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# Purpose of this Book

After writing *15-Minute Focus: Anxiety: Worry, Stress and Fear,*[1] the feedback I received from school counselors, teachers, and caregivers was overwhelming. Students are experiencing high levels of stress that are interrupting their learning, their relationships, and in some cases, their daily functioning. Concerned educators expressed a need for specific strategies to support students that are easy to implement. Given the increased needs, educators do not have time to research proven methods for helping children with anxiety. They want access to trusted resources so they can spend their time helping students.

I developed this workbook as a companion to my first book on anxiety. *Anxiety: Worry, Stress and Fear* provides a foundation for understanding the experience of anxiety. General strategies for how various educators can serve students experiencing anxiety provide a structure for schools to create a comprehensive approach to supporting students with anxiety. This workbook includes activities, ideas, and interventions designed from evidence-based practices shown to be effective for students experiencing anxiety.

It is my hope that this workbook offers an opportunity to collaborate to support the students enduring anxiety in your school community.

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# How to Use this Book

Effectively managing and reducing anxiety begins with a broad understanding of general anxiety. This workbook is designed to support individual, classroom, and school-wide efforts to address anxiety in your school community. I provide developmentally differentiated lessons, activities, and resources to help students and adults establish a strong foundation of knowledge of anxiety. The emphases of these interventions range from education and awareness to targeted individual interventions. Universal prevention and intervention activities, as well as targeted individual strategies, can be effective in reducing anxiety in children and adolescents.[2]

Subsequent chapters build on the understanding of general anxiety and focus on specific anxiety or specific triggers of anxiety such as test anxiety, social anxiety, and anxiety related to family issues. The resources in these chapters are narrow in scope; however, they can be enhanced by those presented in Chapters 1 and 2.

The strategies and tools include:

- Research-based information about the type of anxiety discussed.
- Student examples.
- Lesson plans and activities that can be delivered by the classroom teacher, the school counselor as part of the school counselor program, or through an advisory program.
- Individual counseling interventions.
- Classroom accommodations, considerations, or modifications classroom teachers can use to help students to manage or reduce their anxiety.
- Information for caregivers to bridge the student support between school and home.

The individual counseling interventions should be delivered by a school counselor or school social worker. Because these are designed as counseling interventions, I recommend that the school counselor or school social worker provide consultation before another school staff member utilizes these interventions.

See page 206 for information about Downloadable Resources and Templates.

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# What is Anxiety?

*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.*

Anxiety is a normal part of life. We all have experienced anxiety at some point, felt our pulse race, breath become shallow and quick, and muscles start to shake and tremor. Our bodies tell us that we are in danger and need to act quickly to maintain our safety. Or we could be preparing to do something important, and those nerves remind us how much we care about being successful. Anxiety is uncomfortable, however, for many adults and children, and we can use coping skills to manage and reduce the uneasiness. Each event is an opportunity to reinforce the idea that we have the capacity to face difficult challenges and overcome them.

For a growing number of our students, what has been typical anxiety is changing. There has been a significant increase of anxiety in students and adults. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a noticeable rise in students reporting feelings of anxiety and worry. However, the impact of the pandemic on schools and communities left students and adults showing a sharp increase in anxiety.[3] Navigating changes in learning environments, increased isolation, a greater dependence on social media for social interaction, fear associated with the unknown, and conflicting information about the pandemic left children experiencing higher levels of anxiety and worry about their physical, emotional, and social safety. Additionally, the increase of violence in and around our school campuses has left students, their families, and their communities in heightened states of anxiety and concern. The continued occurrences of school shootings and the challenges in effectively reducing the threats to our schools and communities have intensified anxiety experienced by children and adults.

As families navigate the challenges of maintaining households, balancing work and leisure, and planning for the future, many students are assuming more adult responsibilities to help make ends meet. They are caring for siblings, providing basic needs, and working to contribute financially while carrying the weight of schoolwork, maintaining social connections, and discovering who they are and what they want to do in their lives. Many of these students are still developing and growing and may not have the cognitive, social, and physical skills to successfully manage all they are asked. These complex situations are fraught with anxiety and worry.

