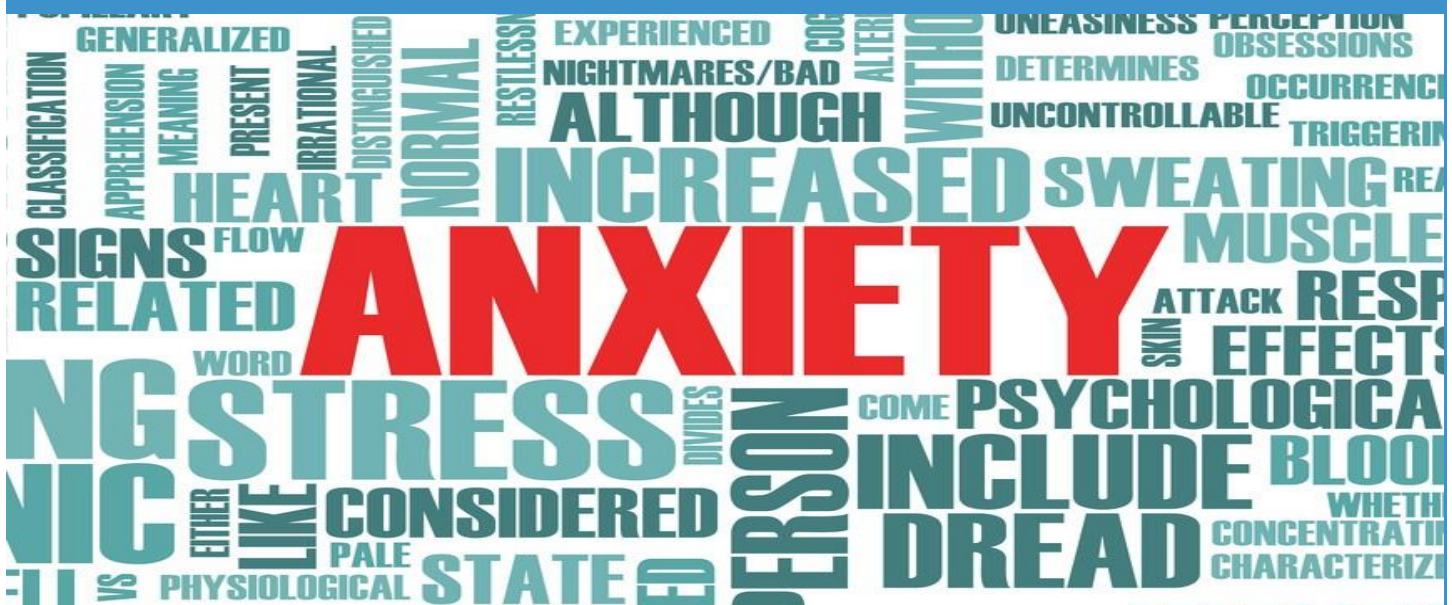


News from Psychological Services

ANXIETY



What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an atypical and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear, which often is marked by physical signs. It is not uncommon for children to experience anxiety. Anxiety at specific times during development is typical and expected. Scientists have learned that some degree of anxiety or stress isn't necessarily a bad thing. Good stress can keep us motivated and excited about life. Anxiety might also bring awareness that changes need to be made in certain situations, help protect us, and help us be a more conscious thinker and problem solver.

When is Anxiety a Problem?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it is chronic, irrational, and interferes with many life functions. Symptoms may be so intense that they cause family, school, and/or social difficulties. Anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents may include physical symptoms such as refusing to eat at school, increased restlessness and/or hyperactive behavior, constantly tensing muscles, and/or sleep difficulties. Emotional symptoms might include crying often, becoming cranky or angry for no reason, being afraid of making minor mistakes, extreme test anxiety, excessive worrying, and/or

frequent nightmares. Anxiety symptoms are the result of the "fight or flight" response. This is the body's normal response to danger. It triggers the release of natural chemicals in the body. These chemicals prepare us to deal with a real danger. They affect heart rate, breathing, muscles, nerves, and digestion. This response is meant to protect us from danger. But with anxiety disorders, the "fight or flight" response is overactive. It happens even when there is no real danger. Several factors play a role in the overactive "fight or flight" that happens with anxiety disorders these include; genetics, brain chemistry, life situations, and/or learned behaviors.

