

MANAGING ANXIETY | HIGH SCHOOL 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 young people about how things (plants, animals, weather) change in nature and how we as people change as well. It is important to be open to new experiences. You can also ask students about something they didn’t know how to do at the beginning of the school year that they think is much easier now. Talking about this can provide proof that learning and change can take place.

STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY - TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Routine is good, but so is learning flexibility. Discuss and model being flexible within your classroom whenever possible.
- Encourage social interaction by decreasing screen time. Normalize the discomfort and judgement as we step into a variety of social situations.
- Talk to students about stress being normal. Students need to go through uncertainty and discomfort and know there is a caring adult available for support.
- Help students understand the universal process of change and how it promotes flexibility and resilience.
- Practice relaxation exercises in your classroom (e.g. deep breathing, stretching).
- Remind students about taking a “*pausing moment*” or “*a moment to gather myself*” and to practice those experiments in the classroom.
- Tell students that anxiety can show itself in physical ways (e.g. headaches, racing heart).
 - Refer to their school nurse if this is the first time for this particular physical symptom.
- Be in the moment – ***Be present.***

- ➔ 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.averaschools.org/ChildrensAnxiety) for additional resources