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The conditions above are shifting what is considered "normal." Chronic anxiety and worry that last for long periods of time are becoming the new baseline "normal." Students and adults are experiencing anxiety more often and with more intensity. There are still events that lead to acute anxiety, moments of severe anxiety and panic. But many of our students are suffering with anxiety that interrupts their learning and ability to navigate life's challenges. We can support them with interventions, such as helping them understand anxiety, teaching them coping skills, providing counseling, and connecting them and their families to resources for additional support when necessary. The information, activities, and resources included in this book are designed to provide educators, mental health providers, caregivers, and youth-serving professionals tools to confront anxiety in your school communities.

# Challenges in Supporting Students Experiencing Anxiety

One challenge in supporting students who are struggling is that anxiety is often an internalizing disorder. Students can often keep their distressing thoughts and feelings to themselves. There are several reasons why a student may not share their feelings with others:

- They may not have an adequate vocabulary or the language skills to clearly articulate their feelings.
- They may be afraid that their feelings will get them into trouble.
- They may not believe that there are helpful solutions to their anxiety.
- They believe that their anxiety is a problem and may want to protect their caregivers, or even teachers from having to take on one more thing.
- They may not have a positive relationship with an adult they trust.

Students can internalize their anxiety through:
- Worrying about things before they happen.
- Constant worries or concerns about family, school, friends, or activities.
- Repetitive, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) or actions (compulsions).
- Fears of embarrassment or making mistakes.
- Low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence.

Another challenge is that students have access to so much more information today. They process a significant amount of material in a very short amount of time. Many students have not developed the cognitive abilities and emotional maturity to effectively handle all that information. Brain science tells us that executive functioning skills are not fully developed until students reach their early twenties. Regulating emotions and self-control are at the core of executive functioning.

All this information, and the inability to manage it in a healthy manner, creates many more opportunities for our young people to compare themselves to others, and we know that comparison is the thief of joy. Their joy has been replaced with fear. Students experience fear of:

- Missing out
- Being popular
- Not being popular

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- Being wrong
- Competing with others, even globally
- Looking the right way
- Measuring up
- Having the right friends
- Making the right decisions
- Being bullied
- Not being enough

Biology and environment can present another challenge to supporting students experiencing anxiety. Some students may be more susceptible to anxiety. Biological, psychological, and environmental factors can put children at greater risk. Because anxiety is rooted in the brain, the way that a student's brain is wired may contribute to anxiousness. Childrens' temperaments and personalities may also heighten their propensity to experience anxiety and early childhood trauma. Even having anxious caregivers can make students more vulnerable. Anxiety has also been identified as a potential side effect of medications.

Educators, caregivers, and mental health professionals must partner to overcome these challenges to meet our students' needs. Schools have been identified as a strategic and effective setting for addressing anxiety in children and youth. Schools provide unique opportunities to identify students experiencing anxiety and teach them skills that can be transferred in various situations, for example, test anxiety, social anxiety, etc.[4] Integrating universal and targeted interventions for anxiety into the larger systems of support encourages collaboration that can lead to positive outcomes for students and the school community.

# Anxiety in Neurodivergent Students

Neurodivergence is a non-medical term that describes a category of conditions and diagnoses in which a person's brain works differently than what is considered typical. Neurodivergence can refer to both learning and sensory challenges. Students with diagnoses of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Dyslexia, and Sensory Processing Disorders often are described as neurodivergent.[5] Given that anxiety is a physiological response that occurs in the brain, it is important to consider how our neurodivergent students may experience anxiety and adjustments to supports that are necessary to meet their unique needs.

