

Anxiety in School

Mashpee Public Schools
Ginnie Milano, PsyD



What is anxiety and how is it different from depression?

How does anxiety interfere with learning?

What does anxiety look like in the classroom?

What can we do in school to help children with anxiety?



Words for Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety

- Nervous
- Stress
- Fear
- Worry
- Tense
- Panic
- Distress
- Pressure
- Painful (physical symptoms)
- Avoidance
- Struggle
- Scared
- Escape

Depression

- Sad
- Overwhelmed
- Alone
- Unhappy
- Withdrawn
- Avoid
- Gloomy
- Misery
- Grief
- Despair
- Mourn
- Blue
- Heartache
- Hopeless
- Withdrawn
- Troubled
- Regretful
- Rejected

Anxiety is the result of an expectation or anticipation that something difficult, scary, or entrapping is going to happen

- **Anxiety** occurs before something has happened or because something has previously been experienced and it might happen again
- In anxiety the brain sends messages to the body that a threat is nearby.
- The brain's perception or misperception of the threat triggers a Fight, Flight, or Freeze response
- Living or working with highly anxious people increases the likelihood of a child having anxiety
- **Anxiety and Depression** often present at the same time
- Differentiating anxiety from depression can be difficult to identify in younger children

Depression

- **Depression** is a serious mood disorder that impacts everyday life
 - It is not caused by Grief-an expected reaction to loss that causes a temporary state of sad feelings
 - It is not a period of feeling low or sad- we all have these
- There is no one single cause
- Often depression is linked to a lack of dopamine or serotonin in the brain
- Can be linked to genes
- Interventions for anxiety and depression are different

Similarities Between Anxiety and Depression

Both are:

- Mood disorders
- Can have organic causes such as a lack of Dopamine or Serotonin
- May result from the same events
- Can cause withdrawal and avoidance
- Can have somatic symptoms-stomach aches and headaches
- Can interfere with school performance



Why Is It Important to know the Difference Between Anxiety and Depression?

- Anxiety and Depression require different responses and intervention
- Anxiety affects how a student responds to a new or expected worry inducing event
- While Anxiety and Depression have some overlapping symptoms, Anxiety is more likely to result in behavioral problems than Depression
- Anxiety is much more prevalent than Depression in elementary students
- Anxiety causes overactive brain functions that maintain worry and fear behaviors
- Anxiety often generalizes to other events in life
- Anxiety about failure, academic, social, behavioral, can lead to low self confidence and potentially Depression

What Does Anxiety Look Like in the Classroom?



Anxiety 

Working Memory 

Fight Flight and Freeze

When the brain perceives a threat it tells the body it must act in some way.

Actions Affect

- Behavior
- Academics
- Social Interactions

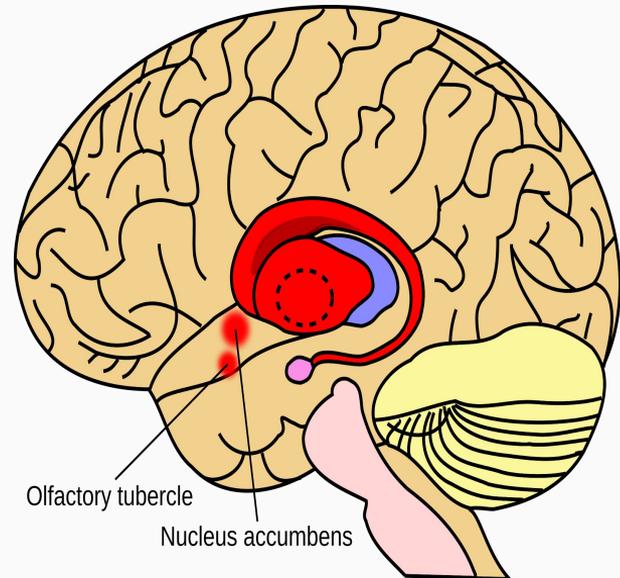
What in the Brain...?

The Amygdala

Small almond shaped area of grey matter in the limbic system that is one of the structures responsible for fear processing and emotions.

