A Teacher's Guide to Supporting Students with Anxiety

As a teacher, you may have noticed your students seem increasingly anxious—and the evidence isn't just anecdotal. According to child psychologist Golda Ginsburg, "anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses in children….[and they're] underdiagnosed and undertreated." In fact, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, while about 18% of adults experience an anxiety disorder in a given year, that rate is a higher 25% for children ages 13–18.

This article will guide you through the definition of anxiety, its causes, how to recognize it, types of anxiety disorders, and, most importantly, how you can help as a teacher. You can also learn specific skills as they relate to anxiety and the COVID-19 crisis, as well as find resources to help you along your way.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an emotion in which one feels irrationally tense, worried, or fearful, manifesting itself through physical or emotional symptoms, which will be further detailed below. While there is frequently a known stimulus, there may not be—some anxiety is purely existential. Like other emotions, anxiety usually lasts a short while. However, if the feeling lingers for far too long, this can indicate an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety" is often confused with—or casually used in place of—"stress"" or "nervousness", but they aren't the same things. Stress and nerves are usually caused by external, recognizable stimuli, and the responses are relatively rational and short-lived. These feelings can even be positive, indicating that a person cares about a situation's outcome and pushing them to succeed. However, if a stressor continues over an extended period or there are multiple nerve-wracking situations on top of one another, anxiety frequently develops.

Anxiety is often connected to suicidal behavior. As of 2017, suicide was the second-highest cause of death in people ages 10–34. Parents, administrators, and teachers must learn to recognize and address anxiety in young people—not only to increase children's academic and social success but also to potentially save their lives.

Causes of Anxiety Among Students

While not all anxiety symptoms are signs of disorders, there are three general causes of anxiety disorders among young people.

Causes of Anxiety		
Biology	**Family**	**Trauma**
Neurotransmitters, especially serotonin and dopamine, aren't functioning correctly in their brains. In short, these "happy hormones," aren't being produced or sent through the brain and body effectively, causing problems with mood and alertness, as well as more frightening issues with blood flow and body temperature regulation.	This includes inheriting the disorder, as well as parents or guardians modeling anxious behaviors in front of their children. For example, they might share "grown-up problems" like money issues or exhibit perfectionism. Parents continually focusing on their child's happiness or even giving excessive praise can also cause anxiety, as the child may feel they're doing something wrong if they're unhappy or not	High-stress events that cause upheavals, like divorce or a death in the family, can cause trauma-related anxiety. Trauma may also include individual terrifying events like car accidents, as well as abuse.

	immediately successful at tasks.	

However, evidence shows situations unrelated to these factors are also causing the rise in anxiety and anxiety disorders among children. While it's easy to blame social media—and studies are mixed about whether it is or is not a major contributor—some school issues are considered partially responsible.

Bullying

Students who bully and those who are bullied are at risk for mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. Less expectedly, seeing peers being bullied is also a significant cause of these challenges.

Overscheduling

Students today are busy, both in and out of school. Overscheduling—such as involvement in too many advanced classes and extensive after-school activities—can have physical and mental effects, including anxiety.

Pressure to Succeed

Students often feel pressure to excel at everything. "When kids feel like each homework assignment is going to make or break their future or that each soccer game could determine if they get a college scholarship, that pressure will have negative consequences," says Amy Morin, LCSW. These feelings can result in battles with anxiety, depression, and self-esteem.

Interpersonal Relationships

At all ages, students worry about their interactions with those around them. If a child feels like their teacher "doesn't like them," they may dread attending class. Additionally, teachers are stressed—which can lead to anxiety for them as well. Even if they never lose their cool, a teacher's general demeanor can model anxious behaviors for students. Also, kids want to fit in with their peers. While a Pew Research Center study showed grades were the primary stressor for students, the following two were the pressure to look good and be socially accepted.

School Shootings
As of 2018, 57% of teenagers surveyed stated they were worried a shooting would happen at their school. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs shows that people become anxious and unable to self-actualize—that is, learn and grow—if they feel unsafe.

Types of Anxiety Disorders in Young People

Knowing the most common disorders and their signs can help you to spot them. While you can't—and shouldn't attempt to—diagnose a child, if you notice behaviors relating to these, gently recommend a parent speak to their pediatrician. There are six common types of anxiety disorders among youths.