Between 25–50 percent of children with ADHD also have clinical anxiety, which leads to more challenges with behavior, daily functioning, and academic performance than students with only ADHD. These students also tend to struggle more socially and lack strong social connections with their peers.[6] Anxiety can intensify ADHD symptoms, creating challenges in navigating social situations, an inability to meet academic expectations, increased clinginess with a parent or trusted adult, intensified sensitivity to typical stimuli, and distress in response to change or uncertainty.[7] Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been an effective approach for addressing anxiety for all students, including those with neurodivergent conditions.[8] Historically, students with ADHD participated in social skills intervention; however, for those students with both ADHD and anxiety, interventions specifically for anxiety have proven more effective and enduring.[9]

Social anxiety is common in students diagnosed with either ADHD or ASD. Research is unclear as to whether social anxiety develops because of the ADHD or ASD or is part of the organic physiological makeup of the

student; regardless, the student bears the impact of carrying both conditions. These students are at a greater risk of being bullied, so particular attention should be given to providing supports to proactively address this concern. As is common with all who struggle with social anxiety, these students lack meaningful connections with their peers. Once again, there is positive evidence that CBT has helped students diagnosed with social anxiety and either ADHD or ASD to reduce their anxiety. Interventions focused on emotional regulation, development of interpersonal skills, and bullying prevention have all shown positive outcomes as well.[10]

Anxiety is one of the most common dual diagnoses with ASD, with approximately 40 percent of students diagnosed with ASD meeting the criteria for an anxiety disorder, and as many as 84 percent having subclinical symptoms of anxiety. Frequent forms of anxiety include specific phobias, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, social anxiety, and OCD.[11] These students often experience intensified symptoms of ASD as well as tantrums, aggression, and self-injury. Because of their challenges in communication, they are less likely to express their anxiety in productive ways. Anxiety in students with ASD may also manifest in restlessness, inability to relax, increased uneasiness in social situations, distress when separated from trusted adults, and difficulty sleeping.

There is some evidence that higher-functioning and older students with ASD have increased levels of anxiety. This may be, in part, due to the higher-order cognitive and developmental skills (such as worry, predicting, and imaging) that are known to feed anxiety. These students may also have increased social interactions which could lead to greater likelihood of challenges that trigger their anxiety. Strong data suggests that addressing anxiety in students with ASD can reduce the impairment they experience from the core ASD symptoms.[12] As previously mentioned, CBT is an effective approach for reducing symptoms of anxiety, in addition to regular physical activity or participation in a sport.[13] Interestingly, one study found that students who felt that they were different from their peers reported feeling safe and supported in music classes, which could provide additional possible interventions for our neurodivergent students who experience anxiety.[14]

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# Common Symptoms of Anxiety

## PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- ☐ Increased heart rate
- ☐ Tense muscles
- ☐ Increased blood pressure
- ☐ Excessive sweating
- ☐ Rapid breathing
- ☐ Headaches
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Digestive issues
- ☐ Feeling jittery or lightheaded
- ☐ Hot face
- ☐ Clammy hands
- ☐ Dry mouth

## EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- ☐ Feeling afraid, worried, or nervous
- ☐ Constant worries or concerns about family, school, friends, or activities
- ☐ Repetitive, unwanted thoughts or actions
- ☐ Fears of embarrassment or making mistakes
- ☐ Low self-esteem
- ☐ Lack of self-confidence
- ☐ Poor sleep
- ☐ Crying

## BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS

- ☐ Refusing to talk
- ☐ Clinging to caregivers, siblings, or trusted adults
- ☐ Acting scared or upset
- ☐ Startling easily
- ☐ Missing school
- ☐ Refusing to do things
- ☐ Avoiding people
- ☐ Tantrums

# What Is Anxiety?

## ELEMENTARY

| | |
|---|---|
| **LESSON LENGTH** | 25 minutes |
| **OBJECTIVES** | • Students will understand what anxiety is and how it can affect them.<br>• Students will identify common triggers of anxiety. |
| **MATERIALS** | • Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Elementary)<br>• Colored pencils, markers, or crayons |

### 5 MINUTES

## Introduction

- Begin the lesson by asking students if they have ever felt worried or scared before.
- Introduce the definition of anxiety:

  *Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear that everyone experiences from time to time. Anxiety comes from fear. It could be a fear of letting someone else down, a fear of letting ourselves down, or a fear associated with a threat to our physical, emotional, or social safety.*

- Have students echo a phrase such as, **"Anxiety is worry and fear."**
- Explain that anxiety can let us know that we care about something, and we might be worried that we will not do a good job. For example:

