



Behavior Tidbits

Helping Students with Anxiety, Stress, and Failure



First, show empathy. Sometimes we have to go beyond saying “It’s ok. You’ll be fine. Trust me. There’s nothing to worry about.” What can you say? First, validate the student’s feelings of frustration, worry, or disappointment. You can say, “I see you’re really disappointed, I know you wanted to do better”.

Make yourself a model. You can explain that being anxious, stressed, or failing happens to everyone, including you. You can share examples of disappointments, stresses and failures. If you share, make sure you also share that you had to think if there was anything you could do about the situation. Remember to share a solution.

Why rationalizing with the student doesn’t work. Your anxious student desperately wants to listen to you reassuring him/her that everything will be ok, but the brain won't let it happen. During periods of anxiety, there is a rapid dump of chemicals and mental transitions executed in your body for survival. One by-product is that the prefrontal cortex -- or more logical part of the brain -- gets put on hold while the more automated emotional brain takes over. In other words, it is really hard for your student to think clearly, use logic or even remember how to complete basic tasks. What can the student do instead of trying to rationalize the worry away? Try this:

- **Freeze** -- pause and take some deep breaths with your student. Deep breathing can help reverse the nervous system response.
- **Empathize** -- anxiety is scary. Your student wants to know that you get it.
- **Evaluate** -- once your student is calm, it's time to figure out possible solutions.

Teach students that worrying happens to everyone. Teach your kids that worrying does, in fact, have a purpose. Teach your student that worry is perfectly normal, it can help protect us, and *everyone* experiences it from time to time. Sometimes our system sets off false alarms, but this type of worry (anxiety) can be put in check with some simple techniques.

Use stories as a way to talk through anxiety, stress or frustrations. Create a worry character for your student. For example, a character called Wade the Worrier. Wade personifies anxiety. Wade lives in the old brain that is responsible for protecting us from what we perceive as stress. Of course, sometimes Wade gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to talk some sense into Wade. You can use this same idea with a stuffed animal or even role-playing at home. Personifying worry or creating a character has multiple benefits. It can help demystify this scary physical response children experience when they worry. It can reactivate the logical brain, and it's a tool your children can use at any time.

Use affirmations or positive statements to counteract your child’s stress. Teach your students to take a break and say, “I am calm. I am relaxed. I am peaceful. I am happy. I am safe.” Write a positive statement and have your student carry it in their pocket for the day. Put a list in the back of their school notebook for them to access at any time. For added fun put affirmations in a fish bowl by the classroom and have students take one as they are coming in or leaving the class.

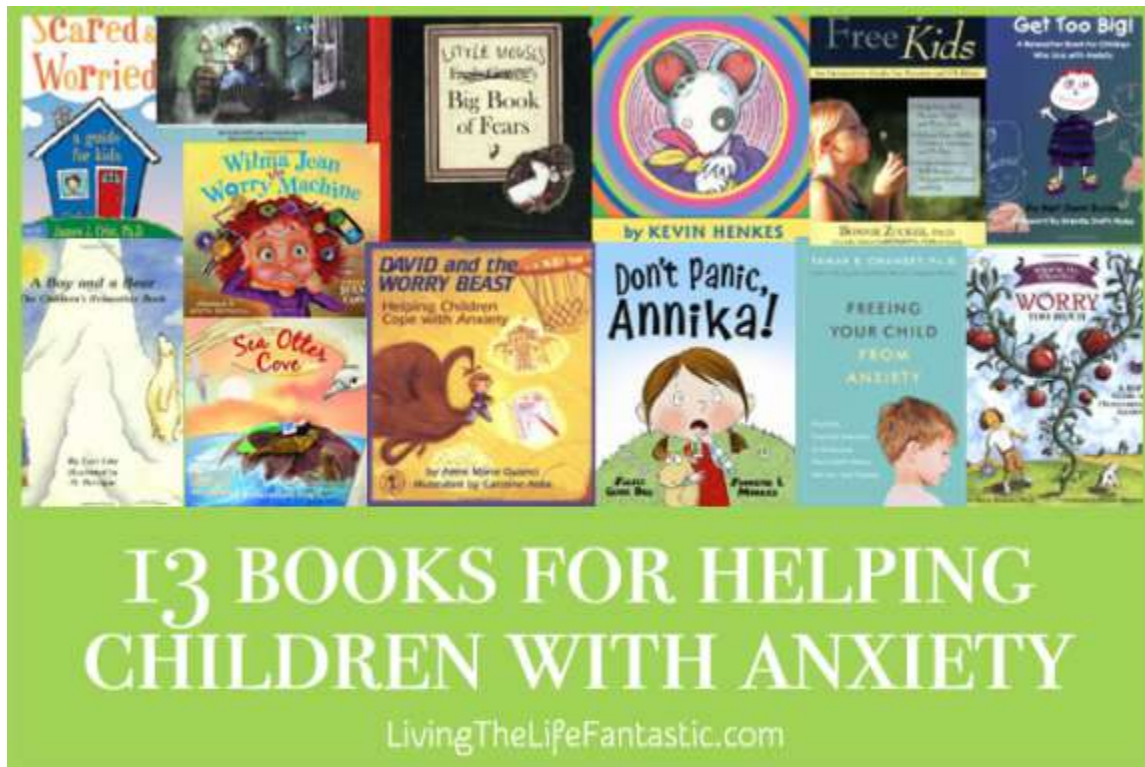
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Create visualizations. Tap into your student's imagination and encourage him/her to create a happy thought that they can "go to" when stressed or worried. Develop a short story or scene that the student can think have when they are fearful or anxious. Go for a calming ride on a cloud or float in a bubble. Have the student use their very own relaxation story or guided imagery as a relaxation tool. The student can write the story down or record it.