Common Anxiety Disorders

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
Excessive worry about many things, from grades to relationships to existential ideas

Panic Disorder
Experiencing a minimum of two panic or anxiety attacks in a month, with no apparent reason

Selective Mutism
Not speaking when social or academic norms require it, though they may be highly talkative at home

Separation Anxiety Disorder
Showing signs of anxiety, like crying, when separated from parents; it becomes something to worry about when the child can't be distracted, won't join in fun activities, or fears bad things will happen to their families

Social Anxiety Disorder
Fear of social situations, including being called on in class or speaking with classmates

Specific Phobias
Intense fear of a particular object or situation, such as dogs or the dark

Recognizing Anxiety in Students

The Boston Children's Hospital says a certain amount of anxiety is normal in children, which can make it hard to determine whether the signs are part of typical development or evidence of a disorder. Young children operate on an evolutionary fight-or-flight level; however, as they age, many of these fears should lessen. For instance, if a teenager is exhibiting separation anxiety, it could be a red flag for a deeper problem.

Physical and Emotional Indicators of Anxiety

Possible physical indicators of anxiety	Possible emotional indicators of anxiety
Difficulty breathing	Perfectionism
Shaking	Expressing constant fears
Dizziness	Attempting to not participate in school
Becoming fatigued quickly	
Frequent stomachaches or headaches	

It's essential not to jump to conclusions, however. Any student can exhibit physical or emotional signs of anxiety, including the occasional panic or anxiety attack. Additionally, several disabilities and conditions, like ADHD, autism, and diabetes, can cause symptoms resembling anxiety. If signs show up frequently or impede academic or social activities, that is when you should become concerned.

How Teachers Can Help Students with Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are critically underdiagnosed and untreated, but those who have diagnoses may have their needs covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or the Section 504 civil rights law. If covered by IDEA, they will be considered

special needs students and given Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Section 504 doesn't typically require any special education services but allows them a 504 plan. Both types of plans provide specific, actionable steps to take when a student is experiencing anxiety.

However, for students exhibiting anxiety symptoms who have no specific plans in place, there are best practices you can follow.

Establish Norms

From day one, you need to communicate norms to your students. All children, but especially those with anxiety, need structure and an understanding of expectations. These should include not just student expectations, but also what to anticipate from you. Knowing what is coming up, what behaviors are expected from them, how you will communicate positive and constructive feedback, and even things as simple as where to turn in papers lowers opportunities for anxiety-inducing situations to arise. Remind students of expectations as the year goes on and re-establish them after breaks.

Put a Stop to Bullying

Bullying, being bullied, or witnessing bullying can lead to anxiety in students, so you must have a policy in place—and to stick to it. Get involved the moment you see bullying behavior, institute consequences mandated by your school, and follow up with the perpetrator, victim, and any witnesses, as well as with their families. The follow-ups should be about healing, not continued consequences. For more help with this topic, check out our bullying prevention guide.

Sarah Mattie, former middle school theatre and language arts teacher, shares, "I was a bullied and anxious kid, and my anxiety increased because I never knew what happened to my bullies after the incidents. I assumed teachers were ignoring it. As a teacher, I always made a point to be transparent. I told kids and parents that for legal and privacy reasons, I couldn't tell them what steps would be taken—but I did promise to everything in my power to help. If someone had told me that when I was a kid, maybe my anxiety would have been lessened!"

Build Relationships with Students

While it can seem impossible to build a relationship with every student, this is essential for decreasing their anxieties. “Getting to know you” activities are a great start, such as “about me” papers and name-learning games, and you should have some in your back pocket for when a student transfers into your class. Mattie recommends keeping the “about me” papers so you can refer to them later in the year. Casual conversations with no academic stakes are also helpful. Talking about your life humanizes you, as does piping up when you hear a student mention an interest you share. When students see you person rather than merely an authority figure, they can better relate to you—and perhaps better trust you.

Additionally, showing you notice when something is “off” with a student, and offering help or a listening ear can ease anxieties. In an interview with NPR, a teenager named Katie stated, “I felt like every single day was a bad day. I felt like nobody wanted to help me,” informing the interviewer that no staff member had ever asked, “What’s wrong?” If they had inquired, she said she would have told them. Jon Harper, assistant principal at New Directions Learning Academy, concurs. “I think we start by asking the students what they need. I get it, we are the experts and we have our degrees but isn’t it possible that we don’t know?”

When talking to students, lead with empathy. Ensure they know you’re there for them and they aren’t in trouble for seeming anxious, sad, or showing any other negative feeling. Involve them in solutions—ask them what they think could help. You don’t have to come up with a fix immediately—you can ask them to think about it, say you will as well, and plan to talk again on a specific day.

“Many kids just wanted to know someone was there to listen,” Mattie stated. “Some asked if I could keep the conversation private, and I went back to my policy of transparency. I told them I was a mandated reporter, and I had to report things that made me worry about their health or safety or that of someone else—otherwise, this was a private safe space. *Never make promises you know you can’t keep.* I don’t think I ever had a student refuse to speak after that—in some cases, I think knowing I was legally obligated to help reassured them. But most didn’t have red flags to talk about; they simply wanted a grown-up who didn’t *have* to care about them to care.”