ANXIETY

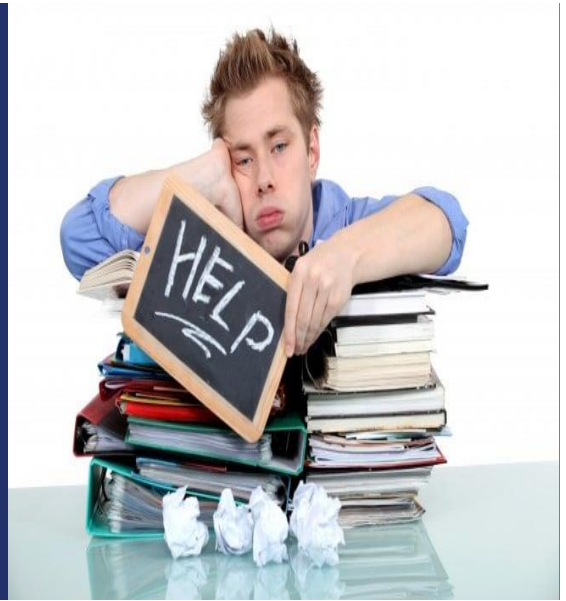


DID YOU KNOW?

Anxiety is the most common emotional problem in children. According to the National Institutes of Health, nearly 1 in 3 of all adolescents ages 13 to 18 will experience an anxiety disorder. These numbers have been rising steadily since 2007 and disorders in children and teens have gone up 20%.

How Does Anxiety Impact Students?

Students who experience significant anxiety may also be impacted in the school and classroom settings. These students might have a hard time focusing on lessons and ignoring their worrying thoughts in class, which can impact their academic performance. Students who have anxiety around the school setting might skip school and/or have ongoing truancy issues. Refusing to go to school is fairly common for students with these difficulties. School refusal rates tend to be higher after vacations or sick days because children and adolescents have a harder time coming back after a few days away. Aggression might also be a symptom of anxiety. When children are feeling upset or threatened and do not know how to handle these feelings, their fight or flight response to protect themselves may kick in. Students with anxiety may often have difficulty answering questions in class, frequently ask to see the school nurse, and/or have difficulties triggered by certain subjects. Some children experiencing anxiety may seek a lot of reassurance and their worries might interfere with their activities.



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GCS Psychological Services



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Know When to Reach Out for Help!

Watch for changes or escalations in your child's emotions and behaviors and use crisis supports when needed. *If it is an emergency, always call 911 first!*

- Cone Behavioral Health has a 24-hour HelpLine at 336-832-9700 or 800-711-2635, for immediate assistance for mental health and substance abuse issues.
- Sandhills Center has a help-line monitored 24/7 at: 1-800-256-2452 that can help connect individuals in crisis with treatment options.
- SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or TTY: 1-800-487-4889, (also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service) is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information.
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264). If you or someone you love is experiencing a debilitating anxiety attack, help is just a phone call (or click) away. Free anxiety attack helplines and resources are available.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Several types of Anxiety Disorders exist, impairing social, personal, and/or academic functioning.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: GAD causes children and adolescents to worry almost every day and over lots of things. Children with GAD worry over things that most children worry about, like homework, tests, or making mistakes.

Separation Anxiety Disorder: While it is typical for toddlers and young children to feel anxious the first time they are apart from their caregiver, especially if they are entering a new environment, like school, it is also typical for them to grow comfortable with new people and new environments each day. When children do not outgrow these anxious feelings, or when these anxious feelings even resemble fear, it is called separation anxiety.

