

Anxiety in the Classroom

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The webinar will begin shortly



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Territorial Acknowledgement



Community Education Service acknowledges that the land on which we virtually gather today is the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta. The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.



2021

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What we won't do today.

- We won't go over diagnostic categories of the different types of anxiety.
- We won't be spending a lot of time on why anxiety exists or why it's potentially becoming more common.

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So what are we going to do?

- Discuss how anxiety is different from fear and how it can impact cognition.
- Discuss ways that you may be able to identify it's presence in the classroom.
- Provide concrete strategies and tools that may help a teacher support a student with anxiety.

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Fear Vs. Anxiety.

My Definition.

- Fear is a physiological and emotional response to an readily identifiable external threat or danger.
- Anxiety is a physiological and emotional response that arises from a pattern of thought as a person thinks about past, immediate, or future consequences based upon their interpretation of past, immediate or potential events.

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Wait....what?

- Fear; I can be scared of a barking dog, or a person threatening me, or of being humiliated by a peer's verbal put down.
- Anxious: I can be anxious about wondering if that barking dog will *ever* get out of their yard. If that person over there *might* threaten me. Or about doubting that anybody would *really* like me if they knew the "real" me.

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So why is that difference important?

- Since fear is a response to an visible or immediate threat it is relatively easy to know when to NOT be afraid.
- For example: A cave man is confronted by Sabre-toothed Tiger. If it leaves-he can calm down. If he gets up a tree-he knows he's safe. If he manages to end up with a new rug for the cave then there is nothing to worry about.

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But what is the Flight/Fight/Freeze Response?

- The Flight/Fight/Freeze response is the result of how our bodies and intellect respond to fear inducing stimulus.

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What is there is no cue that lets you know that you can stop being afraid?

- What if you are so worried that poor marks will permanently damage your future that every test is a nightmare?
- What if you were so badly teased in the past that you are never sure it isn't about to happen again?

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The fear isn't caused by something outside of you. It is caused by something inside of you.

That can make it as hard to recognize for the person who has it as the person who is observing the person who is anxious.

It is much, much harder to stop a thought than an event.

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How many of my students will have a problem with anxiety?

- According to the research between 3-8% of all children will have some feelings of anxiety that are considered intense enough to meet the criteria for having an anxiety disorder.
- So if you are in the position of having a class of 20 students then odds are that one of them has had, has or will have anxiety.

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What can anxiety look like in the classroom?

Here's a challenge: Anxious behaviour can be easily misinterpreted as other things: Anxious kids can avoid with the best of them, they can get stressed out and behave badly. They often have troubles with focus, impulsivity or disassociation that can look like ADHD. It is very easy for a anxious child to come across as defiant, wilful, spacey or spoiled.

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Physiological Signs.

- Stomach aches or nausea.
- Sweating.
- Muscle tension or shaking.
- Head aches.
- Eye or facial ticks, lip licking.
- Gastrointestinal distress.
- Dizziness, shortness of breath.
- Jumpiness/Startles easily.

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Cognitive Signs

- Pessimistic outlook/expects the worst.
- Distracted.
- Perfectionistic.
- Personalizes events not related to them.
- Over attends to threatening stimuli.
- Misinterprets social cues and situations.
- Worried about competition.

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Experiential Signs

- Feels afraid.
- Feels inferior/stupid/worthless/freakish.
- Have trouble seeing their own successes.
- Avoid attention.
- Constantly “on guard”/feel persecuted or judged.
- Avoids attention or endures situations with dread.
- Trouble with making decisions.

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Behavioural Signs.

- Avoidance behaviours.
- Poor eye contact (if eye contact is a cultural norm).
- Shy/withdrawn, work and school avoidance or refusal.
- Behavioural outbursts.
- May need constant reassurance.
- May need rituals or routines.
- May chew nails, clothing, licks lips.

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So we help how?

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Help the anxious child plan and rehearse for future events and unstructured events.

- Warn them about transitions and schedule changes.
- Praise them for being brave by asking questions in class (with younger ones a sticker chart or something like it helps).
- Coach for social situations and give them a script for social problem solving.
- Provide external structure i.e. organization aids for desk, back packs etc.
- Help the student plan on how they will handle anxiety causing situations like group projects or unstructured time.
- Help reassure the child as to what are things are an adult's job to worry about and what are theirs to worry about.

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Provide the child with safety, security and reassurance in the event that they become overwhelmed by anxiety.

- Be aware that they didn't choose to be anxious, no child does. Be non-confrontational and collaborative if you can.
- Give them distraction aids like white noise generators, headphones, MP3 players. Sometimes this can "ground" an anxious child.
- Become aware of their escalation patterns i.e. their verbal and physical responses and intervene early by asking them if they want help.
- Avoid criticism.
- Use simple and clear language; stress affects how well we understand what we hear.