Proactively Lower Stress

Overscheduling in and out of the classroom can cause anxiety in students, so letting them take the occasional break from the grind is essential. Especially during high-stakes periods, like testing, consider having a games day, bringing them outside to run around (no matter how old they are), or using the old standby of popping in a movie. If you're in a school that frowns on activities that aren't directly related to your curriculum, find ways to integrate relaxing tasks into lessons.

Also, reframe how you talk to kids about grades, tests, and behaviors. Don't make any single thing seem like it will ruin their futures—or make you "hate" them.

Create a Growth Mindset, Not a Fear of Failure

Kids are under a great deal of pressure to be perfect, and fear of failure can be paralyzing. Try to reframe perceived failures as opportunities to grow. Harper suggests, "Share your mistakes, blunders and weaknesses with your students. In doing so, others might be inspired to share as well. More importantly, your students will begin to feel safer and they will feel that they spend their days in an environment in which it's okay to make mistakes."

Mattie provides an example of this. "At the beginning of every school year, I told students my greatest weakness is remembering names. I told them about the *three* times I had forgotten my own name when introducing myself and insisted they publicly correct me if I ever got their names wrong—whether forgetting or mispronouncing them. Allowing them to correct me and reacting with good humor (and perhaps a facepalm) rather than annoyance let them know feedback or corrections weren't things to fear in my classroom."

As you teach, include formative assessments so students can get feedback in a low-stakes manner. These can include ungraded assignments, monitoring work, and providing specific feedback throughout to increase confidence for future higher-stakes activities. When a student completes a task, provide both positive and constructive responses. If a student "bombs," discreetly call them over to find out what happened and work together to find a solution.

Make Students Feel Safe

Unfortunately, teachers can't wave a magic wand and make school shootings stop; however, you can take steps to make sure students feel secure in their school

environment. If your school has shooting drills, prep your students about what to expect and give them time to decompress and discuss their experiences and feelings afterward. Don't force them to speak, but allow them to express their fears, ask questions, and become upset if they need to. Offer to talk to them privately as well. Provide the same opportunities after there are shootings on the news—student mental health matters more than the lesson plan.

Additionally, make sure they have all the facts—how rare these incidents are, why your school holds drills, and, most importantly, that the adults in the building are there to protect them.

While other emergency drills may cause anxiety for some students, especially those with relevant traumas, they tend to be less anxiety-causing in general. Still, be aware of students who react with fear and address those worries as discussed above.

Watch Out for Negative Interactions

Both peer and teacher relationships can affect students' anxiety levels, so it's crucial to keep an eye out for problems.

It can be hard to admit that something about your style or class could cause anxiety, but these things happen. This does *not* mean you're a bad teacher! In fact, the best teachers reflect, adjust, and strive to improve. If you notice a student suddenly exhibiting signs of anxiety, consider the following:

- Did you say something that could have caused the reaction?
- Were you having a stressful day and inadvertently modeling anxious behaviors?
- Could the topic have caused this response? For example, a situation in a book—even a seemingly innocuous one—could remind a student of a trauma. There is also math-specific anxiety, in which students assume they'll fail because of previous experiences in the subject.
- Did you unexpectedly redecorate the room or create a new seating chart? Changes like these can create a sense of instability.

When you notice a reaction, talk to the student. If you're unsure of what went wrong, ask. If you know what caused the reaction, address it head-on—and don't be afraid to apologize if

you need to. Apologizing doesn't disallow you from issuing consequences; it's merely admitting you made a mistake in how you handled things in the moment. "In frustration, I used 'teacher voice' on occasion—and sometimes it caused anxiety. If I realized my reaction was wrong, I apologized. It's amazing how far an 'I'm sorry' from an adult can go," said Mattie.

Monitoring peer relationships can be trickier. If a student appears to have trouble with peers, partner them with a kind student for projects, and seat the two near each other—many kids go out of their way to treat others well. You can speak one-on-one with the compassionate student. You don't need to mention the student they will be helping, but tell them you have noticed and appreciate their behavior—then email their parents to express your gratitude as well. Reinforce classroom expectations regarding the treatment of others and talk to students exhibiting negative behaviors that could increase others' anxieties. Most kids don't enter school thinking, "I'm going to be mean today!" Their words or actions could be the result of something going on with them, including their own anxiety.

Talk to Other Teachers

When you are worried about a student, reach out to their other teachers—including elective teachers, as students may act differently in "non-traditional" classrooms. Ask if they have observed the signs you have and work together to find solutions. Stability is key for students with anxiety, so if you can find across-the-board methods—such as a subtle signal for when a student needs to take a break—students won't have to worry about remembering different practices for each class. If the team sees that a student is especially comfortable with a particular teacher, have them check in at the beginning and/or end of each day.