Social Phobia: With social phobia, children and adolescents can feel too afraid of what others will think or say. These children are afraid they will do something embarrassing and do not like to be the center of attention. With social phobia, a class presentation or group activity may cause extreme fear. Social phobia can also cause children to avoid school or friends. They may start to feel sick or tired before school and complain of other body sensations that are associated with anxiety.

Selective Mutism: Extreme form of social phobia that causes children to be so afraid they do not want to talk at all at school, with friends, or in other places.

Specific phobia: It is typical for young children to be afraid of the dark, animals, loud noises, etc. However, a phobia is a more intense, extreme, and longer lasting fear of a specific thing.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD is often associated with distress as a result of a traumatic situation. Common types of trauma in children include: exposure to violent crimes, auto accidents, fires and injuries, natural disasters, domestic violence, physical/sexual abuse, and serious physical illnesses.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Characterized by unwanted and repeated thoughts, feelings, ideas, sensations (obsessions), and behaviors that drive someone to do something over and over (compulsions). Children and adolescents with OCD try to alleviate their anxiety by performing compulsive rituals, like washing their hands or counting.



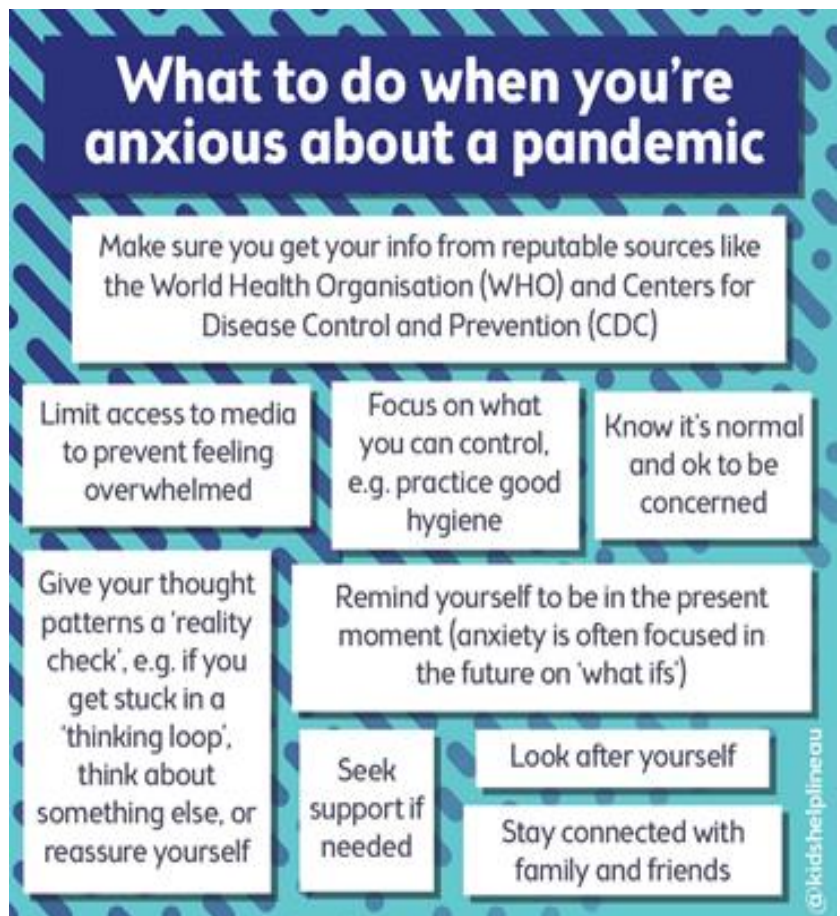
Treatment

Anxiety problems can be treated. Early treatment is extremely beneficial and can prevent future difficulties. Treatments may include a combination of the following: individual psychotherapy, family therapy, medications, behavioral treatments, and consultation with the school.

