



Anxiety in Adolescents and Children: What Parents & Teachers Can Do

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

- Classic worriers who are anxious about numerous aspects of their life
- Recurrent excessive or unrealistic fears and worries that are difficult to control
- Perfectionistic tendencies
- Symptoms - restlessness, irritability, tense, easily tired, difficulty concentrating or sleeping

Social Phobia

- Usually affects older children
- Constant fear of social/performance situations (e.g., speaking in class, joining conversations)
- Intense social discomfort, painfully shy
- Often concerned will do or say something that will make hem feel humiliated/embarrassed
- Symptoms also include physical symptoms (sweating, blushing, heart palpitations, feeling faint or short of breath, muscle tension, tremors, low energy)
- Anxiety often extends to anticipating events where they have to perform & results in avoidance of the feared situation
- Other signs: overly sensitive to criticism, trouble being assertive, & low self-esteem.

Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

- Not the normal phase of separation anxiety that may occur around 18 months of age
- Intense anxiety/fear about being away from home or caregivers
- Distress when separating or even anticipating separation
- Affects school or social functioning
- Great need to stay at home or be close with their parents, excessive worry about parents
- Other signs: school refusal, clinging to parents, fear of sleeping alone, nightmares

- Often end up in school nurse's office w/ stomachaches or headaches, want to call home

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

- Usually begins in early childhood or adolescence
- Intrusive and inappropriate recurrent thoughts, images, or impulses (obsessions)
- Repetitive behaviors, rituals or routines to stop the thoughts (compulsions)
- May be repetitive behaviors to avoid some imagined consequence (handwashing)

Specific phobia

- Excessive fear of certain objects or situations
- Examples: heights, elevators, the dark, lightning storms, dogs, insects
- Other examples of phobias: fear of losing control, panicking, and fainting when confronted
- When confronted by the situation or object the phobic individual becomes extremely fearful.
- Adolescents or adults recognize the fear as unreasonable, but can do little to stop it
- Often can lead a relatively normal life by simple avoidance, then the diagnosis is not made

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Condition caused after a child experiences an extreme physical or emotional trauma
- Trauma must involve an actual or threatened death or serious injury, witnessing such an event, or hearing about such an event in regard of family member.
- Children are more easily traumatized and adults
- Relive or reexperience the trauma (e.g., intrusive thoughts, images, nightmares, or flashbacks)
- Avoidance of activities, thoughts, places, situations, or people that are assoc. w/ the trauma
- Symptoms of increased arousal or general anxiety (e.g., trouble concentrating, sleeping, or eating; irritability; hypervigilance or being "keyed up," being jumpy)
- Symptoms must occur for least one month since many symptoms are not usually present immediately after trauma

Panic Disorder

- Less common among children, more among adol. and adults

- Feelings of extreme fear and dread that strike unexpectedly/repeatedly for no apparent reason
- Also involves a sudden/intense fear of death
- Accompanied by physical symptoms (chest pain, pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal distress)
- Main problem is frequent or constant concern about having additional attacks, or worry about the implications of an attack or its consequences (fear of fear)

How to Help Students with Anxiety

- Teachers' concerns are likely to be most welcome by parents if they point out the observable behavior
 - "I notice that Jane is distracted in class and appears preoccupied and nervous."
 - "In class, right before a test Joe always asks to go to the bathroom."
- Reassure them that when they are anxious they can get rid of those feelings by focusing only on the task, what they need to do
- Help them do one question, problem at a time, use paper to cover up rest of worksheet to decrease their being overwhelmed
- Teach the student breathe deeply through their nose – several long, deep breaths in and out
- Focus on something positive or safe when feeling worried or anxious
- Counter some of their irrational/ "stinky" thinking (rational emotive therapy)
 - Carefully/tactfully confront some of the beliefs they have that are irrational or not based on reality (e.g., "I'm never going to get an "A" on a test" or "I'm going to fail.")
 - Pointing out past successes in that area
- If perfectionistic:
 - Encourage them that their work does not need to be perfect
 - If self-critical, help them substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts
 - Help the student see the good parts of the performance
 - Help them set realistic goals – if too high, may be setting themselves up for failure
 - Help them set strict time limits on their projects - when time is up, move on to another activity (to reduce procrastination that comes from perfectionism)
 - Teach them how to deal with criticism

- If s/he stops making mistakes, they also stop learning & growing
- Criticism is something to learn from rather than avoid
- Offer extra credit for students with test anxiety
- Allow highly anxious students to take their exams in a distraction free environment
- If a child is not completing tests because s/he is anxious, provide extra time on exams
- Increase as much positive feedback as possible about their work, activities
- Counselors at school can meet with them periodically, informally to provide coping skills, support, warmth, acceptance, and empathy for their feelings
- Provide opportunities to exercise to help reduce their anxiety
- Support them
- Show them understanding and compassion but hold them accountable
- Schools need to develop creative ways to ensure that all children feel connected to the school, teachers, and other adults in the community, as well as to their peers.
 - Make sure that every child feels safe and secure in school and on their way to and from school.
 - An emphasis on performance, grades, and standardized tests raises the level of anxiety in children and a time when the world is becoming more threatening place.
- Anxiety disorders are very treatable, encourage the parents to get them evaluated