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- Be aware of the flight/fight/freeze response. If an anxious child runs for a situation then it's always a matter of concern. Talk to your administrative and support staff about how to plan for this.
- Have a pre-arranged spot, place or person that an anxious child can go to when they need it. Pre arranged breaks can be useful as well.
- Encourage the child to tell you when they are anxious.
- Be aware that a child may have a lot of fear of giving up their power and control strategies that they use to avoid their anxiety until they trust you to support them with their anxiety.

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Help them deal with excessively high expectations and fear of negative evaluation.

- Give them feed back privately.
- Avoid excessive attention to grade and outcomes.
- Pay as much attention to effort and the learning process as to grades: the learning process is something they have some control over.
- Set realistic goals based upon what the child has shown you they are capable of.
- Don't assume that resistance is a child being difficult; they could be anxious. Attempt to avoid a power struggle.
- Normalize mistakes or the need for corrections. Provide support to the child when they have to make corrections.
- Encourage positive self talk. If they say they could never "do that" ask them if they have a more positive or helpful thought.

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- Help them see their own strength. If they have successes socially or academically that they are discounting then mention those to them.
- If the child has unrealistically high social fears discuss with them the difference between the “social self” i.e. the masks of norms and behaviours that people wear in social situations and the “real self”, the person that we are with our closest friends and family. This can help normalize social fears.
- Challenge unrealistic expectations. Ask them “Is it possible to be perfect in everything you do? Are you expecting the worst? How do you know this bad thing will happen? What is another explanation for this situation? (i.e. why he/she did not call you back).
- Help the child engage in fixing the problem; Rather than telling them what to do help the child define what the problem is. Brainstorm solutions, anticipate consequences for proposed solutions, have the kid pick the solution, and evaluate if the solution worked.

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- Sometimes more structured writing tasks can be useful. Anxious students often have difficulty with open ended creative tasks, as they get anxious without parameters.
- Accommodate for timed tests where the student has to keep up with the class.

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Model Anxiety Management.

- Kids learn how to behave by watching how others respond. So when trying to support an anxious child avoid showing anxiety.
- Within appropriate limits talk about your own anxiety management strategies (when I’m worried...embarrassed I...etc.)

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Further resources for the anxious child; there are several common techniques that have been found to be helpful to an anxious child.

- Measured breathing exercises.
- The tracing or colouring in of “Mandela” (see attached).
- Physical grounding exercises (i.e. pushing the heels firmly into the ground one at a time, environmental scans)
- Muscle relaxation exercises.

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Closing thoughts.

You are the expert in that child. As teachers you see your students more than most other adults see them. A school can at times have a very accurate reading on how a child is doing. If you have doubts compare observations with other teachers; is this child having global academic problems that could be related to anxiety? Is it getting better or worse? Does the child need additional support i.e. therapy?

Parents will always have a unique insight into their children that no other person will be able to match. You have watched them grow. You see how they act when they are well rested, or tired and cranky at the end of the day. You are often the person that they will drop their mask for, the person they know is safe for them to fall apart around. If you are seeing a worrying trend develop over time it may well be an indication that your child could benefit from support.

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Few children or teens say to themselves: “I’m feeling scared and as a result I am avoiding things. Continuing this could have a long term impact upon my scholastic and life development. Even though I’m absolutely terrified right now I need to push through and do the thing that scares me so that it won’t affect me or limit my options in my 20s”.

This sort of thought process is not developmentally normal for people who haven’t completed adolescence. Children with anxiety do best when they have systemic and unified support from as many concerned adults in their lives as possible, to provide encouragement and gentle firm motivation to move forward against their fears.

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Resources for Parents and Teachers:

Alberta Learning. 2000. *Teaching Students with Emotional Disorders and/or Mental Illnesses*. Edmonton, Alberta.

Bourne, E. 1995. *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Feiner, J & Yost, G. 1998. *Taming Monsters, Slaying Dragons: The Revolutionary Family Approach to Overcoming childhood Fears and Anxieties*. New York: Arbour House.

Garber, S., Garber M., & Spizman, R. 1993. *Monsters Under the Bed: Helping Your Child Overcome Anxieties, Fears and Phobias*. New York: Villard Books.

Goldstein, S., Hagar, K., & Brooks, R. 2002. *Seven Steps to Help Your Child Worry Less*. Specialty Press.

Greenberger, D. & Padesky, C. 1995. *Mind Over Mood: Change How you Feel By Changing the Way You Think*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Manassis, K. 1996. *Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child*. Hauppauge, New York: Barron's Educational Series.

Rapee, R, et al. 2000. *Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step by Step Guide for Parents*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.

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Mental Health Online Resources for Educators

MORE

If you would like to take a *deeper dive* into what you have just viewed, MORE has adapted Jory's presentation on anxiety into a two-part online experience:

- A short, animated video exploring the origins of the 'fight, flight, and freeze' fear responses
- A longer, interactive course designed to help recognize how anxiety shows up in a classroom and to provide supportive strategies for students experiencing anxiety that are brief, simple and sustainable to implement in the classroom setting





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