

# MANAGING ANXIETY | ELEMENTARY TIP SHEET

## WHAT **WORRY** AND **ANXIETY** CAN DO

**Worry** occurs in the thinking part of our brain called the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex allows us to look into the future, problem-solve and imagine.

**Anxiety** is when worrying leads to feeling out of control and a sense of vulnerability. The sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) kicks in. This often leads to physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, sweaty hands, butterflies in the stomach and difficulty concentrating.

## TEACHERS CAN HELP STUDENTS USING THE 3 E'S – EXPECT IT, EXTERNALIZE, EXPERIMENT

**EXPECT IT** - Worry is going to show up; trying to eliminate it will backfire. We want to encourage kids to recognize that sometimes anxiety or worrying will happen, but we can actively manage it and exercise some control over it.

**EXTERNALIZE** - Step back and learn to recognize it.

**EXPERIMENT** - When worrying shows up, do the opposite of what it demands. This helps create new neural pathways and form new patterns.

- **Say:** *“Worry doesn’t think you can handle this. We’re going to practice stepping in so we can show ourselves we can be flexible and courageous.”*

It is important that we provide our students with strategies they can use when things don’t go the way they want them to go. This helps with *cognitive flexibility*.

### WHAT DO WORRY AND ANXIETY WANT?

They want **certainty** and **comfort**. People will worry less if they learn to tolerate uncertainty and manage the discomfort that comes with it.



**CHANGE CAN HAPPEN** - It is important to focus on the changeability of the situation and that positive change can happen. Talk with your students about how things such as plants, animals, and weather change in nature and how we as people change as well. It is important to be open to new experiences.

### EXAMPLES OF WHAT TO SAY TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY:

- *"I care about you."* (Showing your classroom is a caring place)
- *"It is ok to make mistakes. That is the best way to learn and to become a stronger student."*  
(Giving permission to be flexible and a curious learner)
- *"You like to draw? Let's draw what your worry is doing or saying."* (Naming the worry)
- *"Let's work on one task at a time!"* (Doing)
- *"How can I help you problem solve? What do you need right now?"* (Problem solving)
- *"Sometimes when I feel like I have a stomach ache, or when my face gets red, that's how I know I am anxious. Let's practice something to help you reboot."* (Modeling coping skills by showing different options such as breathing exercises, jumping jacks, wiggling your body or going for a walk)
  - Refer to their school nurse if this is the first time for this particular physical symptom.

- For students on a 504 or IEP, check their plan.
- Refer students to a school counselor when more assistance is needed.

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Visit [Avera.org/ChildrensAnxiety](https://www.avera.org/ChildrensAnxiety) for additional resources