

Guidance Notes

Teacher Information



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WHY USE THIS RESOURCE

Our Let's Talk videos encourage conversations about key mental health topics.

Talking about mental health in a creative way will dispel unhelpful myths and break down the stigma that prevents young people seeking support.

You can use this resource to create an emotionally literate environment in which young people can learn about the basics of their own, and others', mental health.

You will be giving young people essential knowledge about how our brains work with our bodies. This psycho-education will empower them to manage their thoughts and feelings in a healthy way, and/or recognise when to seek further support.

The following information will equip you with enough knowledge to confidently teach a lesson, lead an assembly, or even just start a discussion, on the topic of anxiety.

“Empower young people to manage their thoughts and feelings”

“Create an emotionally literate environment”

DEFINITIONS

There are a number of different anxiety disorders and they can differ in severity and in length of affect.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

A constant state of high anxiety. Chronic worrying. GAD can also be described as 'free-floating' anxiety because there is no rule governing what the sufferer feels anxious about; the anxiety will attach to any situation.

Phobias (including social phobias)

Feeling an intense (and often illogical) fear toward a particular object or situation and/or going out of your way to avoid it.

Some common phobias are:

- Needles/injections
- Darkness
- Animals/Insects
- Flying

Exam/performance anxiety

If the pressure of exams becomes too much, it begins to have a negative effect. Exam anxiety may cause a person to ignore their revision, miss the exam (meaning they won't fail because they haven't tried), or go blank during the exam.

Panic

A panic attack is the result of extreme feelings of anxiety which arise at unpredictable moments. Someone having a panic attack may experience difficulty breathing, feel faint, dizzy and sick. The attack usually only lasts about 10 minutes, but due to its intensity may leave a person feeling shaken and weak afterwards.

Other types of anxiety are:

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Separation anxiety

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Anxiety is a normal cognitive and physiological state of arousal.

Anxiety is problematic if it negatively impacts everyday life and prevents the individual from being able to enjoy school/work/family/social life. This may be because the feelings of anxiety are more intense than average, or last longer than might be reasonably expected.

“Anxiety is problematic if it negatively impacts everyday life”

STATISTICS

Everyone experiences anxiety in some degree. 1 in 6 young people experience an anxiety condition (anxietyUK.org.uk), which could mean 5 students in your class are struggling with anxiety and many more are likely to know someone who does.

“People who have had an anxious parent may be more likely to experience anxiety”

CAUSES

The causes of anxiety are multifaceted.

There may be some links with **genetics and physical conditions** (like thyroid problems) and anxiety is sometimes a side effect of some prescription drugs. Anxiety can also be induced by a traumatic experience.

Some people may be **naturally hard-wired** to be more anxious than others, as a result of the way their brains developed in the womb or as infants. People who have a sensitive emotional nature may be more likely to experience problems with anxiety. Also, people who have had a very anxious parent may be more likely to experience problematic anxiety themselves.

Drugs, including caffeine, amphetamines, cocaine, cannabis, ecstasy and LSD, can heighten the experience of anxiety.

Some methods people use to relieve anxiety may eventually cause more anxiety. For example, if a person avoids a situation which causes them to feel anxious, they may save themselves the experience of anxiety in the short term. However, if they continue to avoid this situation then their quality of life may be impaired and their original fear will not have been quelled.



PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Heart palpitations
Difficulty breathing
Feeling dizzy/faint
Feelings of dread/fear/apprehension
Chest pains
Inability to concentrate

Dry mouth
Insomnia
Chills and/or hot flushes
Clamminess
Exhaustion
Irritability

THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIOURS

Young people with anxiety tend to think in the following ways:

- Think in negative and critical ways.
- Overestimate the likelihood of bad things happening
- Focus on things that go wrong.
- Underestimate their ability to cope
- Expect to be unsuccessful.

Young people with anxiety tend to behave in the following ways:

- Avoidance of situations
- Distress in social situations
- Urges to escape situations that cause discomfort
- Repetitive compulsive behaviour (e.g. excessive checking)



What can you do if you notice these symptoms in a young person?

In the case of a panic attack, here are some suggestions:

- Reduce external stimulation by moving the young person to a quiet and safe place.
- Speak calmly and reassuringly to the young person. A panic attack usually lasts for about 10 minutes, so you can encourage them that their current panic will be over soon.
- Encourage the young person to take long, slow breaths. Encourage them to focus on counting 3 seconds while they breathe in and 5 seconds while they breathe out.
- Wait with the young person until the panic attack is over, and listen to them without judging what they say.

“A panic attack usually lasts approximately 10 minutes”

If you suspect a young person may be struggling with anxiety, you could:

- Alert your school’s pastoral team to the concerns you have about the young person.
- If you are in a position to support the young person, then choose a safe and appropriate moment to talk to them about the behaviour you have noticed (skipping lunch, appearing distressed, low-confidence, negativity, social isolation...)
- Give them a description of anxiety and ask if they can relate to it.
- Reassure them that anxiety problems are very common and treatable, so they don’t have to suffer in silence and can overcome their anxiety with the right treatment.
- If the young person is unable to talk about their experiences of anxiety (if they’re too unsure, nervous, ashamed) then let them know you are available to talk when they are ready to talk.

