



A GPSC Initiative

## Tips for Teachers of Anxious Students

### What is anxiety?

Human beings have normal anxieties when facing developmental changes, new situations and potential threats. When children's fears and worries become excessive, they may interfere with academic or social functioning. The anxiety response includes physical symptoms (e.g., racing heart, stomachaches, sleep problems), behavioral symptoms (avoidance or tantrums) and anxious thoughts and feelings. The tendency to excessive anxiety runs in families, and is increased by losses, changes, and stresses. Clinical "Anxiety Disorders" take various forms. The name usually explains itself, as in separation anxiety, social anxiety, generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder and so on. Typically, treatment involves providing practical support, teaching specific coping strategies and sometimes the addition of medications to reduce symptoms.

### How common is it?

About 10% of children have symptoms at the mild end of the anxiety continuum at any given time. About 2% have more severe symptoms leading to difficulty functioning, attending school, or participating with peers. At any given time, several children in a classroom will be struggling with some form of anxiety disorder.

### What effect does anxiety have on schoolwork?

Anxious children and teens have trouble concentrating, are easily discouraged, will often be tired in class and may be irritable. They are often somewhat perfectionistic. Due to sleep problems, anxious children may miss school or come in late. They may not participate much during class, and grades may drop significantly. Despite these difficulties, anxious children and teens are usually advised by their doctor to attend school because it gives the day structure, prevents "school phobia", and keeps them socially connected. It also keeps them moving along academically. Many children with anxiety are achievement-oriented, and the key to feeling successful is attendance at school.

### How can you help?

1. **Check with the counsellor:** If you have concerns that a child or teen in your class may be anxious, talk to the student's counselor, who can give you some guidance as to how serious the problem is and what adaptations are needed. If the counsellor was not aware of the problem, your inquiry could lead to more help being offered.
2. **Communicate with parents:** Be in touch with the parents, in a positive, problem-solving way. Perhaps they can help by getting a tutor, or keeping the child on track with assignments. They will often have ideas for strategies that work for their child.
3. **Take the child's concerns seriously & offer practical support:** Check in with the child regarding how they are managing: is there anything they don't understand, do they need extra help? Express confidence in the child's ability to deal with the situation but if it seems they are overwhelmed, it may be necessary to reduce expectations for a defined time period. Regular class attendance is a lifeline. However, with marked anxiety, it may be helpful for a child or teen to be able to "take a break" to work in a quieter place, such as the resource room or library. You can also quietly remind students to implement whatever coping behaviors have been helpful to them, such as breathing deeply, using distraction techniques, and practicing positive self-talk.

4. **Be consistent:** All children thrive on reliable, consistent schedules, and for the anxious child this need cannot be stated strongly enough. If change is anticipated, cue the child and provide active support for transitions.
5. **Adjusting work expectations:** Short answer, multiple choice and match type questions may be easier, while producing essays may be overwhelming. It helps to break larger tasks such as projects into individual steps. You could help by providing intermediate deadlines, checking how they are coming along, and providing encouragement to keep it up. Anxious children often have perfectionist standards, which results in assignments “not being good enough” to turn in. Encourage submission of any part of an assignment. A doctor's letter may suggest that material be "omitted" for part of a term or that course-load be reduced. At times, a core subject such as math needs to be repeated in summer school or the next year. Please be encouraging in this situation, as students can feel very ashamed and worried about their academic future.
6. **Interaction in the classroom:** Anxious children and teens are easily embarrassed, and do not like to be singled out. This includes having their name put on the board, being selected for special projects, getting disciplined in front of others, or being asked to volunteer for reading aloud. Working with a peer that the anxious child trusts can help them feel more comfortable.
7. **Establish a cue and place for “time out”:** Under stress, anxious children may have a “fight or flight” response, with an emotional outburst or angry reaction. If you cannot ignore the behavior, try staying calm, talking quietly and being reassuring, rather than challenging the child. Do not try to physically remove a child from this situation, as this may escalate the panicky reaction. It is helpful if the child has a pre-planned safe place in the school building that they can retreat to, if they feel they are going to lose control. Prepare in advance a system whereby the child can signal the teacher, and quietly leave the classroom in order to go to another safe place in the building.
8. **Work as a team** with parents, counsellor, other teachers and mental health professionals to work out a “plan” together.