

Anxiety Disorders Factsheet (for Schools)

What Teachers Should Know

Anxiety disorders cause people to feel frightened, distressed, or uneasy during situations in which most people would not feel that way. Left untreated, anxiety disorders can make it hard for students to get schoolwork done or study. It may affect their relationships with peers and teachers, too. In some cases, students with anxiety disorders miss a lot of school days. Or they may avoid school altogether.

Common anxiety disorders that affect kids and teens are:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).** With GAD, children have many worries and worry much of the time. They may also have physical symptoms, like headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, or tiredness.
- **Phobias.** A phobia is an intense, unrealistic fear of a specific thing. Some kids have a phobia of dogs. Others have a phobia of spiders or snakes. A child with a phobia will go to great lengths to avoid the thing they fear.
- **Social anxiety.** Kids and teens with social phobia have an intense fear of being judged. It affects them in social or other situations. They will avoid situations where they may have to meet new people or perform.
- **Selective mutism.** Some students are too fearful to talk at all in certain situations. Kids and teens with selective mutism are able to talk in their homes with their family, but are too fearful to talk in many situations outside their homes (like in school) or with people other than close friends. They may whisper or use gestures to communicate.
- **Panic disorder.** Some students have panic attacks, a sudden and intense episode of fear. They can include physical symptoms like a pounding heart, shortness of breath, or dizziness. Panic attacks can happen unexpectedly.
- **Separation anxiety.** It's normal for babies and very young children to have some separation anxiety when they are apart from a parent or caregiver. But when separation anxiety lasts beyond the early school age years, students may have trouble coming to school or even going to friends' houses. They have a hard time separating from their caregivers.

Students with anxiety disorders may show symptoms that fit into one or more of these categories:

- have trouble concentrating in class or completing classwork
- feel self-conscious and avoid certain situations
- have physical symptoms, such as a racing heart, fast breathing, tense muscles, sweaty palms, a queasy stomach, and trembling hands or legs
- take medication to help reduce anxiety
- may need to work with a school counselor or therapist

What Teachers Can Do

Teachers can help students by:

- talking with parents to learn more about the student and how you can best support them
- allowing students extra time to do work
- learning how to coach students to self-calm with breathing and other relaxation techniques
- giving them daily schedules
- modifying assignments and reducing workloads when necessary
- promoting relaxation techniques and allowing for breaks throughout the day
- supporting parents in helping kids get to school, even if it means arriving late or adapting class schedules
- allowing them a safe space and ability to go speak with a counselor, if needed
- easing anxiety in the classroom by pairing with a peer

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