

# Let's talk about anxiety: teacher guidance

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease such as fear or worry. It's one of the body's natural responses to stress, and affects our thoughts, feelings, body and behaviour.

Anxiety activates the body's fight-flight-freeze response. This means that the body prepares to either confront, escape or freeze in the face of a perceived threat.

Anxiety is not necessarily a mental health condition. Most of the time, anxious feelings are normal responses to stressful situations in everyday life.

## Anxiety in children and young people

For children and young people in particular, some level of anxiety is normal as they grow up and learn to navigate the world.

It helps them to cope with potential threats, and understand how they feel about different situations they encounter.

Difficulties can arise when normal levels of anxiety become more severe and start impacting a child's everyday life. Anxiety can become a problem when:

- it is constant, intense, and overwhelming
- it occurs in response to no real threat, or the threat is exaggerated
- it interferes with someone's daily life and stops them doing things they want to.

## Anxiety in the classroom

School can be an anxiety-provoking environment for some children and young people.

They might be worried about friendships and fitting in, moving into a new school year, pressure to do well, or taking part in certain lessons or activities.

Experiences outside school, such as caring responsibilities, health issues, bereavement or other life changes can also cause children and young people to feel anxious and make it difficult for them to settle at school.

## Some common signs and behaviours

Anxiety can present in different forms in children and young people. It generally manifests in the form of avoidant behaviours. They may seem distracted or absent-minded, agitated, hyperactive or withdrawn.

Students displaying challenging behaviour may also be doing so as a response to anxious feelings.



**Anna Freud**

You might look out for some of the following signs and behaviours:

- avoidance of people and places in school
- difficulty concentrating
- withdrawal from social activities
- seeming tired, fidgety or absent-minded
- not completing tasks or homework
- constantly seeking reassurance
- worrying a lot about minor issues, such as having the correct equipment
- having frequent headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- avoiding difficult situations, such as tests or presentations
- frequent unexplained absences.

These behaviours aren't always indicative of anxiety or an anxiety disorder. It's important to raise any concerns that you might have with the student and their parents or carers, and to work with relevant staff to provide support.

## How can I support my students?

Most children and young people who experience anxiety do not require specialist intervention. Schools can be sites of both prevention and support.

Support and understanding from school staff, as part of a whole-school approach to mental health, can help students to manage anxiety effectively.

The most important thing you can do is to normalise anxiety. Explain to your students that it is a normal response to everyday difficulties, and that support is available to them.

It's also important to take your students' concerns seriously, particularly when they are having further difficulties with anxiety and need additional support.

You should:

**Make yourself available:** make students aware that you are available to talk, and share information about any other support available in your school.

**Listen to understand:** when discussing anxious feelings with a student, listen to them with curiosity and openness. Try to avoid making assumptions, minimising their feelings, rushing to reassure them, or telling them to 'calm down' or 'relax'.

**Teach your students about anxiety and wellbeing:** this might involve using the Let's talk about anxiety and We all have mental health toolkits to discuss anxiety in a lesson, assembly or in tutor time.

**Provide structure and clear expectations:** establish a consistent daily routine that students can rely on. Use visual aids such as schedules or calendars to help students anticipate any changes.

**Create an inclusive environment:** carry out an audit of your classroom to ensure it is inclusive. Use visual aids and other communication devices to support learning and communication differences.

**Work with individual students to support their needs:** working with students and their parents and carers, you might identify particular difficulties, triggers and patterns, and work together to create an individual support plan.

Teaching tip: if you feel comfortable doing so, it can be helpful to share experiences you may have had of feeling anxious. If students are not comfortable sharing their own experiences in lessons, it can also be helpful to refer to characters and scenarios in the third person.



If you are worried that a young person is at risk, always follow your setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. Involve your designated safeguarding team as a matter of priority. If the young person is at immediate risk, ensure that they are taken to their GP or A&E as a matter of urgency, depending on the severity of the concern.

## Managing your own anxiety

It's crucial that you look after yourself first. All the tips, strategies and guidance for children and young people in this toolkit apply equally to adults.

In the classroom, you should be mindful of your own boundaries and triggers. If you have concerns, you should raise this with your school leadership team, or contact Education Support for advice.

If you're still struggling, you should seek further professional advice. Speak to your GP or contact a counselling service.

## Getting further support

If you're concerned that your student's anxiety is continuing to interfere with their day-to-day life, they may have an anxiety disorder and require further support.

You should follow your school's safeguarding and mental health policy, contact your student's parent or carers, and liaise with relevant school staff and specialists.

### Further information

- Classroom wellbeing toolkit - a practical toolkit to help secondary teachers support students' mental wellbeing
- NHS: anxiety in children – information on supporting children and young people with anxiety

