SCHOOL ANXIETY:
How to Support Students in Handling Uncertainty and Fear

TEACHERS GUIDEBOOK

Anxiety Training
For Mental Health Professionals
In this guidebook, you will find helpful tips that can aid you in providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for your students. Whether it’s providing tools to identify signs of anxiety, strategies for handling difficult conversations, or ideas for classroom activities that foster emotional well-being, this guidebook has got you covered.

We aim to help you create an environment where all your students feel supported and understood in school. The guidebook has been designed with busy teachers in mind, offering concise, accessible, and easy-to-implement strategies that can make a big difference in supporting student mental health.

At its core, this guidebook is about equipping you with the knowledge and resources you need to create a more positive learning experience for your students. By investing time in building an emotionally supportive classroom, you can help your students navigate their anxieties and embrace all that the new school year has to offer.

So, take a deep breath, flip through the pages, and let us support you in your mission to empower and educate your students in these unprecedented times. Together, we can help them thrive and flourish both academically and emotionally.
School anxiety can show up in a variety of ways, with avoidance being a common coping mechanism for many anxious students. Anxiety feels bad, and avoidance brings relief from anxiety in the moment. However, avoidance behaviors can hinder a student’s academic progress, social interactions, and ironically end up exacerbating their anxiety. As a teacher, it is crucial to recognize and address avoidance effectively to support students with school anxiety.

1. **Recognize the Signs of Avoidance:**
Become familiar with the signs of avoidance in students. These may include reluctance to participate in class activities, tardiness or frequent absences, being shy, frequently requesting to leave the classroom, or expressing fear or discomfort when faced with certain tasks or situations. Awareness of these signs will enable you to intervene promptly and provide appropriate support.

2. **Encourage Gradual Exposure to Triggering Situations:**
Help students gradually confront their fears and overcome avoidance through gradual exposure to triggers like asking a question in class or giving an oral report. Break down tasks or situations that trigger anxiety into smaller, manageable steps. Encourage students to start with less challenging aspects and gradually work their way up to more demanding tasks. This gradual exposure helps students learn that they can handle anxiety-provoking situations.

3. **Create a Supportive Plan:**
Collaborate with the student, their parents, and any support services available to develop an individualized plan that addresses their specific anxiety and avoidance patterns. Regularly review and adjust the plan as necessary.
4. **Teach Students to Be Brave:**
School is, first and foremost, a learning environment, and any time students are learning, some tasks are harder for some than others. Celebrate when a student takes a risk even if they are not correct, model ways that you and other adults are brave, and provide opportunities for them to demonstrate bravery in the classroom.

5. **Encourage Peer Support and Understanding:**
Foster a classroom environment that promotes peer support and understanding and normalizes anxiety. Educate the class about anxiety and its impact on students. Encourage empathy and discourage judgment or teasing. Peer support can play a significant role in reducing avoidance and creating a positive social experience for students with school anxiety.

6. **Celebrate Progress and Effort:**
Recognize and celebrate students’ progress and efforts in facing challenges and being brave. Highlight their achievements and growth, no matter how small. This positive reinforcement grows their self-confidence and motivates them to continue working towards managing their anxiety and overcoming avoidance. The environment can be daunting for any student. However, for students with anxiety, it can feel insurmountable. This is why it’s up to the professionals at every level of the school district to work towards building an environment that helps students with anxiety thrive.
Classroom Activities to Foster Emotional Well-Being

Provide small rewards like stickers or candy for students who show bravery.

Encourage students to answer a question even if they get it wrong or give a presentation even if they are anxious.

Normalize anxiety — everyone feels anxious sometimes! Discourage judgment and teasing.

Consider having a class discussion with a question like “How many of you have experienced anxiety/worry? What does it mean that we all have had this experience? How can we support each other when we feel anxious?”
Have students spread the message of encouragement.

Have your students spread the message of encouragement by writing on post-it notes or make mini-posters that they stick on a prominent area. Suggest phrases like “Anxiety can’t stop me from doing what I want,” “It gets better!” “You learn more from failure than from success.”

Promote empathy and understanding.

Share examples of empathy in the classroom. Have students work in pairs to promote peer support for challenging assignments or to rehearse presentations using these examples.
Anxiety Training has selected the following books for adults and children, videos, podcasts, and links to organizations that can provide information and educational resources on tackling school anxiety.

Books for Parents and Teachers

- Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons 2013, Health Communications Inc.
- Face It and Feel It: 10 Simple (But Not Easy) Ways to Live Well with Anxiety by Kimberly Morrow 2011
- Freeing Your Child from Anxiety by Tamar Chansky 2004
- Parenting Your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance: A Powerful New Approach to Overcoming Fear, Panic, and Worry Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy by Christopher McCurry 2009
- Triumph Over Shyness by Murray Stein and John Walker, second edition (available from ADAA)
- The Shyness & Social Anxiety Workbook by Martin Antony and Richard Swinson, 2008

Books for Children

- What To Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck–A Kids Guide to Overcoming OCD by Dawn Huebner
- Up and Down the Worry Hill by Aureen Wagner
- Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes
- First Day Jitters by Julie Danneberg
- Scary Night Visitors: A Story for Children with Bedtime Fears by Irene Marcus
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION ON SCHOOL ANXIETY

- AnxietyTraining.com
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America
- Andrew Kukes Foundation for Social Anxiety
- Active Minds (college-age students)
- Beyond OCD
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
- GoHackify.com for students with OCD
- GoZen.com for anxious students
- How to Become More Confident in 30 secs: Till Gross TedX Talk on YouTube
- International Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder Foundation
- National Association of School Psychologists
- National Institute of Mental Health
- Noises in your Head: Free Video Series
- Selective Mutism Group
- Selective Mutism Foundation
- Trichotillomania Learning Center
- Anxietyintheclassroom.org

Free Podcasts from ADAA

- School Refusal
- Selective Mutism
- Teen Social Anxiety
- Helping Your Child with Anxiety
ANXIETY TRAINING

STRATEGY

Schools seeking support in this endeavor can benefit from Anxiety Training’s three-pronged strategy, which encourages teachers, staff, parents, and students to be acquainted with the same principles, as well as language, for helping children facing anxieties.

This cohesive strategy empowers the school environment to promote the anxious paradox: making progress despite apprehension, facing fear through communication, and becoming comfortable in the presence of unease are all paths to reshape our perception of fear.

Learn more about this training here and begin crafting a plan that will support an empowering school year for everyone.

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