

Anxiety Disorders Fact Sheet

Anxiety is a natural human reaction to danger or a threat. It serves an important basic survival function – anxiety is an alarm that goes off when a person perceives danger or a threat. The body reacts with a faster heartbeat and breathing, tense muscles, sweaty palms, a queasy stomach and trembling hands or legs. These sensations, part of the fight-flight response, are caused by a rush of adrenaline and other chemicals that prepare the body to make a quick escape from danger.

Unfamiliar situations, such as the first day of school, can make children feel anxious or nervous. A challenge, such as a big test or a big game can trigger normal anxiety. Anxiety can help people do their best by making them focused. However, anxiety that is too strong can cause people to feel overwhelmed and unable to perform.

Anxiety disorders are mental health conditions that involve excessive amounts of anxiety, fear, nervousness, worry or dread. They affect people of all ages. Although there are many types of anxiety disorders with different symptoms, they all have one thing in common – anxiety occurs too often, is too strong, is out of proportion to the present situation, and affects a person’s daily life and happiness.

Many children and youth are worried about their performance at school or sporting events; being on time; catastrophic events, such as earthquakes and floods; fitting in. Children may be perfectionists, lack confidence, redo tasks because they weren’t perfect, strive for approval and require a lot of reassurance about performance.

Symptoms

- Constant worrying about small or large concerns
- Restlessness, feeling keyed up or on edge
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating or the mind “going blank”
- Irritability
- Muscle tension or muscle aches
- Trembling or being easily startled
- Difficulty sleeping
- Sweating, nausea or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath or rapid heartbeat

Educational Implications

Students with anxiety disorders may be worried about schoolwork and grades. Fears of failing or being embarrassed may make it difficult to start and finish assignments or avoid school entirely.

Absences may make it difficult to catch up on work, which may cause concerns about failing, which leads to more absences.

It is typical for students with anxiety disorders to have difficulty concentrating due to persistent worry, which affects a variety of school actions, from following directions to paying attention.

Some medications prescribed for anxiety disorders have cognitive or behavioral effects, or cause physical discomfort that interferes with school performance.

Instructional Strategies

Each student is unique. This list is intended to provoke thoughts about options that might help your student.

- Listen actively to your student without giving advice.
- Allow extra time for moving to a new activity or location.
- Check the student's assignment book to make sure that assignments are written correctly.
- Encourage follow-through on assignments or tasks, yet be flexible on deadlines.
- Reduce workload at home or school when necessary.
- Maintain a consistent daily schedule and post it where students can see it.
- Allow for multiple or frequent breaks.
- Cue student to begin working and to stay on task.
- Allow your student to respond to questions orally.
- Encourage school attendance – to prevent absences, modify the student's class schedule or reduce the time spent at school.

Resources

[Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)

[Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#)

[Mayo Clinic](#)