Anxiety and COVID-19

We are living in unpredictable, uncertain times. We can expect our students to feel more than the usual amount of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. For students with anxiety disorders, the stress and unknowns associated with this pandemic can be particularly overwhelming. Below are some ways to support your students in managing their anxiety during this pandemic:

- **Make time to talk regularly.** Let your students know that you are available to talk and answer questions about COVID-19, and make sure to check in with them regularly. When talking with children and adolescents about COVID-19, consider the following:
 - **Stick to the facts.** Share accurate information and answer questions in a developmentally appropriate way. Follow advice from experts, including the [Center for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), and [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services \(NCDHHS\)](#).
 - **Be honest and open about what you do not know.** If you are able to name what you know and don't know, students may be able to develop some comfort with not knowing. For example, tell your students: "There are many people working very hard to study this virus to help us stay healthy. The leaders in our community have planned for us to stay safe. I am going to help you be safe."
 - **Set limits on news coverage.** Too much news coverage on COVID-19 can be overwhelming, especially for students who are anxious. Additionally, not all news coverage is based in fact. Talk to children about how some stories on COVID-19 on the Internet and social media may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.
 - **Model a calm attitude.** Children will react to and follow your reactions. Your discussion about COVID-19 can increase or decrease your child's fear. If you talk about COVID-19 in a calm manner, this will help students interpret the pandemic through a calm lens.
 - **Want more tips on talking to children and adolescents about COVID-19?** The [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#) has put together a great resource with tips for talking to students. The [CDC](#) also has a page on their website that includes general principles and facts about COVID-19 for discussions with children.



- **Don't ignore the feelings.** No child ever stopped worrying because a parent or teacher said, "Don't worry!", or "Relax!" We cannot create a completely worry-free life for our children, especially during a pandemic, but we can help our students identify and process their feelings, using the following tips:
 - **Name the feelings.** This pandemic can fuel many different emotions, which can fuel strong reactions in children and adolescents. When students can give words to their feelings, their emotions can feel more manageable. Ask students questions such as "How are you feeling right now?" If they cannot name it, offer words to use, such as mad, sad, frustrated, scared, worried or embarrassed. Or provide them with a visual [feelings chart](#).
 - **Acknowledge the existence of anxiety as one of many emotions.** Don't ignore it, fight it, reject it, or be afraid of it. Provide empathy, reassurance, and validation. This normalizes the experience and will help students understand that they aren't alone; you can help guide them through it. Remind students that anxiety is one part of their emotional life, but it's not the whole thing.
 - **Reframe and challenge the feeling.** Anxiety often causes children and adolescents to distort the facts. They can become caught in a cycle where they only see the worst possible outcome instead of all possible outcomes, good and bad. Challenge the negative thinking! Help students break down the reality of their situation. Are their anxious thoughts based in fact or misinterpretation? How can the anxious thought change to a more positive thought?
 - **Identify triggers for the feeling.** Help students find the pattern in situations that make them feel anxious. This will help students manage future anxiety. For example, if your student always becomes anxious after logging onto social media, you can help them come up with a plan to limit social media use or identify accounts that may be anxiety-inducing. Try using a free [Anxiety Tracker](#) to help with this.

- **Create as much structure as possible.** Our world has never faced a pandemic like this one in modern times. Our daily routines have been completely disrupted. Therefore, it is important for us to create structure where we can. Lack of structure leads to a lack of predictability, which can heighten anxiety. To add structure during our time stuck at home, try the following:
 - **Make a schedule.** Develop a daily schedule and routine, with the input of your child or adolescent. This helps students know what to expect throughout the day. Make sure to build in time for both learning and fun. Write the schedule down on paper and post it where it can be easily accessed and viewed.
 - **Build in choices.** Anxiety can overwhelm our brains and make it hard to come up with a plan for ourselves. Offering choices to a child or adolescent with anxiety can help them make better decisions. For example, "Do you want to read 10 pages in your book now, or do you want to do 10 math problems now?" or "Do you want to work for 30 minutes and then take a break, or do you want to take a break now and then work for 30 minutes?"
 - **Set up a "worry time."** If anxious thoughts are taking up your student's day, schedule a time for them to talk or journal about their anxious thoughts. Just make sure to set a time limit and stick to it! It could be helpful to have students write down their anxious thoughts on a piece of paper, and then crumple it up and throw it away.

