

ANXIETY

A Presentation for Students,
Parents and Teachers

By Allison Fox

What is Anxiety?

- A normal human emotion
- Can have quite negative consequences in a school environment if its impact is not monitored
- Anxiety has a rational basis, but is usually very disproportionate to the situation
- Communication and collaboration a large part of supporting students who experience anxiety

Types of Anxiety

Anxiety can generally be classified into one of two types:

1. **Trait anxiety**, which is chronic and happens in all situations, and doesn't have a specific trigger; includes general anxiety disorder (GAD), which is “present in 3-4 % of adolescents” (www.schoolpsychiatry.org, 2010)
2. **State anxiety**, which happens in certain situations and usually has very specific triggers; can include test/academic anxiety, fears, panic attacks, post traumatic or acute stress disorder, social phobias/extreme social withdrawal, separation anxiety disorder, obsessive – compulsive disorder and selective mutism

What Does Anxiety Look Like?

- Often referred to as “worry”, but activity can increase in people and their skin may flush
- Everyone worries from time to time, but intensive worry happening often can limit how well people can function socially, academically or personally, eventually interfering in their daily lives
- Anxiety can cause people to feel as though they have lost control, sometimes leading also to depression, especially in females (Huberty, 2009)
- Anxiety causes people to view situations as threatening, often due to irrational fears that something awful will happen or because they cannot control the outcome

Why Do We Experience Anxiety?

- Anxiety usually sets in when people experience feelings of insecurity over a situation whose outcome they are uncertain about
- At school, anxiety can be felt over test situations, having to perform publicly or anytime an evaluation is taking place
- Anxiety can be experienced over an event or a set of circumstances
- Test-taking trouble or other performances lowering self-esteem can set a student up later to experience anxiety
- Excessive pressure can heighten anxious feelings, affecting performance, self-confidence and motivation
- Anxiety can help us in situations requiring adaptation (“fight or flight”) and is considered a normal emotion felt during human development

Who Does Anxiety Affect?

- Anxiety for students at school is far more common than most personnel there realize, largely due to the fact that most students, while hoping to avoid being teased or drawing attention to themselves, suffer silently, underperforming along the way
- Most people experience anxiety at one time or another
- Students often withdraw when anxious and may exhibit avoidance, appearing lazy, incapable or unmotivated
- Students can also act out in a conscious or unconscious manner when anxious

Where Can Anxiety Strike?

- **At home:** manifests as excessive worry and self-doubt on most days for an extended period of time
- **School:** students may exhibit difficulty transitioning between home and school
- **Peer relationships:** adolescents may need assistance in interactions with peers and specific social skills lessons; making and keeping friends can be challenging
- Most people do not choose to be anxious; there is often a “genetic predisposition exacerbated by environmental influences” at play (Doll and Associates, 2008)

The Importance of Dealing with Anxiety

- “Anxiety disorders are the most common disorders to occur in childhood and adolescence, affecting 13 out of every 100 boys and girls between the ages of 9 and 17” (Gasparovich, 2008)
- Severe test anxiety can impact a student’s ability to do their best
- If left unattended for the long-term, test anxiety can be transferred to any type of situation when an evaluation is taking place, causing lowered self-esteem, minimal effort being put forth and lack of motivation for school tasks or attending school in general

Preventing/Treating Anxiety

- Extensively prepare students for “high-stakes testing”, such as the OSSLT, or other circumstances where passing is linked to graduation
- Parents, teachers and school administration can all work together to support anxious students and must be diligent in this regard, as “50% of adolescents can experience both anxiety and depression together” (Huberty, 2009)
- Refer students to and have them consistently working with the school psychologist, social worker or Guidance counsellors
- Mental health specialists can also address parents/students/teachers to explain what anxiety is and isn't

How We Can Deal With Anxiety at Home

- ❑ Maintain realistic expectations of students, keeping a consistent studying/homework routine
- ❑ Allow students to be independent
- ❑ Work with students to help them prepare for tests or performances
- ❑ Be patient, consistent, calm, supportive and listen/look for signs of anxiety
- ❑ Accept mistakes; remind students that no one does everything equally well
- ❑ Praise and reinforce effort
- ❑ Help with organization of materials and time, go over with students what to do and say when getting anxious and encourage relaxation
- ❑ Encourage exercise and a healthy, active lifestyle, and avoid over scheduling and exposing students to upsetting news/stories
- ❑ Seek outside support (psychologist, doctor, counsellor) if anxiety begins to interfere with daily life