  *You might get nervous and worried before you perform in front of an audience. You want to do well, and it is common to feel some anxiety because you are afraid you might forget the words or miss a note.*

  *Sometimes we feel anxiety because we feel like we are in danger and could get hurt. We are afraid of getting physically hurt, having our feelings hurt, or even having our friendships or reputations hurt. An example is when we hear a lot of thunder in a storm or even a tornado siren. We might feel some anxiety because we are afraid we could get hurt in a storm.*

- Allow students to ask questions and assess for understanding. Have students echo, **"Anxiety is worry and fear."**

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**15**
MINUTES

# What Makes Us Anxious?

- Divide the class into small groups and provide each group with a large sheet of paper and markers. You may also use technology tools if they are available.
- Instruct each group to brainstorm and write down different situations that may make them feel anxious (i.e., starting a new school year, taking a test, speaking in front of the class). For older elementary students, you can ask groups to come up with a trigger to represent each letter of the alphabet or give each group a setting (such as school, home, ball field, mall, etc.) and identify triggers that may happen there.
- After ten minutes, have each group share their ideas with the class. As groups share their anxiety triggers, allow students to identify whether they feel anxiety when those events occur. This reinforces that anxiety is a normal part of life and reassures students that everyone experiences it; however, they can be triggered by different things.

   *Learning what triggers our anxiety will help us to control and reduce it. We are going to learn coping skills that will help us to manage and decrease our anxiety.*

   *Sometimes, though, our anxiety gets intense and keeps us from doing the things that we need to do (like learn and take care of ourselves) or things that we enjoy (like playing with friends or participating in sports). When that happens, it is important that we ask our trusted adults for help.*

- Ask students to identify their trusted adults.

**5**
MINUTES

# Wrap Up & Assessment

- Ask students to echo: *"Anxiety is worry and fear."*
- Ask students to share one thing that triggers their anxiety.
- Distribute the **Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Elementary)** and the **colored pencils, markers, or crayons**.

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# Anxiety
## is Fear and worry.

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# MIDDLE

| | |
|---|---|
| **LESSON LENGTH** | 40 minutes |
| **OBJECTIVES** | • Students will understand what anxiety is and how it can affect them.<br>• Students will identify common triggers of anxiety. |
| **MATERIALS** | • Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Middle/High)<br>• Colored pencils, markers, or crayons |

## **5** MINUTES  Introduction

- Begin the lesson by asking students to share if they have ever felt anxious or stressed and what those experiences were like.
- Stress that anxiety is a normal part of life that we will all experience.

  *Often anxiety can be helpful. Anxiety can let us know that we care about something, and we might be worried that we will not do a good job. For example, you might get nervous and worried before you perform in front of an audience. You want to do well, and it is common to feel some anxiety because you are afraid you might forget the words or miss a note.*

  *Sometimes we feel anxiety because we feel like we are in danger and could get hurt. An example is when we hear a lot of thunder in a storm or even a tornado siren. We might feel some anxiety because we are afraid we could get hurt in a storm. The anxiety urges us to make sure that we are taking precautions to stay safe.*

## **15** MINUTES  What Is Anxiety?

- Introduce the definition of anxiety:

  *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.*

- Distribute the **Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Middle/High)** and the **colored pencils, markers, or crayons.**
- Anxiety comes from a fear or threat. Lead a discussion about the difference between a real, potential, or perceived threat. Explain that if a person believes that something could be a threat, it can cause anxiety.
- Next, discuss physical, emotional, and social safety. Ask students to suggest examples of each kind of threat. We are afraid of getting physically hurt, having our feelings hurt, or even having our friendships or reputations damaged. Remind them that what one student perceives as a threat does not have to be a threat to another person (and the other way around).

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## **15** MINUTES What Makes Us Anxious?

- Explain to the students about triggers.

   *Our anxiety is caused by a trigger, an event that makes you feel anxious. It could be taking a test, going to a new school, joining a new team, being in a crowd, or storms. Triggers are warnings to your brain that the thing you are afraid of or feel threatened by is getting ready to happen. What is a trigger for one student may not be a trigger for another.*

- Divide the class into small groups. Instruct the groups to brainstorm triggers that middle school students could encounter. Encourage them to consider things related to academics, friends, family, community, health, and social media.
- Allow the students to brainstorm for 7–8 minutes and then have each group share examples of triggers they identified.