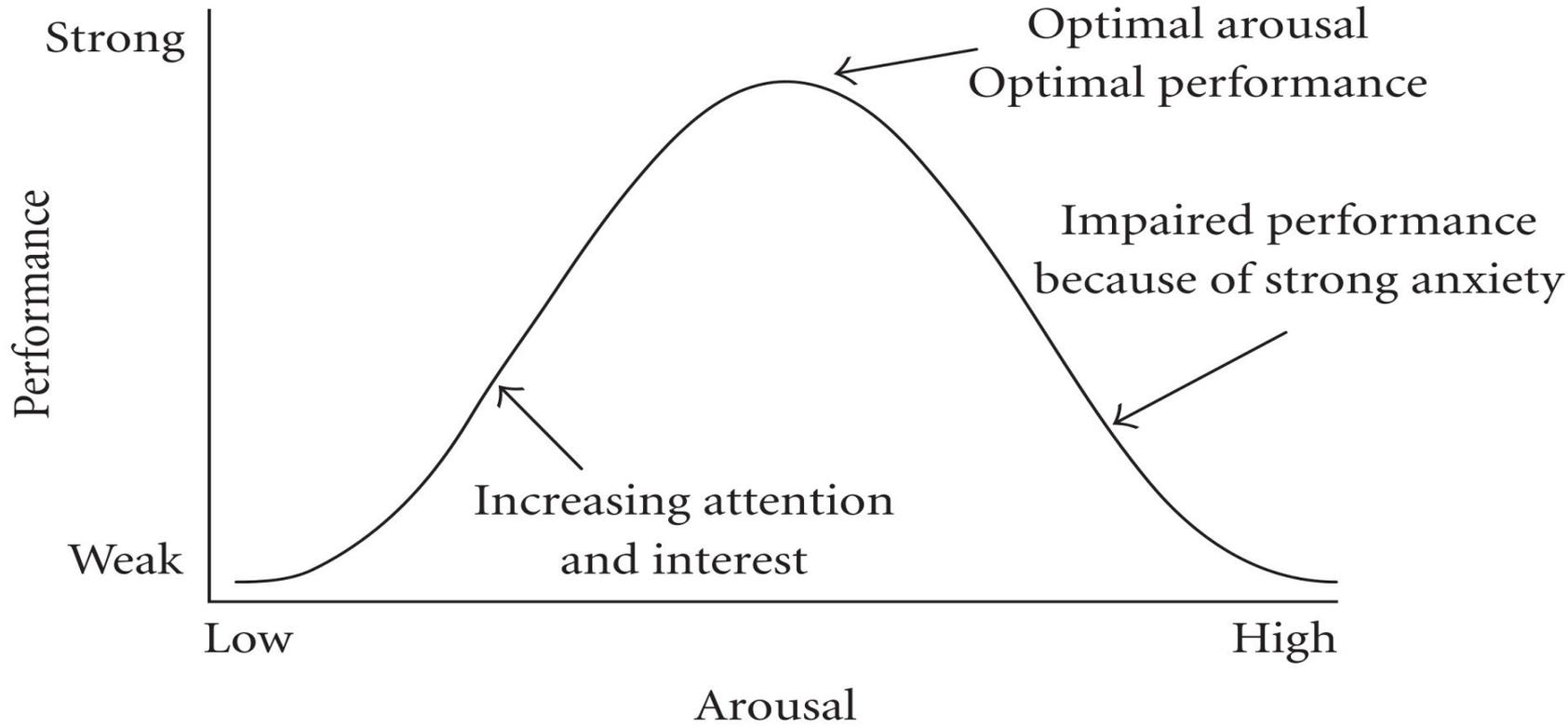
Sensory signals come into the Amygdala, are quickly processed, and sent to the Thalamus. The Thalamus initiates a flight, flight, or freeze fear response before the rest of the brain can analyze the potential danger.

High levels of anxiety cause an overactive Amygdala



Impact of Anxiety

- High anxiety, especially over a long length of time, results in the Amygdala staying active
- The likelihood that the brain stays in Fight, Flight, or Freeze goes up
- Our Limbic system processes emotional reactions and fear in a reactive way
- The rest of the brain no longer processes information the same way
- Working memory decreases
- Processing speed decreases
- Attention and focus decrease
- Emotions increase
 - Emotional dysregulation
- Behavioral challenges increase
 - Avoidance/withdrawal
 - Noncompliance
 - Aggression



Fight

Fight- Destruction of the threat

- Throwing, kicking, hitting things
- Property destruction
- Yelling, screaming, cursing

Why?

- The brain tells the body to defend itself from the threat
- Once the body reacts, the brain maintains Fight until the threat is gone
 - Hyperarousal
 - Increased motor activity

Flight

Flight- Actively distancing self from the threat

- Avoid the threat
 - Avoid eye contact
 - Find something else to do
- Escape
 - Hide
 - Run
 - Creating another need/want
- Distraction or “zoning out”
- Sleep

Why?

The Flight response is the brain telling us to get away from the anxiety provoking situation to decrease the chance of facing the stressful situation.

The body goes on “auto pilot”- the brain stops taking in new information until the stress is gone.

All of the body’s resources go into getting away

Without taking in new information, there is no/limited problem solving

Freeze

Freeze- Inability to act

- Staring/disengagement
- Appear to be “somewhere else”
- Unable to initiate work or interactions
- Unable to respond verbally or nonverbally

Why?

