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See page 79 for information about Downloadable Resources.

Introduction

Rachel sits quietly in the back of the classroom. Her long hair shields her face as she looks up at the screen. Her teacher is asking for a volunteer to work the problem out for the class. Rachel tries to avoid eye contact with the teacher. Her heartbeat quickens at the mere thought of getting up in front of her classmates. Her thoughts have been whirling since she took her seat. She has to do a presentation in her English class the following period, and she is terrified. All she can think about is what she is going to do when her teacher asks her to give her presentation. Her family only has one computer and her older brother had to use it the night before, so Rachel was not able to finish her project. Even if she had gotten it done, Rachel still was not sure how she could stand up in front of her classmates and teacher and talk about her presentation. She was beginning to think about just telling her English teacher that she did not do the project. Getting a failing grade would be easier than facing the class.

Rachel's thoughts are interrupted when her teacher approaches her desk. Her mouth goes dry and her head starts throbbing. It is then that Rachel realizes another student is talking in front of the class. Her quick relief, though, is followed by panic as her teacher towers above her. She assumes she is in trouble, so she tugs her jacket sleeves over her hands trying to become more invisible. She glances up at her teacher and wonders if she could ever understand what is happening in her mind and in her body. She can feel the tears begin to form in her eyes. Should she tell her how afraid she is of speaking up in class? Her teacher leans down and . . .

So many of our students have experiences like Rachel. They are overwhelmed with worry and fear and do not know what to do with those feelings. Whether their anxiety is rooted in their performance, a loss of a loved one, a potential crisis, or just how their brains are wired, the fear can be debilitating. Anxiety makes them feel isolated and steals any hope for a time when worry will not win the battle in their minds. Although students' bodies may show up in our classrooms, their whirling minds keep them from learning the material that we want them to know.

Rachel and her fellow students suffering with anxiety need to know that we see them, we believe them, and we want to help them. In the absence of knowing the right approach, educators have tried to calm their students with advice such as: “You will be okay.” “Don’t worry about that.” “You need to believe in yourself.” When Rachel tells adults that their well-meaning words do not provide any comfort, they often misinterpret her behavior as apathy or defiance, scolding her with punishments that only heighten her anxiety.

As teachers, school counselors, and administrators, we recognize these students’ symptoms but do not always know how to help them remedy them. What can we do to truly help these students? There have been many studies about what happens in our brains and bodies when we feel anxiety. When, as educators, we understand the process that the brain uses to protect its body, we can begin to see our anxious students from a new perspective. We can employ proven practices to interrupt the cycle of symptoms the students experience.

In this book, we will explore the physiological progression from a trigger to a full-blown anxiety attack. We will investigate the difference between an anxiety diagnosis and inappropriate behavior. Finally, we will identify a variety of prevention and intervention strategies that can be used—from the classroom, to the school counselor’s office, and even to the administrator. We have included resources to share with parents and extend support from the school to home.

This guide is intended to be a helpful resource for educators to use as they are working with a student experiencing anxiety. Practical information is organized so a classroom teacher, school counselor, or administrator can quickly find helpful strategies to help a student in their setting. When you are ready to take a deeper dive into the research about anxiety in students, a robust list of resources is included at the end of the book to guide your learning.

Teachers and educators are charged with teaching students important academic information as well as valuable life skills. But for so many of these coaches, mentors, and tutors, their students are much more than people in desks. They are developing children with growing minds, bodies, and hearts. When they experience challenges, they need help navigating through and continuing on with their journey. Once we are equipped with the right strategies to help them manage their anxiety, we can be a powerful advocate for our students.



1

What Is Anxiety?

Does the thought of helping your students experiencing anxiety give rise to your own anxious thoughts and fears?

Most children and adults have experienced anxiety. They may worry and feel overwhelmed. Their pulse starts to race and the pounding in their head begins to drown out all other sounds. For some, their mouth may go dry and they will worry about having to speak in front of others. Or their face begins to flush, giving away the internal crisis to those around them.

Sometimes anxiety can push people toward achieving a goal or desired outcome. It can motivate or even help them avoid danger. Other times, those same feelings can paralyze them or shut them down.

When students are not able to manage their feelings and thoughts and reduce those anxious feelings, they need support and assistance. This is when normal anxiety may become something more serious.