Noggin is offering guidance to parents on how to handle the stress of the pandemic on young children. It includes helpful tips from pediatricians and a psychologist, such as how to explain, practice, and have fun with 6-foot social distancing. Parents AND teachers should also check out the resources provided at the bottom of the page, especially [Wide Open School](#), [the Stress Relief Playbook](#), and [Noggin's Smart Schedule](#), which is being updated weekly with stress busting ideas for Mental Health Awareness Month! [Click here](#) to learn more!

STRESS-BUSTING STRATEGIES



Supportive Relationships



Balanced Nutrition



Exercise



Mental Health Support



Quality Sleep



Mindfulness

➤ **Develop a list of coping strategies for the pandemic.** Make them concrete, and simple and easy enough to complete while at home. Write them down, so that they are easily accessible, and build them into your daily at-home routine. Try using this [calming strategies template](#) to write down your list and to help generate ideas. Below are some simple ideas for coping through this pandemic:

- **Practice Mindfulness.** Students will have anxious thoughts, but they do not need to dwell on them. Mindfulness helps to divert attention away from anxious thoughts. Try a [guided meditation](#), or a [mindful exercise from Kids Health](#). One quick idea is to have students pick a color, and then name everything in their surroundings that is that color.
- **Engage in deep breathing.** Just pausing to take a breath can calm you in a difficult moment. It can help you pause before you react and choose how to react. Try an activity from [KidsRelaxation.com](#)
- **Reach out to others virtually.** We may be *physically* apart, but we should not be *emotionally* apart. Schedule regular chats with family and friends through phone, video chat, and other electronic platforms. Feeling socially close to others reduces anxiety and has been known to boost our immune systems.
- **Practice gratitude.** Noticing what we're grateful helps to challenge anxious thoughts. It benefits mood and overall health. Have students make a list of three things they are grateful for each day. Or have them write and send a letter to someone who has helped them.
- **Go outside.** Even 5 minutes spent in nature can lower anxiety and blood pressure. It helps remind us we are part of a bigger world. Have students go outside and name three things in their natural environment that they appreciate.
- **Get moving.** Even though we are staying at home, find ways to be active every day. Children can run, jump, and play outside, but make sure they are practicing social distancing with those who are not family members. [Go Noodle](#) is a great tool for making sure students stay active when indoors.



COVID-19 Helplines

- Guilford County Schools has set up a crisis line during the COVID-19 school closure: 336-332-7295. This crisis line is run by members of the district crisis team 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This phone number should only be used by GCS students, for a crisis of any kind.
- The Hope4NC Helpline (1-855-587-3463) connects North Carolinians to additional mental health and resilience supports that help them cope and build resilience during times of crisis.
- The SAMHSA National Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 offers crisis counseling and emotional support 24 hours a day for anyone experiencing distress or other mental health concerns during the COVID-19 outbreak. You may also text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. The web link here [SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline](#) also gives information about how to utilize services for Spanish speakers.

Classroom Strategies to Help Manage Anxiety

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, one in five children will experience anxiety at the clinical level by the time they reach adolescence. Below are some tools teachers, caregivers, and parents can add to their toolkit to help children work through their anxious thoughts/feelings.

Coping Strategies

Deep Breathing: Slow deep breathing helps relax muscles, release tension, and decrease heart rate. Help them practice this technique by visualizing air going through their nose, down the windpipe, and into the belly. Star breathing is one example of a breathing exercise. Other belly breathing exercises can be found on YouTube and [here](#).

Create a Calm Down Spot: Going to a space that is comforting and quiet helps to reduce anxiety, even prior to escalation. Calm down spots can be anywhere in the home or classroom that is away from high traffic and excessive noise. Spots can be made comfy with blankets, stuffed animals, bubbles, and other comforting objects. Some creative ideas can be found [here](#).