The brain cannot perceive or make sense out of the situation.

The brain tells the body to stop

The brain and the body stop to reserve resources

When in Freeze, the threat remains present, increasing the brain's fear response

Fight- What it Looks Like in Academics and Social Interactions

- Destroying schoolwork
- Throwing work in the trash
- Disrupting instruction
- Calling out
- Bothering peers during instruction
- Scribbling on work
- Quickly completing work nonsensically
- Taking work from peers or answering for them
- Taking work off classroom walls
- Rough with peers
- Hurts others feelings
- Behaviors before school or on the bus



Flight

- Running around the classroom
- Leaving the room for the bathroom or water several times during difficult schoolwork
- Refusing to answer questions
- Making jokes or acting silly
- Running to hide under desk or somewhere in the building
- Always on the wrong page or can't find the work
- Leaving work at home or always "forgetting" to do work
- Head down on desk
- Avoids social interactions
- Leaves games or activities
- Prefers to work alone
- School refusal



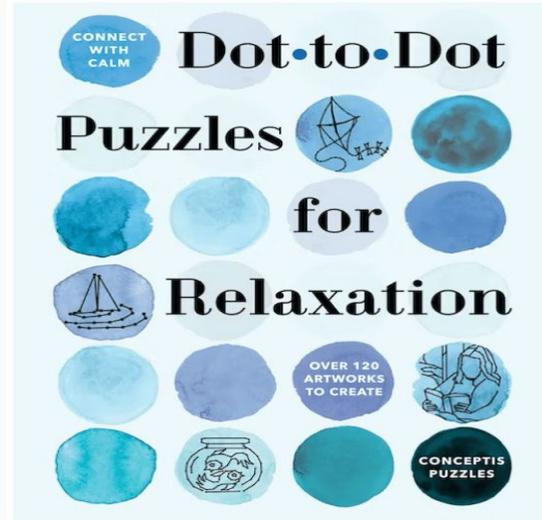
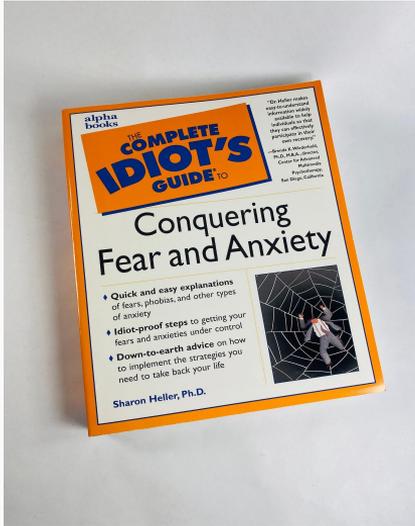
Freeze

- Cannot understand instructions
- Refuses to do work/non-compliance
- Cannot initiate work
- Appears to “not listen”
- Appears to work on something for a long time but produces nothing
- Has difficulty joining peers
- Always “wasting time”
- Cannot self advocate
- Has little response to negative peer interactions
- Can't get ready for school or get on the bus



Helping Students with Anxiety

Teach Calm Challenge



Teach

- Name it and explain it
- Understanding anxiety is the first step to controlling it
- Acknowledge physical complaints as part of anxiety
- Explain the cycle of anxiety
- Acknowledge your own experiences with anxiety and fear

Writing down and drawing worries about school, schoolwork, or peers can help to:

- Put worries into perspective
- Identify triggers
 - Make a plan for next time

Calm

- Breathing
- Stretching
- Using fidgets or other distractions
- Mind/Body connection
- Using outlets- friends, activities, sports



Challenge

Courage Quotes

**Courage is resistance to fear,
mastery of fear – not absence of
fear**

Mark Twain



Anxiety grows and is sustained by the avoidance of the source of the fears and worries.

Avoiding anxiety provoking situations

- Allows the cycle of anxiety to continue
- The fear continues to be misunderstood or exaggerated. This starts the cycle again.

Challenging the Fear=Courage

Courage leads to Resilience

What Teachers and Parents Can Do in the Moment

- Break the work into smaller more manageable parts
 - Writing task
 - Tell me what you want to say
 - Write it for the student to copy
- Encourage and support mistakes as learning opportunities
- Use rewards to celebrate small triumphs
- Listen, acknowledge, and reflect students feelings
- Praise when a fear is faced



WHAT DID YOU MAKE TODAY?



MISTAKES.

The Goal Isn't to Eliminate Anxiety But To Teach Skills to Manage Anxiety

- Empathize not agree with fears
- Avoid leading questions “Are you worried about your math today?”
 - “You are going to do great on your math today!”
- Reduce anticipatory time before a stressful event
- Get kids to school everyday
- Welcome, acknowledge, and connect with students everyday-Build a trusting relationship
- Keep promises
- Encourage participation in hobbies and sports where the child is successful
- Give the student opportunities to be a leader in a difficult area to demonstrate mastery of the fear
- Home/school communication
- Model good coping skills and healthy ways of managing stress/worry
- Adjustment counselors
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Summary

What is Anxiety?

