



Anxiety

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT TO DO

What is anxiety?

- ▶ Anxiety is the presence of stress, worry, nervousness or unease along with the fear that future events will have a negative outcome.
- ▶ Body's reaction to perceived danger or important events—an internal alarm system.
- ▶ Alerts us to danger and helps body prepare for it
 - ▶ Example: Helps us jump out of the way of a speeding car
 - ▶ Example: Helps us to perform at our best in performances and on exams

What is Anxiety?

- ▶ It is one of the most common experiences of childhood and adulthood. Everyone experiences anxiety and it serves a productive and protective purpose—without anxiety we would not have survived as a species!
- ▶ There is an optimal level of anxiety that helps us perform at our best. Too little or too much and we underperform.

Anxiety in Normal Development

- ▶ 7-8 months—stranger anxiety
- ▶ 12-15 months—separation anxiety
 - ▶ Both of these are typical and indicate that development is progressing normally. In general, severe stranger and separation anxiety will go away by age 3.
- ▶ Anxiety below age 8 is primarily associated with fears of strangers, new situations, animals, the dark, loud noises, falling, and injury.

Anxiety in Normal Development

- ▶ With school aged children, sources of anxiety become more social and abstract, such as worrying about friends, social acceptance, the future, and coping with a move to a new school or other transitions.
- ▶ Adolescents tend to become more worried about sexual, religious, and moral issues as they continue to develop. In the vast majority of cases, children and adolescents cope well with these situations and severe or chronic anxiety is not common.

Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety

- ▶ Table 1 in the next slide summarizes the major cognitive, behavioral, and physical signs of anxiety. Not all children will show all signs or show the same signs to the same degree, but a stable pattern that interferes with performance may be cause for concern.
- ▶ The usual signs of anxiety differ between the anxious and non-anxious child primarily in degree, and may be shown in one or more of the following ways:
 - ▶ Excessive or atypical for age or developmental level
 - ▶ Inappropriate or excessive for the situation on a frequent basis
 - ▶ Have persisted for several weeks or months

Source: NASP online

Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety

Thinking/Learning

- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Attention problems
- Problem-solving difficulties
- Worry/racing thoughts or repeating worries
- Sense that “something bad is going to happen”
- “Freezing” or “going blank”

Behavioral

- Restlessness or feeling on edge/difficulty relaxing
- Fidgeting
- Urge to avoid or get away
- Rapid speech
- Irritability or easily annoyed
- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism
- Lack of participation
- Failing to complete tasks
- Seeking easy tasks

Physical

***Important to rule out medical causes of physical symptoms**

- Stomachache
- Rapid heart rate
- Flushing of the skin
- Sweating
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Sleeping problems
- Nausea or diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Tightness in chest
- Shallow breathing

Test Anxiety



- ▶ Those students who have test anxiety often view the test as more than an assessment of what the student knows. They may view it as a judgment about their abilities or potential as a student as well as a verdict about him/herself as a person. If they are invested in intelligence as their identity, the test has the potential to challenge that or to “prove” that they are not smart which feels threatening to them.
- ▶ When test anxiety occurs, the fight or flight response hampers the ability to think critically, solve problems, concentrate and perform higher-level thinking.

Test Anxiety

- ▶ Test anxiety can be caused by a variety of factors:
 - ▶ Parental and teacher expectations of the student
 - ▶ Student expectations of themselves
 - ▶ Learning difficulties OR high intelligence (see parent and teacher expectations above)
 - ▶ The association between grades and self-worth

Tips for Test Anxiety

- ▶ **Ask your child** what is making them nervous...and then stay calm yourself. They will pick up on your anxiety. Saying their worries out loud may help children work through their feelings. Understanding the thought patterns that trigger anxiety can help parents develop strategies to target specific concerns. Try asking these questions:
 - ▶ How do you feel when you first see the test?
 - ▶ What's your biggest worry about taking a test?
 - ▶ Do you feel worried when you think about a test or only when you see the test?

Questions like these help us to avoid assumptions about why kids feel anxious.

Tips for Test Anxiety

- ▶ **Teach relaxation strategies.** Have your child develop their own relaxation strategy before test day and practice it when they are calm. One strategy is to go to a place where they feel confident and relaxed in their mind. Cue them to take deep breaths. Then on test day, remind your child to close their eyes and visualize their calming place when they feel anxious.
- ▶ **Encourage positive self-talk.** Encourage them not to be so hard on themselves. Cognitive reframing is also a great way to help young children cope with their anxious thoughts. We can teach kids to “boss back” anxious thoughts by replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. So when their brain signals that something is too hard, they can say, “You don’t worry me! I know how to do this!” or “I’m prepared. I can handle this!”.

Tips for Test Anxiety

- ▶ **Teach test-taking basics.** Kids may feel empowered simply by talking through basic strategies, such as reading the directions, asking questions about the directions, looking for questions they know they can answer right away, and passing over tricky questions for a moment to come back to them later.
- ▶ Help them study in small chunks over time.

Tips for Test Anxiety

- ▶ **Talk to the teacher.** The classroom teacher might be able to implement some simple solutions such as using a piece of paper to cover the majority of the page so that your child only focuses on one line at a time. Some kids experience anxiety when they look around and see everyone working quickly. A quick fix for this is a privacy shield at the desk or being seated in a separate area at the back of the room.
- ▶ **Help them prepare physically**—Get a good nights' sleep, eat a healthy breakfast with protein and carbohydrates.

When Is Anxiety a Problem?

