no amount of worrying can change the future." - Roy T. Bennett

"Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently." - Henry Ford

"Rule number one is, don't sweat the small stuff. Rule number two is, it's all small stuff." - Robert Elliot

"Don't waste your time in anger, regrets, worries, and grudges. Life is too short to be unhappy." - Roy T. Bennett

"Do not let your difficulties fill you with anxiety; after all it is only in the darkest nights that stars shine more brightly." - Ali Ibn Abi Talib

"It's OKAY to be scared. Being scared means you're about to do something really, really brave." - Mandy Hale