

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*
Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents
Information for School Clinicians

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 overbearing and an individual has difficulty functioning, it has become a disabling disorder.

Severe anxiety 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?

Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses affecting both children and adults. Unfortunately, symptoms of anxiety disorders in children are often misunderstood, resulting in the overlooking of the needs of these youth, the misdiagnosis of their symptoms, or the provision of inappropriate or inadequate treatment. This is significant since without proper identification and treatment, all of these disorders prohibit individuals from enjoying normal, productive lives.

What can we do about it?

- **Confirm diagnosis with a thorough medical evaluation.**
 - Because many biological (e.g. hyperthyroidism, cardiac disorders, seizure disorders), psychological (e.g. mood disorders) and environmental factors (e.g. excessive caffeine consumption) may cause symptoms mimicking anxiety disorders, a comprehensive medical examination should be performed to eliminate such possibilities.
- **Education** – Educate the family, teachers, and the youth about the youth’s specific anxiety disorder and provide them with resources on anxiety disorders.
- **After a diagnosis, two treatment methods are considered effective, often with the combination of the methods producing optimal results.**
 - Medication:
 - There are few studies that examine the effect of psychotropic medication on anxiety disorders in children and adolescents; however, available data indicate relative effectiveness of serotonin selective reuptake inhibitors in many childhood anxiety disorders. Numerous other psychotropic medications may be considered.
 - Psychotherapy/specific strategies:
 - *Cognitive behavioral therapy/coping* – any technique designed to alter interpretations of events through examination of the child’s reported thoughts, typically through the generation and rehearsal of alternative counter-statements.
 - *Exposure* – techniques or exercises that involve direct or imagined experience with a target stimulus.
 - *Modeling* – demonstration of a desired behavior by a therapist, confederate, peers, or other actors to promote the imitation and subsequent performance of that behavior by the identified youth.
 - *Relaxation* – techniques or exercises designed to induce physiological calming, including muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, meditation, and similar activities.
- **Treatment manuals for Anxiety Disorders:**
 - *Coping Cat* (Kendall & Hedtke, 2006) – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Anxious Children
 - *The C.A.T. Project* (Kendal, et al., 2002) – Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Anxious Adolescents.

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.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/for_clinicians.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/AboutADAA/introduction.asp>
4. **National Institute of Mental Health** – Anxiety Disorder Basic Facts sheet and links to resources. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/HealthInformation/anxietymenu.cfm>
5. **Spence Anxiety Scale** – a free checklist for evaluating level of anxiety. <http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~sues/scas/>
6. **Freedom from Fear** details strategies family members can use when a relative is diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. http://www.freedomfromfear.org/aanx_factsheet.asp?id=27
7. **Worry Wise Kids** lists the red flags that can alert parents to each individual anxiety disorders, details the steps parents can take if they suspect their child suffers from an anxiety disorder, and supplies parenting tips for helping anxious youths. <http://www.worrywisekids.org>
8. **Progressive Relaxation for Kids** provides an example of a relaxation script to use with children. <http://www.yourfamilyclinic.com/adhd/relax.htm>

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

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