- Irrational or disproportional fear response to something that hasn't happened yet
- Fight, Flight, or Freeze behaviors
- Can be present with Depression but isn't the same disorder

How Does Anxiety Affect Learning?

- A perceived threat/fear triggers parts of the emotion center in the brain
- Overactive parts of the emotion center tells the rest of the brain to react to the fear
- High states of sustained anxiety affect the rest of the brain's functions
- Emotional reactions and behaviors increase
- Processing of new information slows or stops
- Working memory decreases
- Attention decreases

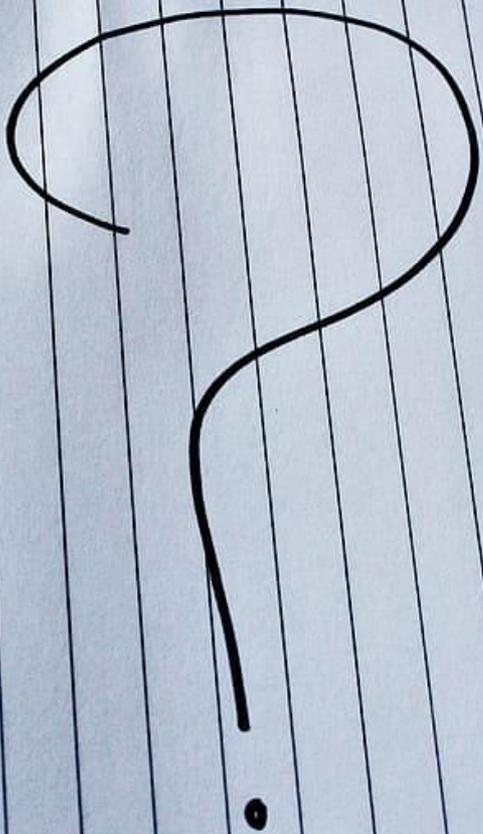
What Does Anxiety Look Like in the Classroom?

- Work avoidance
- Noncompliance
- Disruptive behaviors
- Inability to problem solve
- Missing or misunderstanding instruction
- School refusal
- “Daydreaming” “Not paying attention”



What Can We Do in School to Help Students with Anxiety?

- Empathize not agree with a fear
- Reduce anticipatory time before a stressful event
- Get kids to school everyday
- Build trusting relationships
- Create predictable routines
- Encourage opportunities for success
- Model and teach good coping skills
- Remember that students can't learn or problem solve when their emotions take over
- Help students face fears not avoid them



Resources

Websites

The Child Anxiety Network: www.childanxiety.net

WorryWise Kids: www.worrywisekids.org

Temple University's Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic: www.childanxiety.org

UCLA Child and Adolescent OCD, Anxiety, and Tic Disorders Program: www.npi.ucla.edu/caap/

New York University Child Study Center:
www.aboutourkids.org

Massachusetts General Hospital School Psychiatry Program and MADI Resource Center:
www.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/info_anxiety.asp

Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org

The Center for Mental Health Services: www.mentalhealth.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:
www.aacap.org •

Academy of Cognitive Therapy: www.academyofct.org

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies

Resources for Kids

Books

- Best picture book: [What Do You Do With a Problem?](#)
- Best for preschoolers: [The Whatifs](#)
- Best for teaching young kids deep breathing: [My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing](#)
- Best for parents to read with young kids: [Hey Warrior](#)
- Best for early readers: [What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety](#)
- Best workbook for kids: [The Anxiety Workbook for Kids: Take Charge of Fears and Worries Using the Gift of Imagination](#)
- Best for young girls: [Braver, Stronger, Smarter: A Girl's Guide to Overcoming Worry and Anxiety](#)
- Best toolkit of anxiety solutions for kids: [Superpowered: Transform Anxiety Into Courage, Confidence, and Resilience](#)
- Best for tweens: [Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid's Guide to Managing Anxiety](#)
- Best graphic novel: [Guts](#)
- Best for teens: [Anxiety Relief for Teens: Essential CBT Skills and Mindfulness Practices to Overcome Anxiety and Stress](#)
- Best novel for teens: [A Quiet Kind of Thunder](#)
- Best workbook for teens: [The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal With Anxiety and Worry](#)
- Best workbook for kids: [The Anxiety Workbook for Kids: Take Charge of Fears and Worries Using the Gift of Imagination](#)
- Best for tweens: [Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid's Guide to Managing Anxiety](#)