Anxiety is the excessive concern about a potential triggering event or perceived threat to one's safety. That safety can be physical, emotional, or social.

To help our students when they experience anxiety, it is important to understand where anxiety comes from. Often anxiety is associated with fear, but there is a distinct difference between the two. Fear is an emotional response to a triggering

event. Anxiety is the worry about or anticipation of the triggering event.

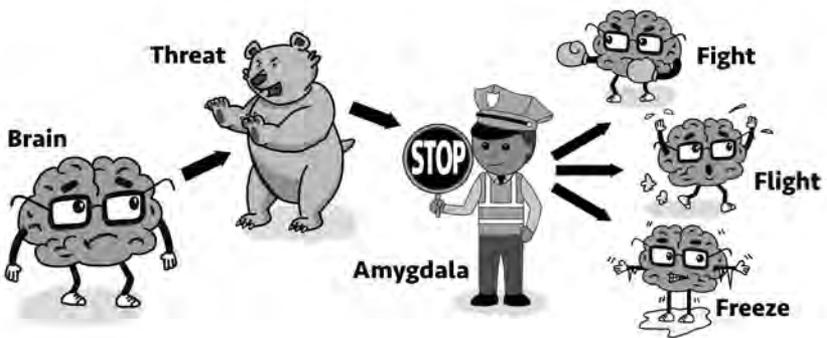
For example, when there is a loud thunder strike during a storm, Pedro may jump at the sound, even though he is safe inside. His heart rate quickens, and he holds his breath. The noise disturbs the quiet and it will likely take a second or two for him to assess what the noise was and if it indicates danger. In those few seconds, Pedro feels fear.

Now, let's say that Pedro and his family experienced a bad storm the month prior. There was significant thunder and lightning. In fact, after one particularly loud thunder boom, the power went out in Pedro's house. He and his family were suddenly in the dark. Pedro felt frightened. It took his family quite a bit of time to find flashlights and candles and then determine what had happened in their neighborhood. Lightning struck a power station and it took several hours for the power to be restored inside their home. It wasn't until the soft glow of a lamp broke through the darkness that Pedro's fear began to diminish. Since that stormy evening, every time thunder begins to roll outside, Pedro finds himself distressed, worrying that he is going to be plunged into darkness at any moment. His heartbeat quickens, his breathing becomes shallow, and he is not able to focus on anything but the sounds outside. Pedro's anxiety is not in response to the storm but is in anticipation of what that thunder has come to represent.

What happens when a person experiences anxiety?

Anxiety is a physiological response to a perceived threat in the environment. That response prepares the body to protect itself from danger by fighting, fleeing, or not moving at all. This acute stress response is more commonly known as the fight, flight, or freeze response.

When a person is in danger, they often must act quickly to protect themselves. When the amygdala (the part of the brain responsible for processing emotions) reacts to the threat, it activates the sympathetic nervous system by releasing hormones that include adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones communicate to the body's other systems that they need to stop and focus on the immediate situation. That hormonal release increases heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing. These changes in the body's homeostasis let those systems know they will have to work effectively and efficiently to find or create a safe environment.



By priming your body for action, you are better prepared to perform under pressure. The stress created by the situation can actually be helpful, making it more likely that you will cope effectively with the threat. This type of stress can help you perform better in situations where you are under pressure to do well, such as at work or school. In cases where the threat is life-threatening, the fight, flight, or freeze response can actually play a critical role in your survival. The fight, flight, or freeze response makes it more likely that you will survive the danger.

Understanding the body's natural fight, flight, or freeze response is one way to help cope with anxiety. When you notice the physical changes associated with the release of hormones, increased heart rate, and breathing, you can start looking for ways to calm down and relax your body so that you can determine if the threat is real or perceived.

A person who is terrified of heights might begin to experience an acute stress response when they have to go to the top floor of a tall building to attend an appointment. The perceived fear that heights equate to danger may trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response. Their body might go on high alert and their heartbeat and breathing rate may increase. If this response becomes severe, it could lead to a panic attack. They may find that they aren't able to get on an elevator to go to their appointment (freeze), or they may turn and leave and not make the appointment at all (flight).