Practice controlled breathing. Taking slow deep breaths can help lower a child's anxiety and anger. All students can benefit from this important powerful stress and anger management technique. Students can use breathing when they feel over-stimulated or to help prevent a meltdown. Use reminders to help students remember to use the techniques. Breathe in (through your nose) 2, 3, 4 and (push air out your mouth) out 2, 3, and 4. In 2,3,4 and out 2,3,4.

Some excellent stories to use to help students with anxiety, stress, and frustrations:



“**Social stories**” describe situations, skills, or concepts that model relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses. The goal of a social story is to teach specific skills in a manner that is easily understood by children. The child's improved understanding of social events and expectations that result from reading/watching social stories often leads to more effective responses from the child. Social stories can provide a great tool in teaching a skill in a direct way. There are tons of free social stories online. Here are some links:

www.carolgraysocialstories.com

<http://lifeandink.com/2012/08/17/behaving-in-my-class-social-story-and-tips-on-how-to-write-your-own/>

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Classroom Environment to Address Anxious Students

Anxious children perform best in a calm, supportive, and organized classroom. Since change and uncertainty can be unsettling, a structured classroom and calmly disciplined environment will allow children to feel safe and know what to expect. An ideal situation is a teacher who maintains authority positively, using reason and respect rather than fear for punishment.

- **Seating within classroom**
Anxious children often struggle with the unlikely fear that they will get in trouble, seating away from more rambunctious classmates will be less distracting, and may help them focus on their work rather than feeling responsible for the class.
- **Following directions**
Concerns about getting the directions wrong either because of distraction or misunderstanding are common. Signaling the class first when giving directions (chanting, clapping hands) and when possible having directions written on the board or elsewhere may assure anxious children that they have understood the directions.
- **Class participation**
Fears of getting the answer wrong, saying something embarrassing, or simply having other kids look at them may be concerns for an anxious child. Determine the child's comfort with either closed ended questions (requiring a yes or no) or with opinion questions, start with whichever is easiest. Use a signal to let the child know that his turn is coming. Provide opportunities for the child to share knowledge on topics in which he or she is most confident.
- **Class presentations**
Children with extreme social anxiety may have difficulty with oral reports. Consider having the child present to the teacher alone, or have the child audiotape or videotape the presentation at home.
- **Answering questions at the board**
For children with social anxiety, the combination of getting the answer wrong, and being visible to the whole class may be so overwhelming that they may opt to avoid school altogether. Consider having the child exempt from going up to the board until they are ready to handle that challenge, or, begin to approach that situation by eliminating the risk of being wrong, by simply asking the child to write the date on the board.
- **Testing conditions**
Extended time on tests will ease the pressure on anxious children, and just knowing that the time is available may obviate the need to use it. Sometimes anxious children become distracted when they see other children working on their tests or turning them in, they may inaccurately assume that they don't know the material as well. Testing in an alternate, quiet location may be preferable for some children. Consider the use of word banks, equation sheets, to cue children whose anxiety may make them "blank out" on rote material.
- **Lunchroom/recess/unstructured activities**
Free choice times can be a welcomed and necessary break from the pressures of school, but fears of rejection in the cafeteria or on the playground can take the fun out of free time. Bridge the gap socially by creating ties between small groups of children. A lunch bunch with two or three children can create a shared experience which kids can then draw on later. When working
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in pairs or small groups, don't always have children choose the groupings themselves, alternate this with a "counting off" technique or drawing straws to allow variability in the groupings.

- **Safe person**

Having one person at school who understands the child's worries and anxieties can make the difference between a child attending school and staying home. A guidance counselor, principal, nurse, or teacher can be identified as a point person for the child to check in with briefly (5-10 minutes) to help dispel worry thoughts, take deep breaths and return to class.