“Anxiety problems are common and treatable”



TREATMENT

The most effective treatment for anxiety is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, which can be accessed via the GP. In some circumstances medication may be necessary.

Other effective treatments include:
Self help books (see the Shelf Help link below)
Regular gentle exercise
Talking to someone/Group work
Distraction techniques
Herbal remedies
Relaxation and mindfulness exercises

“Anxiety can become a ‘fear of the fear’”

THE SCIENCE

Anxiety is related to the body’s natural fight or flight response to feeling threatened. During the fight or flight response, the mind and body are in a state of hypervigilance which is sustainable in short bursts. It is necessary for us to experience the fight or flight response as it protects us from danger and allows us to function in an emergency.

However, if the threat, or perceived threat, never goes away, then the fight or flight response causes huge stress on the body.

The fight or flight response is activated in the primal part of the brain and does not activate the logical areas of the brain. When a person is in a state of anxiety they are unable to think logically.

Anxiety can arise in an event of feeling threatened or out of control (travelling on a plane), but it also arises in *anticipation* of feeling threatened, and so becomes a ‘fear of the fear’, rather than a response to the actual threat.

“The fight or flight response causes huge stress on the body”

RELATED ISSUES

Depression and anxiety is a mixed mental health condition, and is the most common mental health diagnosis in the UK. This is because prolonged anxiety may cause a person to become depressed, and visa versa.

Family relationships are likely to be affected by anxiety to some degree, given the incidence of diagnoses. Young people are likely to have experienced a parent not understanding their behaviour when they are anxious (e.g. truanting), or experienced a family member who struggles with anxiety.

Disordered eating may arise when a person is experiencing anxiety. They may skip meals because of the unsettled feeling that anxiety brings. Or feelings of anxiety may become attached to certain foods (for fear of food poisoning or vomiting).

Young people are highly likely to experience anxiety related to their **friendships** or **romantic relationships**. The desire to be liked, or to be thought of as attractive and/or included, will be under strain as friendship groups go through periods of flux.

Bullying may be a factor in triggering a young person's anxiety. Equally, bullying may exasperate already-existing anxiety or arise after the onset of anxiety (for example, if a young person has a panic attack during an exam, it may lead to gossiping or rumour spreading).

Body image anxiety is highly prevalent among young people. **Social media** is likely to play a role in a young person's expectations of what they should look like.

Adults may use **alcohol** to relieve the symptoms of anxiety. It is highly addictive and long-term alcohol misuse may increase anxiety levels.



IDEAS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

High ability

Spend time exploring the structure of the brain. Focus on understanding how the primal brain (aka, the 'old' brain, or the 'reptilian' brain) is concerned with survival and emotions, while the 'new' brain ('logical' brain, frontal cortex) is where all the reasoning and problem solving occurs.

Some questions to think about:

If you find yourself fearful, angry or anxious, what could you do to ensure you start to activate your logical brain?

Low ability

Some questions to think about:

When do I feel scared or worried?

What helps me to feel better?

Those affected

Before delivering this lesson, let your school's pastoral support team know. Perhaps they can provide a drop-in on the same day for anyone who feels they need to talk more about their mental health.

If you have a TA in your class, make sure you give them advanced warning of your lesson's content, as they may have their own personal experiences which could impact your lesson. Your TA may also be the best person to support any students who are affected by the lesson's content.

If a young person appears to need more support during your lesson, perhaps you could offer them a quiet corner of your classroom and ask them to write a description of their anxiety, perhaps a poem or a story, or an analogy. Or maybe they could draw what anxiety feels like to them. This could then be used as the basis of discussion if/when that young person seeks further support.



SIGNPOSTING

GP can refer to a CBT course, but availability is limited so a young person is likely to go on a waiting list before they receive support.

NoPanic youth helpline (13-20yrs) 0330 606 1174 (Mon-Fri 3pm-6pm)

Useful websites

Phase is a schoolwork charity based in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. Phase is on the frontline working with children and young people to promote their wellbeing. Check out their blog.

No Panic is a charity which specialises in supporting people who struggle with anxiety. They offer a range of support opportunities including a confidential helpline and detailed step-by-step recovery programmes for phobias and OCD, and they offer more support for people who become members.

AnxietyUK provides information and support for people suffering with anxiety and anxiety-based depression.

Shelf Help is a scheme which offers book suggestions for people struggling with mental health issues. For example, the books suggested for relieving anxiety are listed here. It also offers a reading list of books which will lift your mood. The books are available in local libraries, and so is free and easy to access.

AyeMind is a thoroughly detailed website which aims to improve mental health and wellbeing for young people. They have a page which links to a wide range of other websites too (this is where the link takes you), so you can explore the best the web has to offer on young people and mental health.



Silverbirch Centre, Bedford Road, Hitchin, Herts, SG5 1HF
01462 422940 | office@phase-hitchin.org | www.phase-hitchin.org
Registered Charity No. 1154364

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