Try to alert other teachers when you notice the student is having a bad day, so they can be ready to provide support.

Even if the student isn't in a special education program, it won't hurt to reach out to SPED teachers as well. They may have some tips or can advise on whether an IEP or 504 may be worth exploring.

Include Administrators and the Counseling Team

Since administrators and members of the counseling team, including school counselors, psychologists, and social workers, aren't in the trenches every day, they may not know a student is struggling until a problem becomes a crisis. Reach out before things get that far.

Administrators can provide advice and insight regarding how to communicate with parents. If you're worried about how you might come across, ask the administrator if they could look at your email before you hit "send" or practice the conversation with you before it occurs.

The counseling team members are the real experts on this topic. They can meet with the student and talk about how the year is going and address your specific concerns—usually without mentioning your name. Follow up after the meeting to see what suggestions they have.

Both administrators and members of the counseling team may have knowledge teachers don't, such as records from previous schools, medical information, or even if child protective services are involved with the family. They may consider this information to be on a "need-to-know basis." If you express a need to know, you may gain more understanding of what is going on and be able to adjust your practices.

Involve Parents

Parents can be your best allies in the fight against student anxiety. Be factual in your conversation—describe behaviors, relay things the child has said, and inform them of any academic effects. Make it clear their child isn't in trouble and that you want to work together to find solutions. Parents may not have alerted you to previous challenges, so ask them if this has happened before and if any accommodations have worked. Emphasize that you care about their child and your line of communication is always open.

Some parents may resist or become upset. Don't let that discourage you. They might be scared there is something "wrong" with their child, or perhaps these issues have arisen before and they felt no one wanted to help or thought it was over. Make sure they know you're on "Team Student." Keep records of all interactions. These records could help if other teachers contact them, if counselors or administration need to get involved, and may protect you if a parent complains.

COVID-19 and Student Anxiety

As mentioned, upheavals in students' lives can cause anxiety. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students across the nation have suddenly moved from seeing their teachers and classmates in person to learning online—a massive change for most.

There are a few things you can do to help your students stave off anxiety during this time.

Allow for Asynchronous Learning

Asynchronous learning occurs on a student's schedule. Some may have to share a device with a working parent or school-aged sibling; others might spend their days caring for younger children while guardians work. These students can become anxious about falling behind or disappointing you, and those who already have anxiety could enter a crisis state. If your school insists on frequent synchronous learning, push back and advocate for your students.

Check in Regularly

Whether a student has anxiety or not, they need to know you haven't disappeared. Send out whole-class messages, respond to students as quickly as you can, and reach out individually, particularly to students with anxiety or other needs. This may mean a phone call or text. Apps like Remind let you text students and parents without revealing your phone number. For phone calls, things can be a bit trickier. You can share your number, but if you aren't comfortable doing so, talk to your administration about alternatives. Remind has a call function for premium members, and Google Voice lets you create a phone number if you have a Google account.

Take Care of Yourself

As the cliché goes, "You can't pour from an empty cup." If your emotional cup is empty, you have nothing left to give your students. Check in with yourself mentally. As previously stated, your demeanor can affect student anxiety—if you seem freaked out, they might become so. Do whatever you need to do to keep yourself calm, like participating in a favorite at-home activity outside of work hours or getting digital therapy through a resource like Talkspace.

Learn about Online Education

Knowledge is power and feeling powerful can lower anxiety. EducationDegree.com

provides two articles to help educators and students feel comfortable with online learning. The first article contains tips for students learning remotely. The second is an article designed especially for teachers.

Resources for Teachers of Students with Anxiety

Anxiety and Depression Association of America: ADAA focuses on education about, treatment of, and finding cures for anxiety, depression, and related disorders. They have a wealth of information for people with these disorders, mental health professionals, family members, and educators.

Education Week: This publication offers a variety of articles about student anxiety. Education Week has a limit on how many pieces you can read, so if it proves valuable to you, see if your school has an account or will pay for you to have a membership.

National Association of School Psychologists: NASP provides resources, professional development, and policy information for school psychologists and educators who are dealing with mental health in the classroom—including anxiety.

Rogers Behavioral Health: Rogers Behavioral Health has information specifically regarding students with school anxiety, including a podcast series and actionable steps teachers can take to help anxious kids.

Understood: This website strives to ensure people with disabilities of all sorts thrive. They provide anxiety-related resources, including information about recognizing symptoms of anxiety, how-to guides, and information about the legalities surrounding IEPs and 504s.