Dealing with Anxiety at School

- Administration can remind parents and students that anxiety is a real psychological issue, and then make this a priority for everyone in the school to address by committing to necessary resources and leadership
- In-service training should be provided so that teachers can recognize and understand how to treat anxiety so that it is seen as a relevant, persistent issue
- Students with test or performance anxiety should be supported by a designated school staff member (Guidance, Student Success, Special Education, etc.)
- Provide anxious students with relaxation training

How Teachers Can Help

- Allow students to “rehearse” ahead of time by doing a pre-task item or writing a practice test
- Review all assessment content ahead of time
- Break larger assessments into smaller tasks
- Encourage students to use mnemonic devices to help with recall, and employ coping strategies like positive self-talk, self-monitoring and self-relaxation during tests
- Recognize effort along with performance and avoid any use of negativity by emphasizing success
- Use alternative forms of assessment
- Know students normal behaviour so as to recognize a change which might indicate an anxious episode

How Teachers Can Help (Cont'd)

- Teach the entire class positive self-talk and discuss anxiety as a group
- Post the daily lesson schedule and the weekly lesson organizer; notify students in advance of changes (fire drills, supply teachers, field trips, etc.)
- Consider playing soothing background music when appropriate
- Allow students to work alone and not participate if they are not comfortable
- Let students know ahead of time if calling on them to read
- Seat anxious students away from talkative peers

Anxiety at School: General Coping Strategies

- Rehearsal: of presentations, providing solutions at the board, returning from illness and easing back into routines, etc.
- Relaxation: deep-breathing, visualization, one-item focusing or stress management
- Plan: ahead for stress-causing situations, which could be anything beyond the normal routine
- Test-taking strategies: organizational skills, practice exercises, study guides
- Desensitization, incremental exposure or removal of anxiety-causing trigger altogether
- Identify a “safe” place and staff member for students to turn to
- Model positive ways, as the teacher, to prevent and manage anxiety

Anxiety at School: Coping Strategies for Specific Behaviours

- **Excessive worry:** carry a stress ball, listen to music or read when worried
- **Irritability:** allow students to take “time outs”, engage in mild physical exercise or work with a peer
- **Loss of energy:** have student self-select a classroom role to engage in, identify student’s interests and modify timetable, if possible, for a later start
- **“Blanking out”:** use a daily planner, chunk, check in regularly with student to see if they’re on track

Positive Behaviour Support

- This anxiety-intervention technique, also known as PBS, looks to enhance students' educational experiences by identifying a problem behaviour and then introducing students to a positive behaviour instead
- PBS teaches students skills to help reduce the rate of problem behaviours, instead elaborating on their strengths and promoting resiliency
- PBS can allow students to prevent or manage anxious episodes

Test Anxiety: Students

- Some students experience anxiety over tests and may go through heightened periods of anxiety right before a testing situation
- Some test anxiety is normal though and can actually help students prepare and work more effectively and stay focused during the test
- However, too much test anxiety can take away from a student's performance, therefore, having strategies to help eliminate anxiety are essential
- ~30% of students experience severe anxiety, often referred to as "test anxiety" (Huberty, 2009), though they may not recognize it, know what to do or how to seek help

Dealing With Test Anxiety: What Students Can Do to Help Themselves

- Share feelings of anxiety with teachers and parents
- Consider tests as an opportunity to demonstrate your learning, but remember that they are only one way a course mark is arrived at
- Review all lessons and items from homework ahead of the test that have been indicated are on it and go over any designated review materials
- During the test, relax, breathe deeply and remain focused on the test

Dealing With Test Anxiety: What Students Can Do to Help Themselves - Specifics

- **Before the test:** ensure good study habits and complete all class work; determine when test is; sleep well the night before and eat a normal breakfast
- **During the test:** follow directions; read everything, carefully; determine a question's focus; watch the time; answer what you know first; stay positive; review test if time
- **After the test:** locate areas of strength and those that need improvement; seek teacher assistance or further review materials for topics of concern

