

7. **Fight versus flight syndrome:** Humans know anxiety as an adaptive response to threatening cues. We respond by either fighting, or running (“flight”) from the feared situation. While the hallmark of anxiety is avoidance (and thus school avoidance), if a child is attending school and perceives a situation to be threatening, the child may also respond by “fighting” or becoming quite agitated or even occasionally aggressive. The child is typically hugely remorseful after the outburst and regrets responding in this manner. If you cannot ignore the behavior, staying calm, talking quietly and being reassuring at this time is more helpful than challenging the child. Do not try physically to remove a child from this situation, as this may escalate the behavior.

8. **Establish a cue and place for “time out”:** Many children need to feel that they have a safe place in the school building that they can retreat to, in order to avoid the worrisome situation or if they feel they are going to lose control. Prepare in advance a system whereby the child can signal the teacher, and quietly leave the classroom in order to go to another place in the building. Many children prefer to sit in the desk nearest the exit door.

9. **Remind the child to use coping techniques:** Teachers can quietly suggest or remind students to implement whatever coping behaviors have been helpful for the child. This may include breathing deeply, using distraction techniques, and practicing positive self-talk.

10. **Be consistent:** All children thrive on reliable, consistent schedules, and for the anxious child this cannot be stated strongly enough. Consistency is very reassuring and allows the child the ability to anticipate and predict future transitions. If a change does have to be made in the daily schedule, quietly alerting the child to this change is appreciated.



Tips for Teachers of Anxious Students

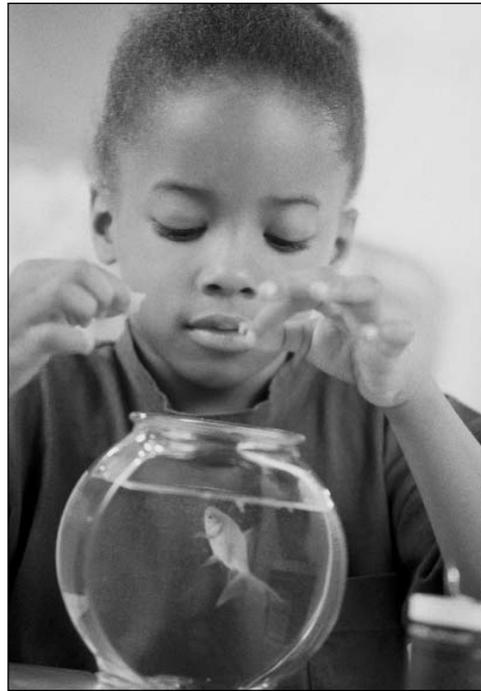


Anxiety Disorders Association of BC
www.anxietybc.com
604-681-3400

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What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is the most common mental health concern of children, adolescents and adults. It is excessive worry, fear or doubt, leading to interference in academic or social activity. Anxiety is made up of three components: physiological symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms, racing heart, stomachaches or butterflies), behavioural symptoms (e.g., avoidance or refusal to participate in things) and cognitions or thoughts (e.g., "If I stay overnight I fear I'll wet the bed and everyone will laugh at me"). Genetic factors increase risk.



How common is it?

10% of children are at a mild end of the anxiety continuum at any given time, and about 2% are more extreme with significant interference with functioning. By the end of our life, about 1 in 4 will meet criteria for anxiety disorder. In other words, you are guaranteed to have several children or teens in your various classes who are anxious at any given time.

What effect does anxiety have on schoolwork?

Anxious children and teens will have more trouble concentrating, can be highly motivated but are frustrated, are easily discouraged, may be irritable, and will often be tired in class. Anxious children and teens have sleep problems and frequently miss school or the first part of the school day in the morning. Their grades may drop dramatically. They may not participate much during class.

Despite these difficulties, anxious children and teens are usually advised by their doctor to attend school anyway. Why? It gives the day structure, it prevents "school phobia", and it keeps them socially connected. It also keeps them moving along academically to some degree, so that catch-up is easier later. We know that children with anxiety disorders have higher than average intelligence, and the key to feeling successful is attendance at school.

How can you help?

1. **Check with the counsellor:** If you have concerns that a student in your class may be anxious, talk to the student's counsellor. The counsellor will often be aware of what is happening and can give you some guidance as to how serious the problem is and how much the course material may need to be modified. If the counsellor was not aware of the situation, your inquiry could lead to help being offered.
2. **Take the child's concerns seriously:** How are they managing, is there anything they don't understand, do they need extra help? Express confidence in the child's ability to be brave and overcome anxious feelings. If it seems they are overwhelmed, arrange to discuss jointly with the counsellor some ways to reduce expectations for a defined time period. Do not excuse them from class, however! Regular attendance is a lifeline.
3. **Communicate with parents:** You need to be in touch with the parents, but in a positive, problem-solving way. You can consistently reinforce or not reinforce behaviors the parents are trying to help the child change. Perhaps they can help by getting a tutor, or keeping the child on track with assignments. Having a peer who the anxious child trusts, and the parents recommend, can also be helpful in the school.
4. **Adjusting work expectations:** Short answer, multiple choice and match type testing may be easier for anxious teens. Producing essays and answers, which require a lot of effort and thinking, may be overwhelming. They often need help breaking larger tasks such as projects into individual steps. You could help by encouraging the child to make intermediate deadlines, checking how they are coming along, and providing encouragement to keep it up. Anxious children often have perfectionist standards, which results in assignments "not being good enough" to turn in. Encourage submission of any part of an assignment.
5. **Subject failures:** It is not uncommon for even a good student to fail a term when they are anxious. Sometimes, a doctor's letter will suggest that material be "omitted" for part of a term, or that the course-load be reduced. Often, a subject, especially math or science, needs to be repeated in summer school or the next year as core material has been missed. Please be understanding and encouraging in this situation, as students can feel very ashamed and worried about their academic future. They may feel they have let you down, too.
6. **Interaction in the classroom:** A common misconception is that children act differently for attention or try to manipulate others. Anxious children do not like to be singled out for the teacher's attention. This includes having their name put on the board, being selected for special projects, getting disciplined in front of others, or being asked to volunteer for reading aloud.