

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

Anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive feelings of panic, fear, or irrational discomfort in everyday situations. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress; however, when the stress becomes excessive, irrational, and unbearably where an individual has difficulty functioning, it has become a disabling disorder.

The severe illogical tension associated with these disorders often compels people to take extreme action to avoid situations that might produce anxiety, often significantly impacting the individual's quality of life. Anxiety disorders may develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events.

Affecting people of all ages, anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorder in children, affecting nearly thirteen percent of young peopleⁱ and forty million American adults. Overall, nearly one quarter of the population will experience an anxiety disorder over the course of their lifetimes.ⁱⁱ

There are several common types of anxiety disorders:

- **Panic Disorders**
 - Characterized by unpredictable panic attacks. Common symptoms are: heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness and anxiety and these symptoms are often confused with those of a heart attack.
- **Specific Phobias**
 - Intense fear reaction to a specific object or situation (such as spiders, dogs, or heights) which often leads to avoidance behavior. The level of fear is usually inappropriate to the situation and is recognized by the sufferer as being irrational.
- **Social Phobia**
 - Extreme anxiety about being judged by others or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or ridicule and may lead to avoidance behavior.
- **Separation Anxiety Disorder**
 - Intense anxiety associated with being away from caregivers, results in youths clinging to parents or refusing to do daily activities such as going to school.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**
 - Individuals are plagued by persistent, recurring thoughts (obsessions) and engage in compulsive ritualistic behaviors in order to reduce the anxiety associated with these obsessions (e.g. constant hand washing).
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**
 - PTSD can follow an exposure to a traumatic event such as natural disasters, sexual or physical assaults, or the death of a loved one. Three main symptoms: reliving of the traumatic event, avoidance behaviors and emotional numbing, and physiological arousal such as difficulty sleeping, irritability or poor concentration.

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
 - GAD results in patients experiencing six months or more of persistent, irrational and extreme worry, causing insomnia, headaches, and irritability.

Why do we care?

Given that the prevalence of anxiety disorders is over one in ten youths, **most classrooms will have at least one child or adolescent with an anxiety disorder.** In order to better serve the needs of the students, teachers need to have a familiarity with these disorders, their symptoms, and the effective strategies that can be used to assist in treatment. Because anxiety disorders often cause serious consequences such as school failure, absenteeism, classroom disruption, the inability to complete basic tasks, family stress, and impaired social relationships, the understanding, compassion, and support of educators is essential to better accommodate students with these disorders.

What can we do about it?

- **Become familiar with the common symptoms of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents, making the appropriate referral when the disorders are suspected.**
 - Inform parents of any academic or social problems a child may experience, especially if the child appears anxious, has problems completing tasks, or is isolated by his or her peers.
- **Once diagnosed, specific classroom interventions include:**
 - Because transitions and separation are frequently difficult for children with anxiety disorders, accommodate student's late arrival and provide extra time for changing activities and locations.
 - Recognize that often it is a youth's anxiety that causes him or her to disregard directions, rather than an intentional desire to be oppositional.
 - Develop a "safe" place where the youth can go to relieve anxiety during stressful times or provide calming activities.
 - Encourage the development of relaxation techniques that can work in the school setting. Often these can be adapted from those that are effective at home.
 - Work with a child regarding class participation and answering questions on the board, understanding that many anxious youth fear answering incorrectly.
 - Encourage small group interactions and provide assistance in increasing competency and developing peer relationships.
 - Reward the child's efforts.
 - Provide an organized, calming, and supportive environment.
 - For maximum effectiveness, foster feedback from youths about these interventions.

Key Resources/Links

1. **Massachusetts General Hospital School Psychiatry Program and MADI Resource Center** – provides a wealth of information on anxiety disorders, with specific information on symptoms, treatments, and interventions for families, educators, and clinicians.
http://www.mgh.harvard.edu/madiresourcecenter/schoolpsychiatry/schoolpsychiatry_childadolescent.asp
2. **Psych Central** – offers anxiety screening quizzes, detailed information on the symptoms and treatment options available for anxiety disorders, and online resources such as websites, relevant book information, and support groups.
<http://psychcentral.com/disorders/anxiety>
3. **Anxiety Disorders Association of America** – assists those with anxiety disorders with finding a therapist, understanding their disorder and treatment recommendations, and offers inspirational stories, support groups. It has a special section devoted to children and adolescents. <http://www.adaa.org/>
4. **Worry Wise Kids** offers schools simple and free accommodations that they can provide to anxious youths. <http://www.worrywisekids.org/schools/index.html>
5. **National Institute of Mental Health** – Anxiety Disorder Basic Facts sheet and links to resources.
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/HealthInformation/anxietymenu.cfm>

ⁱ <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/CA-0007/default.asp#8>

ⁱⁱ http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx_factsheet.asp?id=10