

School and Classroom Strategies: Anxiety

This Quick Fact Sheet contains strategies designed to address potential symptoms of student anxiety and should be used in consultation and collaboration with your school's mental health personnel or as part of a larger intervention approach. These pages contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of anxiety in the classroom. Strategies should always be individualized and implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances. Additionally, this information should never be used to formulate a diagnosis. Mental health diagnoses should be made only by a trained mental health professional after a thorough evaluation.

If you notice a significant change in mood of any student that lasts for more than a week, share your observations with the child's parent and/or guardian and with your school's mental health support team.

Strategies for Feelings of Excessive Worry, Fear or Stress

- Validate the student's feelings and understand that his/her worries/fears are real to him/her
- Teach and model appropriate responses to stress
- Teach specific steps the student can take to relax (i.e. taking deep breaths, tensing muscles and then relaxing muscles, etc.)
- Allow the student to have a small object (such as stress ball) in his/her pocket that would be appropriate to use during class time and would not disturb others
- Allow choices in order to help the student feel more in control
- Minimize the emphasis on competition
- Allow the student to engage in calming activities, such as silent reading or listening to music, when worried or stressed
- Reduce unnecessary stress within school/classroom environment
- Where feasible, avoid bringing up topics that are sensitive to the student such as recent loss, parents' divorce, incarceration, etc.
- Identify individual (i.e. school counselor, social worker, school nurse, etc.) the student may talk to and provide built-in opportunities during the school day for student to talk with this person

Strategies for Irritability, Restlessness, or Feeling Keyed Up

- Identify one teacher or other staff member to act as the student's advocate, a check-in person, and as a point person for communicating with parents.
- Identify individual (i.e. school counselor, social worker, school nurse, etc.) the student may talk to about irritability and provide built-in opportunities during the school day for student to talk with this person
- Validate the student's experiences and feelings ("I know that things are really hard for you right now.")
- Teach the student to recognize his/her mood patterns and appropriate ways to communicate anger, frustration, sadness, etc.
- Provide the student opportunities for "self time out" to regroup when feeling agitated or overwhelmed
- Provide opportunities for the student to engage in mild exercise when he/she is feeling restless or keyed up, such as walking up/down stairs, taking a message to the office, etc.
- Allow the student to have a small object (such as stress ball) in his/her pocket that would be appropriate to use during class time and would not disturb others.
- Use a predetermined signal when the student is exhibiting irritable or restless behavior.
- Provide opportunities for the student to work with a peer who is calm and able to focus on an assignment for an extended period of time
- Teach specific steps the student can take to relax (i.e. taking deep breaths, tensing muscles and then relaxing muscles, etc.)
- Help the student to identify automatic negative thoughts and strategies for reframing these negative thoughts; encourage positive self-talk

Strategies for Sleep Difficulties, Fatigue or Loss of Energy

- Identify student's interests and preferred activities and try to incorporate them into his/her daily schedule.
- Place the student in a brightly lit area in close proximity to instruction
- Provide the student with sensory-stimulating tools such as a stress ball to use throughout the day
- Integrate frequent motor breaks throughout the day
- Allow the student to self-select a classroom job/role of high interest (i.e. running errands, setting up computer)
- Provide the student with an audio or video recording and/or written notes of class lessons, assignments or instructions
- Allow the student more time to respond to classroom activities (both written or verbal)
- Assess the student on effort and on work completed or attempted rather than work assigned.
- Identify individuals who may support the student with the issues underlying his/her fatigue and energy loss (i.e. school counselor, social worker, school nurse, etc.).
- Provide student with supported study hall at the end of the day to help organize and catch up on assignments
- Provide the student specific "rest" times throughout the school day to avoid sleeping during instruction.
- If fatigue is due to sleep difficulties, collaborate with the student and his/her parent to address the issue at home; For example, develop a daily schedule that includes structured time for activities before bedtime (i.e. homework, chores, etc.) so the student develops a healthy, daily sleep routine.
- If appropriate, begin the student's school day later based on the student's sleep-wake cycle
- Coordinate with the school nurse to allow healthy grazing on foods that may increase student energy

Strategies for Difficulty Concentrating or Mind Going Blank

- Prompt the student throughout the day to use a daily planner to keep track of assignments
- Provide support at the end of each day to make sure the student has all assignments documented and all necessary materials
- Check regularly for work completion to avoid the student getting significantly far behind
- Help student organize projects and break down assignments into manageable parts
- Allow student to work with classmate who is calm and capable of concentrating on an assignment.
- Provide discrete assistance in helping the student to stay focused
- Assess the student on effort and on work completed rather than work assigned
- Provide positive feedback when student is able to focus and concentrate and encouragement when student loses focus

Strategies for Somatic Complaints

- Determine that the physical complaint is not the result of a medical condition.
- Coordinate interventions with student's parent(s), physician, and counselor or therapist
- Validate the student's feelings and understand that these feelings are real to him/her
- Teach specific steps the student can use to relax (i.e. taking deep breaths, tensing muscles and then relaxing muscles, etc.).
- Allow choices in order to help student feel more in control
- Structure the class so the student does not have time to dwell on real or imagined physical complaints.
- Provide additional classroom responsibilities (i.e. errands, duties, etc.) to keep student's mind off his/her physical discomfort, real or imagined.
- Identify an individual (i.e. school counselor, social worker, school nurse, etc.) the student can talk to and provide built in opportunities for this during the school day