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**Coping with Student Anxiety**

**By Anna Duvall and Chrissy Roddy**



Anxious students may not be able to verbalize the specific cause of their anxiety; they just know they are experiencing excessive and ongoing worry and/or fear about something. They may avoid situations or activities in school. They may start to decline in academics and have trouble focusing and concentrating, which many school counselors and teachers may confuse with ADHD. However, anxious students also typically exhibit other symptoms, which tend to become a pattern, such as always being sick on test day. Students with anxiety also may have irrational and negative thoughts.

Anxiety symptoms may present differently among students at different ages, who may not be able to express what’s causing their anxiety and may instead exhibit symptoms. It is vital to be on the lookout for any of these symptoms:

* attendance problems
* clinginess/separation anxiety
* panic attacks
* academic problems/decline in schoolwork
* frequent urination
* frequent crying
* difficulty concentrating/staying focused
* blushing/sweating
* feeling weak/tired
* excessive worrying
* health problems such as headaches or an upset stomach
* avoidance of people/situations
* sleeping problems
* lots of “what ifs?”

Everyone has bad days and may exhibit one or more of these symptoms, but a pattern should raise red flags. Although diagnosing anxiety is not the school counselor’s job, it is important to be cognizant of the types of anxiety disorders. These can include generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety or panic disorder. Any of these can affect a student’s ability to perform well in school. Students with anxiety may also be at risk for developing other mental health issues, such as depression, drug/alcohol use and suicidal ideation.

**Steps to Support Students**
Experiencing anxiety can be frightening, especially for young students. An urgent sense of nervousness and apprehension can be debilitating for anyone. These feelings are amplified when students don’t understand why they feel this way or what they can do to feel better. One of the most beneficial things you can do for anxious students is to help them understand their why – not just the surface why, but the deep, underlying reason they become so anxious. A technique to accomplish this is “The 5 Whys,” developed by Sakichi Toyoda, an industrialist, inventor and founder of Toyota Industries. He believed by asking “why” five times, the nature of a problem and its origins become clear.

To use this strategy with a student, first ask, “Why are you experiencing anxiety?” Use their answer to pose another why question, and repeat this five times. Here is an example from “Anxiety Annie,” a sophomore student with test anxiety:

*Why are you anxious about the test?* I must get good grades, and tests count 80 percent of my final grade.
*Why is it important to get good grades?* I want to have happy parents.
*Why is it important to have happy parents?*It makes me feel good when they approve of me.
*Why do you want your parents to approve of you?* I want to achieve what my parents achieved; I want to have the kind of life they have.
*Why do you want to have the kind of life your parents achieved?* I don’t want to be the odd man out.

Annie’s fifth why indicates she doesn’t want to “be the odd man out” – she wants to fit in with her family. Background information on Annie confirms that education is an important aspect of her family dynamic. All adults in her family (parents, grandparents, etc.) were excellent students and have pursued careers in education. Once Annie realized that fitting in was the root of her anxiety, she began to recognize that taking tests wasn’t the issue; her sense of belonging was. This helped Annie put her anxiety into focus, and she began to view test taking in a different light.

With understanding, students can begin to determine how they can manage anxiety. You can teach students several techniques to use during class without drawing attention to themselves.

**Deep breathing:**Slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure and increasing oxygen intake all have a calming effect. Common exercises are belly breathing and the 4-7-8 breathing exercise (inhale for four counts, hold for seven, exhale for eight).

**Grounding:**Grounding can distract students’ mind from their anxiety and keep them grounded in the present. Common exercises include the 5-4-3-2-1 senses technique (five things you can see, four things you can feel, etc.), counting how many things in shades of a particular color can you see around the room and counting backward by 7, starting at 100.

**Imagery:**When students create a detailed mental image of a safe and peaceful place, they redirect attention away from what is stressing them and toward an alternative focus.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:**This is the practice of tightening one muscle group at a time followed by a relaxation phase with release of the tension. Students tense and relax the muscle groups one at a time in a specific order, beginning with the lower extremities and ending with the face.

**Positive self-talk and affirmations:**This helps students challenge self-sabotaging and negative thoughts. Students can practice through journal writing, negative-thought stopping or snapping a rubber band during negative thoughts. You can help students select affirmations that speak to them. When students repeat the affirmations – and believe them – they can start to make positive changes.

**Journaling:** Journaling helps students clarify their thoughts and feelings, gaining valuable self-knowledge. Students can process their anxiety by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved.

**Desk yoga:**Neck rolls, cat-cow stretch, shoulder shrug, triceps stretch, seated twist and the seated pigeon pose are all exercises students can discretely practice at their desk.

Once students determine which techniques work for them, you can assemble a list with descriptions for the student to discretely tuck into a notebook as a quick reference. Or, the student can keep their journal, list of affirmations or picture of their peaceful place where they can access it without classroom disruption. Having this survival kit available can bring a feeling of control over their anxiety.

**Strategies with Teachers**
In addition to working with individual students, you can equip teachers with strategies to use with an entire class. All the techniques above can easily be modified for classroom use. Teachers may find these activities useful at the beginning of the day, during transition times or before a test. Teachers can also serve as compelling role models for students. As teachers model relaxation techniques during class time, students internalize the importance of lifelong stress management.

School counselors are tasked with working with the whole student, not just academic, career or social/emotional development. It is crucial that students with anxiety learn positive coping techniques now to become healthy and productive citizens in the future.

There is no quick, easy fix for students with anxiety, especially those who are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Offering support and flexibility, however, allows you to help students as they discover meaningful, effective ways to address their anxiety.

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