The fight, flight, or freeze response can happen in the face of an imminent physical danger or as a result of a more psychological threat. The response can be triggered due to both real and imaginary threats. The fight, flight, or freeze response happens automatically. Two very important characteristics of the amygdala are that it functions unconsciously and almost instantaneously. However, that does not mean it is always accurate.

The same process occurs in students. When a child encounters a new event or a perceived threat, the same physiological chain of events is set in motion. The brain looks for some prior memory to help discern if the threat is real or not. If the student's associated memories are negative, then their body will likely try to escape. Often the prefrontal cortex helps to determine the level of threat. In children, the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed so they are more likely to experience threats. Without those cognitive skills to help them redefine the trigger as something other than a threat, the amygdala reacts to the threat by releasing hormones into the body. These hormones let the body know that it needs to prepare to protect itself from danger by fighting back, escaping, or staying put. This means our students feel fear before they can understand what they fear and why they are fearing it. Even more frustrating for students, they cannot control this once the process begins.

Imagine a fire alarm going off in a school building. This is not a planned drill, so when the alarm rings throughout the building, both students and adults perceive a potential threat to their safety. Because alarms are associated with danger, the amygdala will release hormones immediately upon the alarm sounding. Our brains are not able to determine if that perceived threat really requires action until after the amygdala has reacted. So students and teachers will hopefully react by following practiced protocols.

After this episode, students suffering with anxiety may start to worry that an alarm could sound at any time. Every unexpected sound they hear while they are at school could trigger the amygdala and begin the fight, flight, or freeze response. For students under acute stress or with anxiety issues, the sympathetic nervous system is always on guard. The amygdala is hypersensitive and will react to things that others would not recognize as threatening. Remember that the amygdala acts unconsciously and immediately. Students with serious anxiety issues experience the fight, flight, or freeze response frequently which keeps them from being able to cognitively engage at school and at home. It is important to remember that students with anxiety issues are not:

- Choosing to be anxious
- Faking their symptoms
- Able to “think” their way out of feeling anxious once the fight, flight, or freeze response has been activated
- Being willfully disobedient
- Looking for attention. Their bodies are trying to find safety.

Anxious students’ brains have been hijacked by the sympathetic nervous system and they are unable to think calmly and clearly until their bodies have achieved homeostasis again. Once a threatening situation has been resolved, bodies have to reset themselves. Science has shown that after the threat is gone, it takes between twenty to sixty minutes for the body to return to its pre-arousal levels. Requiring students to engage in cognitive

activities shortly after an anxiety-inducing event is asking them to do something that they physically cannot do and may even trigger another episode of anxiety.

Parents, teachers, and administrators can help these students by understanding what they are experiencing and giving them time and space to let their brains recognize that the threat is over. Helping students be more aware of the physical reactions to the amygdala's release of hormones, increased heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure allows them to better identify potential triggers. In the coming chapters of this book, we will discuss more strategies that can be effective in supporting these students.

A Student's Story

Alexis is a second-grade student whose grandmother passed away over the summer. She was very close to her grandmother and was terribly sad when she died suddenly. Since the funeral, Alexis has been exhibiting excessive worry that something will happen to her parents. After her family goes to bed at night, Alexis will go lie down outside her parents' bedroom door. She insists that she accompanies her mom when she leaves the house and asks to call her dad several times a day when he is at work. When the school year began, Alexis refused to get out of the car and go to her classroom. Her mother has met with the teacher because of Alexis's escalating behavior. Her teacher reports that Alexis spends the first thirty minutes of their day crying at her desk. Once she can calm down, she does start to engage with the class. However, anytime one of her classmates mentions a family member, Alexis bursts into tears again. Instruction is interrupted while the teacher is tending to Alexis's emotions. Alexis's performance is starting to suffer. She does not complete her work in class, and she often appears to be lost in her worry rather than paying attention to the lesson.

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**QUESTIONS
to
CONSIDER** ??

1. What are the issues that interrupt Alexis's learning?

2. What resources are available to support Alexis at school?

3. How can the school partner with Alexis's parents?

4. What would be your next steps to support Alexis?

**KEY
POINTS**

- Anxiety is the excessive concern about a potential triggering event or perceived threat to one's safety. That safety can be physical, emotional, or social.
- Fear is an emotional response to a triggering event. Anxiety is the worry about or anticipation of the triggering event.
- Fight, flight, or freeze is the body's way of protecting itself from a real or perceived threat.