

Teacher Guide:

Supporting Students Through Anxiety

Mental health experts define anxiety as, “a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe.” Everyone has experienced anxiety from time to time. Usually, these feelings are surrounding a specific event or circumstance such as taking a test, driving a car for the first time, or starting at a new school or job. Experiencing anxious feelings during these circumstances is completely normal. However, anxiety can become an issue when the feelings are constant and start to negatively impact your daily life. Regardless of the circumstances, there are many ways that you as a teacher can help support your students who might be experiencing anxious feelings.



Signs of Anxiety in Students

Not all students who are experiencing anxious feelings will act the same and displaying these behaviors doesn't automatically mean a student is anxious. But, here are some more common ways that they may show their anxious feelings:

- Having trouble concentrating
- Breathing heavily and/or rapidly
- Withdrawing and/or shutting down
- Avoiding school or multiple absences
- Feeling nauseous, having stomach or head aches
- Asking many questions about details of the day
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being irritable, easily frustrated or quick to react
- Asking repeatedly for reassurance from other adults

Ways to Support Anxious Students

Here are a few suggestions that can be incorporated into the classroom to help everyone involved to be more at ease.

Help your students regulate. Incorporate activities into the day that help students to regulate their emotions. This could be mindfulness minutes, movement activities, downtime to talk, or quiet coloring. You can also consider partnering with the school counselor or an SEL teacher to support the skills students are learning during their SEL time. Carry over the tools and skills they are learning into your everyday classroom routines.

Post visual schedules/routines of the day and try to stick to them. We know that the school day can be unpredictable at times. Focusing on routines instead of a “time” schedule can help students feel more secure. For example: Have your class do a mindful minute or brain break before starting a lesson. Even if you start the lesson at a different time, your routine can stay the same.

Have a calming corner or tools in a box students can utilize when they need to regulate their emotions.

Work with your students on a plan. If your class requires a presentation in front of the class, tell the students they can meet with you if they have a hard time talking in front of people. You can work with them to create a plan and strategy to get through the presentation even though it is difficult for them.

Find ways to allow students to tell you about their worries and feelings. You could have a teacher mailbox for them to leave you notes or check in with them face to face if you notice their behavior has changed.

If a student needs help in the moment you can...

- Avoid putting pressure them—continue the activity or directions for the rest of the class. You can stand closer to the student and offer support like a note that says: “I’ll help you after I get the others started,” “breathe,” “it’s okay,” “get a drink of water.”
- Be kind and nonjudgmental.
- Let them know it will pass and that you are there to help.
- Ask them what they need.

Class Activities for Anxiety

Create Worry Stones

Make worry stones for students that they can keep in their desks or in their pockets. Whenever they are worried about something, they can rub the stone and put their worry in the stone. When their stone gets “too full” they can hand it to the teacher as a signal that they want to talk about their worries.

Helpful hint: You can have the class make extra stones just in case a student forgets or loses their stone. Keep these in a spot in the classroom where anyone can take at any time. Encourage students to share their stones for others to use.

Option 1 - Make Clay Stones

1. Give each student a small amount of modeling clay of 2-3 color
2. Have them squish the clay together to form a ball. Roll the clay around in your hands to get the colors all mixed up.
3. Have the students take their thumb and press it into the ball of clay until they are left with an indentation of their thumb.
4. Have the students put their completed thumbprint on a pan lined with foil. Write their initials on the foil so you can remember whose stone belongs to who.
5. At home, bake the clay in the oven for 30 minutes at 230 degrees.

Option 2 - Find small rocks or stones out in nature.

1. Wash the rocks and stones, then let them dry completely.
2. Have your students decorate them with paint or paint markers. They can make colorful designs or write positive sayings.
3. Tell the students that they can keep their worry stones in their desk or in their pockets. Whenever they are worried about something, they can rub the stone and put their worry in the stone. When their stone gets “too full” they can hand it to the teacher as a signal that they want to talk about their worries

Conversation Starters about Anxiety


What are situations where you feel nervous?

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How can you ask for help if you need it?

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What are you worried about this school year?

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