Test Anxiety: Parents

- To help eliminate test anxiety in your child, talk openly and positively about assessments
- Encourage your child to always put forth their best effort, but remain realistic about your expectations of their performance
- Remind students that tests are only one way that student course marks are determined, and that test marks are not a reflection of a student's worth

Dealing with Test Anxiety: What Parents Can Do to Help - Specifics

- **Before the test:** record test dates at home; encourage homework, study time and independent review opportunities; offer praise when warranted; communicate often with teachers; collect test preparation materials
- **Test day:** ensure student is rested/healthy, has eaten breakfast and arrives at school on time; offer encouragement; avoid appointments on test days
- **After the test:** review with child areas of strength and those needing improvement, praising the former and making a plan to address the latter with the student; seek further clarification from school if necessary

Test Anxiety: Teachers

- Clearly indicate to students when tests will be scheduled
- Discuss the purpose/focus of each test with students
- Encourage all students to put forth their best effort on tests, but remain realistic about your expectations of their performance
- Be mindful of overemphasizing the importance of a test
- Allow students to express their test anxiety, through discussion or in written communications

Dealing with Test Anxiety: What Teachers Can Do to Help - Specifics

- **Before the test:** ensure an organized environment; try different test formats; look over the test before distribution; identify students receiving accommodations; encourage all students to be in attendance
- **During tests:** remind students of the time; ensure students understand directions; think ahead about test interruptions; move around to ensure independent and proper student answering to test questions
- **After the test:** identify student areas of strength and those needing improvement; make a plan to address the latter

Test and Performance Anxiety

- Anxiety and performance are related; anxiety creates the motivation needed to drive academic and other types of performance
- Too little anxiety leads to a lack of motivation, but too much anxiety affects memory and concentration
- Reducing the societal emphasis placed on testing would benefit anxious students, opening up more educational and vocational opportunities in their futures, while improving their self-confidence

Math Anxiety

- Math anxiety is a worry over one's ability to do Math, regardless of skill level and/or the fear or frustration associated with doing Math which gets overwhelming
- Stressors can include: slower performance than peers, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, history of failures or bad experiences with Math, weak learning skills or a Math disability, like dyscalculia
- Students with Math anxiety may struggle with basic facts, memory, calculations, applying Math concepts or visual and spacial relationships

Overcoming Math Anxiety

- Math anxiety is not a disability, so it should not be viewed as such
- Create a positive Math environment, where everyone displays positive feelings about Math
- Appropriate instruction or assistance can offer support
- Strengthen learning skills
- Show students that Math is and will be used in their lives (shopping, banking, etc.)
- Play Math-related computer and board games
- Seek help for students if necessary (tutors, therapists, academic testing, etc.)

A Multimodal Approach in Dealing with Anxiety

- Offers feedback and education for parents and the student from qualified mental health practitioners
- Encourages communication between the student's family physician and school personnel (Guidance, teachers, etc.)
- Counselling can occur for the student, but also for the entire family
- Medications can be taken to reduce the severity and frequency of anxiety

Working Together: Administration, Guidance Counsellors, Teachers, Parents and Students

All parties must work together to actively reduce anxiety:

- Teachers and parents should work together to develop strategies to support the student, encouraging their honest communication and feedback
- Guidance counsellors can be a huge assistance in addressing anxiety with students during individual or small-group counselling; they can also support parents and teachers by offering workshops and seminars on anxiety
- Administrators can build a strong support network for students, based on their parents, teachers and Guidance counsellors, and ensure all parties are educated about anxiety and how to deal with it

Links and Resources on Anxiety

Teachers: Cornell University: Learning Strategies Center
at

https://lsc.cornell.edu/Sidebars/Study_Skills_Resources/Study%20Skills%20PDFs%20for%20LSC%20Website/Letting%20Go%20of%20Test%20Anxiety.pdf

Students: Huebner, D. (2006). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety.*

Parents: Chansky, Tamar E. (2004). *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias.*

For More Information...

- If you would like further information on anxiety, or have any questions related to this presentation, please call/visit the school at 905-477-8503 and ask to speak with a member of the Guidance department, or the Student Success teacher, Ms. Fox, who can also be reached via email at allison.fox@yrdsb.edu.on.ca.

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