- ▶ Anxiety can become a problem when:
 - ▶ Anxiety/the internal alarm system goes off when there is no real danger
 - ▶ Anxiety happens frequently and is intense
 - ▶ Anxiety stops your child from doing fun and important things that they want or need to do (socializing, getting homework done, doing as well as they could in school, making friends, etc.)

When to Seek Help

Examples of specific anxiety disorders that could benefit from professional help include:

- ▶ Separation Anxiety Disorder—excessive difficulty being separated from parents or loved ones sometimes along with the fear that something bad will happen to them.
- ▶ Generalized Anxiety Disorder—many excessive worries about a variety of topics like family issues, grades, peer relationships and sports or performing arts performance.
- ▶ Social Anxiety Disorder—intense fear of being called on in class or participating in other social activities like conversations with peers due to fear about how they will be perceived.

When to Seek Help

Examples of specific anxiety disorders that could benefit from professional help include:

- ▶ Obsessive Compulsive Disorder--characterized by unwanted and intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and feeling compelled to repeatedly perform rituals and routines (compulsions) to try and ease anxiety.
- ▶ Panic attacks—intense anxiety attacks.
- ▶ Selective Mutism—inability to talk in specific social situations.

What you can do to help your anxious child

- ▶ The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help your child manage it, tolerate the discomfort, and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. Helping them gain mastery over their feelings/fears helps them to build resiliency and confidence.
- ▶ Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious. Avoiding the stressful event makes them think they feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long term.
- ▶ Make sure that your body language and reactions don't reinforce your child's fears.
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions instead of leading questions.

What you can do to help your anxious child

- ▶ Help them to realize that the physical symptoms, even though they feel scary, are not dangerous, are temporary and will pass.
- ▶ Try to keep the anticipatory period short.
- ▶ Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.
- ▶ Consistency is important for managing anxiety—in routines, discipline, and expectations.

What you can do to help your anxious child

- ▶ Be patient and be prepared to listen. Don't treat feelings, questions, and statements about feeling anxious as silly or unimportant. Avoid being overly critical, impatient, or cynical.
- ▶ Anxiety is not a rational emotion. Be understanding when your child is not able to respond to rational approaches.
- ▶ Maintain realistic, attainable goals and positive but realistic expectations for your child.

What you can do to help your anxious child

- ▶ Praise and reinforce effort, even if success is less than expected. Practice and rehearse upcoming events, such as giving a speech or other performance.
- ▶ Do not communicate that perfection is expected or acceptable.
- ▶ Accept that mistakes are a normal part of growing up and that no one is expected to do everything equally well.

What you can do to help your anxious child

- ▶ Teach your child simple strategies to help with anxiety, such as organizing materials and time, developing small scripts of what to do and say to himself or herself when anxiety increases, and learning how to relax under stressful conditions.
- ▶ Seek outside help if the problem persists and continues to interfere with daily activities.

Coping Strategies

- ▶ There is no magic wand that takes away anxiety. Remember, it is protective so we don't want it to go away. We just don't want it to *get in* the way.
- ▶ Coping strategies are ways to “dial it down” to a manageable level so your child can think more clearly, focus better and feel more strong and steady.

Coping Strategies

- ▶ Teach your child to identify when the anxiety response starts. If they can use a coping strategy when their anxiety is a 2/10 instead of a 10/10, they will gain more control over their response.
- ▶ Often coping strategies do not work once they have gotten to 10/10. You just have to ride it out. Reassure them that the feelings will pass.

Coping Strategies

- ▶ Coping strategies include:
 - ▶ Deep breathing—changing and deepening the pace of the breath to induce relaxation. 4-7-8 breathing.
 - ▶ Mindful breathing—different from deep breathing because it is focused on the natural breath to bring attention back to breath and away from anxious thoughts.
 - ▶ 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding—using senses to bring them back to the present moment
 - ▶ Think of your favorite things
 - ▶ Visualization--a relaxing, peaceful place or memory

Coping Strategies

- ▶ Squeeze a plushie, squishie, playdough, stress ball, etc.
- ▶ Help them to “talk back” to their worry—externalizing their worry helps them to put limitations on it.
- ▶ Positive self talk—“I’ve got this” “I’m prepared”
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Reframing anxious thoughts/feelings as annoying and temporary
- ▶ Tense and release muscles in your body
- ▶ Music

Resources

► Websites:

► www.childmind.org

► www.anxietybc.com

► www.youth.anxietycanada.com for preteens and teens

► www.gozen.com

Resources

► Apps:

- Mindshift—Specifically for anxiety. Check in with how you're feeling and get specific strategies in the moment.
- Headspace meditation—older elementary to adult.
- Smiling Mind---mindfulness exercises.
- Stop, Breathe and Think Kids—For younger elementary. They choose how they are feeling and watch a video, some of which guide them through relaxation exercises.
- Settle Your Glitter—Pick an emotion and how intensely it is felt. Shake the iPad and watch the glitter settle while they take deep breaths.

Resources

► Books For Parents:

- Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children. Reid Wilson, PhD and Lynn Lyons, LICSW
- Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents. Ronald Rapee, PhD, Ann Wignall, D Psych, Susan Spence, PhD, Heidi Lyneham, PhD and Vanessa Cobham, PhD

Resources

► Books For Kids:

- What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety. Dawn Huebner
- Meet My Worry Monster by Melissa Webster
- When My Worries Get Too Big by Kari Dunn Buron
- I Will Be Okay by Laurie Wright
- The Last To Finish by Barbara Esham
- Tyler Tames the Testing Tiger by Janet Bender