- **Cool down Pass**

Pressures build for anxious children, being able to leave the situation briefly to get a drink of water or wash their face can allow them to clear their heads and return to class on a less anxious track. Since anxious children may be hesitant to ask for this and risk being the center of attention, use an orange card which the child simply places on his desk, or the teachers desk, which signals they are out on break. In general anxious children are exceedingly honest and responsible and will not take misuse this privilege.

- **Assemblies/large group activities**

Some children become anxious in crowds, until a child has mastered the auditorium, allow them to sit where they feel most comfortable (e.g., at the end of the row in the back of the auditorium), see if they can gradually rejoin their class.

- **Return after illness**

Even responsible, anxious kids may be very distressed about work they have missed while they were out. Assign a responsible buddy to copy notes and share handouts. If tests are given the day of the child's return, give them the option to take the test at another time and use the test-time to make up any other missing work.

- **Field trips**

Compounding the daily stress of the anxious child, field trips include the factors of being away from home and parents, and a change in routine. Accommodate the child's level of readiness so that he or she can participate as fully as possible. Consider having the child in the teacher's group, or having parents accompany the group until the child is ready to handle an excursion without these supports in place.

- **Change in routine/substitute teachers**

Because anxious children try very hard to please and predict what is required in a situation, changes of any sort may be experienced as very stressful. When possible, send a note home the day before to alert the child/family to a change in routine, this will allow the child to process the change in his or her comfort zone and will make the transitions go more smoothly the next day.

- **Fire/safety drills**

While these drills are for a child's safety, anxious children may be very distressed by imagining that these events were actually happening. If there is an opportunity to signal the child in person just before the alarm sounds, this may buffer the surprise of the drill and allow children to mobilize with less distress.

- **Homework expectations**

If children are spending inordinate amounts of time on homework because of OCD redoing, rechecking, rereading, or simply worrying that the assignment wasn't done thoroughly enough, the teacher can set a reasonable amount of time for homework and then reduce the homework load to fit into that time frame. Teachers can also provide time estimates for each assignment (this could be helpful to the entire class), so that the anxious child can attempt to stay within

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10% of the estimated time. Eliminate repetition by having the child do every other math question, reduce reading and writing assignments, consider books on tape if a child is unable to read without repetition, for a child with writing difficulties, consider having a parent, teacher, or another student "scribe" for the child while he or she dictates the answers.

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Teaching the student some fun, quick calming techniques may help prevent meltdowns and will give him/her a strategy to do when stressed. Remember to teach these techniques to the student(s) when the student is relaxed and not in a stressful state (Some of these strategies would help students with test anxiety!):

- **Hand massage-** Simply use the thumb of one hand and press around the palm of the other hand. It's very soothing.
- **Palm massage-**By pushing your palms together and holding for five to ten seconds, you give your body proprioceptive input according which lets your body know where it is in space.
- **Closing Your Eyes-** 80% of sensory stimulation comes in through the eyes, so shutting them every now and then gives your brain a much-needed break.
- **Mindful Sighing-**Basically you breathe in to a count of five through your mouth, and then you let out a very loud sigh, like the sound you may hear teenagers make. Those small sighs are powerful and can serve to adjust energy level and focus.
- **Mindful Monkey Stretch-** Bring your hands, arms extended, in front of you, and then bring the arms down. Next bring your arms (still extended) to our sides, and then down. Next you bring your arms all the way past your head and then swooped down, with your head dangling between your knees, and hang for a second. This exercise is extremely effective at releasing the tension we hold in different parts of our body.
- **Hugging yourself-** By squeezing your belly and back at the same time, you are again giving yourself proprioceptive input (letting your body know where you are in space), which can help stabilize you.
- **Wall Push-**Another great exercise to ground kids is the wall push, where you simply push against the wall with flat palms and feet planted on the floor for five to ten seconds.
- **Superman Pose-**Have the student lie on their belly on the floor. Extend arms in front, and hold them straight out. Extend the legs behind and hold them straight out. Hold that pose for ten seconds. It's a great exercise if you are groggy, overexcited, distracted, or antsy.
- **Shaking-**Did you know that animals relieve their stress by shaking? Lots of animals like antelopes shake off their fear after being frozen in panic to escape a predator.
- **Bubble breath-**Breathe in for five seconds, out for five seconds. Imagine you have a wand of bubbles. When you breathe out, be careful not to pop it. Place one flat palm on your heart, one flat palm on your belly. Breathe in through your nose and hold your breath for five seconds. Breathe out a large "bubble" though pursed lips, blow out for five seconds.