

Mental Health Newsletter

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ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS

Overview

Anxiety can present itself in many forms. There are various types of anxiety disorders that will manifest differently depending on the root and basis for fear and or anxiety. The most common features of anxiety disorders are that they are rooted in **excessive fear and anxiety** and related behavior disturbances.

Fear can be defined as the emotional response to a real or perceived imminent threat in which a fight or flight response may be employed.

Anxiety on the other hand is anticipation of a future threat. While all rooted in fear and worry, each anxiety disorder is related to a specific object or situation that may induce fear, anxiety or avoidance in an individual.

Anxiety disorders are more common in females than males (approximately 2:1 ratio). Anxiety disorders can be first seen in childhood and may persist if not treated and addressed. Anxiety disorders also may be comorbid (occurring at the same time) as another diagnosis (for example, depression or ADHD)

With a 10% frequency rate, a **middle school** class of 30 students could have as many as **three students** with an anxiety disorder and perhaps two of them would be girls (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019).

It is NOT uncommon to be diagnosed with both depression AND anxiety. Nearly one-half of those diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

“You don’t have to control your thoughts. You just have to stop letting them control you.”
– Dan Millman



Signs of Anxiety

What you may see:

- **Thinking/Learning**
 - Concentration problems
 - Memory problems
 - Attention problems
 - Problem-solving difficulties
 - Worry
- **Behavioral**
 - Restlessness
 - Fidgeting
 - Task avoidance
 - Rapid speech
 - Irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Perfectionism
 - Lack of participation
 - Failing to complete tasks
 - Seeking easy tasks
- **Physical**
 - Stomach discomfort
 - Rapid heart rate
 - Flushing of the skin
 - Perspiration
 - Headaches
 - Muscle tension
 - Sleeping problems
 - Nausea

What Can YOU Do?

School-Based Interventions

Some suggestions for the classroom include:

- **Establish predictable routines** – *anxious students struggle with the unknown*
- **Set clear and reasonable expectations**
- **Break tasks into manageable units**
- **Have specific evaluation criteria** – *anxious students benefit from knowing specific expectations, think guided rubrics*
- **Pair anxious students with peers who are confident and supportive**
- **Give special responsibilities** – *providing both a break from the classroom and movement – bring attendance to the main office*
- **Give time to relax when anxiety becomes high** – identify student's signs and try to provide a break prior to the increase in anxiety
- **Reduce or avoid unexpected situations** – warn of changes in schedule where possible
- **Avoid punitive and negative attitudes** – use positive approach as much as possible
- **Reduce time constraints, if possible**
- **Move the student to a quiet setting with fewer distractions**
- **Check in with student routinely** – helps student to develop relationship with teacher
- **Offer cognitive distractions** – frequent breaks, job or alternative activity to break negative/anxious thought cycle

As always, please do not hesitate to send your students to see either their case manager or school counselor for check ins, therapy, or assistance in working through specific anxiety triggers.

Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America: <http://www.adaa.org>

Foa, E. B., & Andrews, L. W. (2006). *If your adolescent has anxiety disorder*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Huberty, T. J. (2008). Best practices in school-based interventions for anxiety and depression. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1473–1486). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.