

Anxiety

What is it?

Anxiety is a typical part of childhood and a normal reaction to stress. Anxiety can be beneficial in some situations: it can alert us to dangers, help us attend to our environment, and help us to prepare.

Anxiety can become problematic when we are constantly noticing dangers all around us, and it involves excessive fear or worry. For an anxiety disorder to be diagnosed, the anxiety must interfere with normal functioning and be age-inappropriate or out of proportion to the situation (APA, 2017).

Recent research shows that as many as 1 in 6 young people will experience an anxiety condition at some point in their lives. This means that up to 5 pupils in your class may be living with anxiety. There are many forms of anxiety: generalised anxiety, or lots of worries about different things; social anxiety and shyness in relation to social situations; panic attacks; phobias, or anxiety about something specific; obsessive compulsive disorder, or reoccurring worries (obsessions) which drive the young person to do something (compulsions); and post-traumatic stress disorder, which can follow on from a traumatic event. Exam stress and separation anxiety related to being separated from a caregiver are also common in children and young people.

Signs and Symptoms

Cognitive and psychological signs

- Excessive worrying - this could be out of proportion to the situation, or something that goes on for a long time
- Unpleasant thoughts - these can include thoughts of dying, of being different from others, or not managing or coping
- Feeling on edge - you may notice a child being jumpy or very alert
- Worrying about judgement from others - a child may be oversensitive about comments from peers, or may not put themselves in situations that could lead to judgement e.g. speaking in front of the class
- Difficulty concentrating - you may notice them struggling to focus on the task in class
- Problems with memory - this could present as difficulty completing the task in class if they are forgetting your instructions
- Indecisiveness – a child may struggle to decide when given a choice of tasks by staff, or struggle to agree on social plans with friends

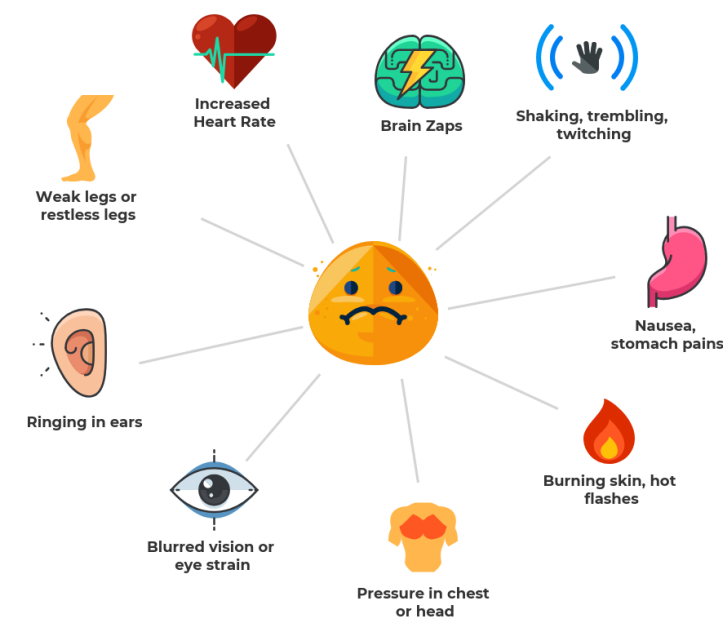
Behaviour

- Avoiding social situations - you may notice a child has withdrawn from their friends or avoids taking part in class
- Arriving late and leaving early - was this child often punctual? Are they consistently turning up late to your class? Are they leaving class when things get too much for them?
- Avoiding eye contact - are they looking at you when you speak to them or when they are participating in class?
- Lack of interest in hobbies - have they stopped participating in activities that they used to enjoy?
- Distraction from school work - they might have stopped completing classwork/homework, stopped participating in class, or be avoiding class etc.

- Fight flight freeze:
 - 'Fight' - appear more argumentative, defiant, verbal (swearing, name calling) and physically aggressive (hitting, kicking, throwing things)
 - 'Flight' - appear fidgety or leave the classroom without permission
 - 'Freeze' - refuse to speak, give minimum one word answers, seem shut down or put their head down, or not appear to respond to the environment
- Panic attacks - this is when a person's body goes into survival mode. Symptoms can include: racing heart, fast and shallow breathing, being fidgety and restless. This is frightening to experience, but is short-lived.
- Anxiety is different from panic attacks - it is long lasting and when it affects a young person's daily life they may need some interventions from a children's mental health service.

Physical Sensations

Physical symptoms of anxiety may include:



Suggestions for Schools

- **Acknowledge that anxiety is completely normal:** It is something that we all experience to some level.
- **Help the young person to identify the physical symptoms of anxiety:** "What happens when I am anxious?" (I get butterflies in my stomach, sweat a lot, breathe heavily, and feel dizzy or lightheaded). This is important to help children identify that they are experiencing anxiety and to understand what is happening in their body. Understanding anxiety can allow them to ask for help.
- **Help young people recognise anxious thoughts:** this can affect how a person may think, feel and behave. Anxious thoughts usually include a fear of something bad happening in the future.
- **Help young people identify 'safety behaviours':** or actions carried out with the purpose of preventing a feared catastrophe, such as an urge to escape or avoid situations/activities/people. Encourage them to build up to do things they want to avoid.
- **Encourage daily 'meet and greet' in school:** be present to welcome children into school, as the transition from home to school can be anxiety-inducing.
- **Provide 'safe spaces' in school:** provide spaces in school where there is a trusted adult if anxiety gets overwhelming.

- **Provide regular “downtime”:** This may include encouraging breathing exercises (five finger breathing, belly breathing), grounding techniques, or giving opportunities to go to a quiet space.
- **Encourage a healthy diet:** try to reduce caffeinated drinks, and encourage children to get the recommended amount of sleep. Please see useful resources/websites for recommendations of sleep for young people.

Useful websites / Resources

Hands on Scotland- relaxation techniques

<http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/relaxation/>

Young Minds

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Graded Exposure: a method that works well with anxiety and simple phobias. The basic idea is to help the young person become exposed gradually to a feared situation in a controlled step by step approach. This is one example of how to approach graded exposure: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/graded_exposure.pdf

Sleep Tips for Older Children

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/sleep-tips-for-teenagers/>

“Huge Bag of Worries” book

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Huge-Bag-Worries-Virginia-Ironside/dp/0340903171>

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mPwQTiMSj8>

Leaflet on Anxiety <https://adaa.org/sites/default/files/Anxiety%20Disorders%20in%20Children.pdf>

Anxiety UK <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/coronanxiety-support-resources/>

This document is available in Welsh / Mae’r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg