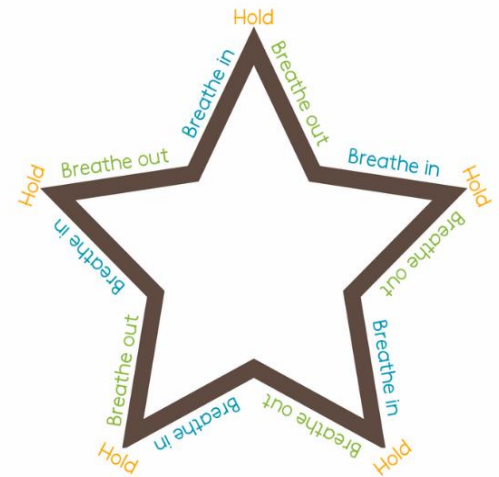
Emotional Thermometer: Help students recognize the early warning signs of intense emotions that manifest in their bodies and minds by creating and using a feelings thermometer. Many examples can be found online.

Exercise: Exercise helps relieve anxious thoughts and feelings. Try taking a movement break when symptoms of worry begin to present themselves.

Counseling: Consider talking to a mental health professional.

Star Breathing

Start at any "Breathe in" side, hold your breath at the point, then breathe out. Keep going until you've gone around the whole star.



www.copingskillsforkids.com
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Classroom Strategies

Create a "safe space" in the school: Allow the student to identify a safe space (e.g. nurse, school counselor, or school psychologist's office, or another teacher's room) that they can go to when they start to feel anxious. In addition to helping them learn to identify their own symptoms of anxiety, establish rules for the use of the "safe space". These rules should include parameters around the student asking permission or the student receiving permission from the teacher, a set amount of time, or expectations for the student while they are in the "safe space".

Allow transitional periods: Examples include providing five to ten minutes for the child to prepare their papers and school supplies or simply a few minutes for the child to sit quietly before the school day begins. If the time before school is difficult for the child, it may be beneficial for them to either enter the classroom a few minutes before or a few minutes after the rest of the class arrives.

Break Card: Break cards are a valuable outlet for students to use when they become overwhelmed by a situation, giving them a pass for a moment away from the activity or environment to regulate their emotions. They may be given to students at the start of the day to be "cashed in" later. This strategy could be used along with the strategies for using an emotion thermometer or creating a "safe space", among others.

Social Stories: Social stories are a useful strategy for teaching students about routines, expectations, and behavioral standards. Presenting the information in a story format, along with visual examples, provides students with reinforcement for correct behavior. Some examples can be found [here](#).

Play soothing music during down time: Playing soft music may help children to calm down and can relieve stress. During quiet activities or seatwork, play soothing music.

50 Ways to Take a Break

Take a Bath

Listen to Music

Take a Nap

Go to a body of water

Watch the clouds

Light a candle

Learn something

REST your legs up on a wall

Let out a sigh

Fly a Kite

Watch the stars

Write a Letter

Listen to a guided relaxation

Read a Book

sit in NATURE

Move twice as slowly

Take Deep Belly Breaths

MEDITATE

Notice your Body

Call a Friend

Meander around Town

WRITE in a journal

Buy some Flowers

Find a relaxing scent

Walk Outside

Go for a run

Take a bike ride

Create your own coffee break

View some ART

Eat a meal in SILENCE

Turn off all electronics

Go to a park

Pet a furry creature

read or watch something FUNNY

Examine an everyday object with Fresh Eyes

Drive somewhere NEW

Go to a Farmer's Market

Forgive Someone

Engage in small acts of KINDNESS

COLOR with Crayons

Make some MUSIC

Climb a Tree

Let go of something

Put on some music and DANCE

Do some gentle stretches

Paint on a surface other than paper

Write a quick poem

Read poetry

Give Thanks

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