## **5** MINUTES Wrap Up & Assessment

- Ask students to repeat the definition of anxiety.
- Encourage students to watch for the triggers of anxiety they may encounter before the next class.

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# ANXIETY

**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.**

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# HIGH

| | |
|---|---|
| **LESSON LENGTH** | 40 minutes |
| **OBJECTIVES** | • Students will understand what anxiety is and how it can affect them.<br>• Students will identify common triggers of anxiety. |
| **MATERIALS** | • Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Middle/High)<br>• Colored pencils, markers, or crayons |



Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Middle/High)

# ANXIETY

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.

## 5 MINUTES Introduction
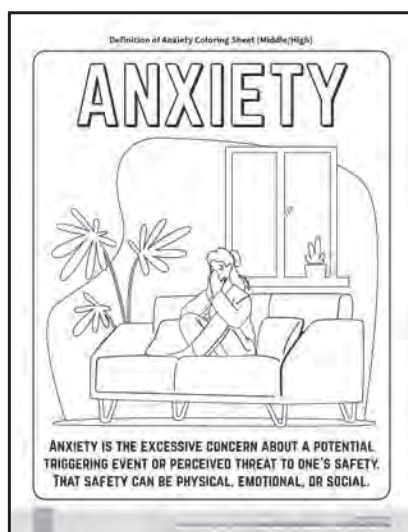
• Begin the lesson by asking students to share when they have felt anxious or stressed and what those experiences were like.

*Stress that anxiety is a normal part of life that we will all experience. Often anxiety can be helpful. Anxiety can let us know that we care about something, and we might be worried that we will not do a good job. For example, you might get nervous and worried before you perform in front of an audience. You want to do well, and it is common to feel some anxiety because you are afraid you might forget the words or miss a note.*

*Sometimes we feel anxiety because we feel like we are in danger and could get hurt. An example is when we hear a lot of thunder in a storm or even a tornado siren. We might feel some anxiety because we are afraid we could get hurt in a storm. The anxiety urges us to make sure that we are taking precautions to stay safe.*

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## 15 MINUTES — What Is Anxiety?

- Distribute the **Definition of Anxiety Coloring Sheet (Middle/High)** and the **colored pencils, markers, or crayons.**
- Introduce the definition of anxiety:

    *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.*

    *Anxiety comes from a fear or threat. Lead a discussion about the difference between a real, potential, or perceived threat. Explain that if a person believes that something could be a threat, it can cause anxiety.*

- Next discuss physical, emotional, and social safety. Ask students to suggest examples of each kind of threat.

    *We are afraid of getting physically hurt, having our feelings hurt, or even having our friendships or reputations damaged. What one student perceives as a threat does not have to be a threat to another person (and the other way around).*

- Lead a discussion with students about the impact of anxiety on mental health and well-being. Suggested probing questions include:
    - How does anxiety impact how we feel about ourselves?
    - What happens if we do not learn strategies to manage and reduce anxiety?
    - Should we try to avoid all anxiety in our lives?
    - Anxiety can be very isolating. Why is it important to remember that everyone experiences anxiety?

## 15 MINUTES — What Makes Us Anxious?

- Explain to the students about triggers.

    *Our anxiety is caused by a trigger, an event that makes you feel anxious. It could be taking a test, going to a new school, joining a new team, being in a crowd, or a storm. The triggers are warnings to your brain that the thing you are afraid of or feel threatened by is getting ready to happen. What is a trigger for one student may not be a trigger for another.*

- Divide the class into small groups. Instruct the groups to brainstorm triggers that high school students encounter. Encourage them to consider things related to academics, friends, family, community, health, and social media.
- Allow the students to brainstorm for ten minutes and then have each group share examples of triggers they identified.

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# Wrap Up & Assessment

- Ask students to repeat the definition of anxiety.
- Encourage students to watch for the triggers of anxiety they may encounter before the next class.

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