



Pupils with Mental Health Difficulties

Anxiety



Anxiety



Classroom-based tips (focus on instructional methods)

1. Make accommodations

When working with pupils with anxiety, consider making accommodations in the following areas:

- **Homework** – Establish a time limit for homework and reasonable homework content as pupils with anxiety can be overwhelmed by homework load and worry that homework is not of required standard. Consider asking the pupil about feelings and thoughts regarding the quantity and quality of homework. Sometimes reducing homework might create more stress, depending on the pupil.
- **Testing** – Consider exam settings: is the testing environment quiet and distraction free? The anxious pupil may be better served sitting exams separately to other pupils. Is the anxious pupil aware that testing will occur and prepared? Consider the use of multiple choice testing, word banks or cloze testing as the anxious pupil may become overwhelmed and struggle to recall rote learning. Always be flexible; testing depends on the abilities of and difficulties experience by the pupil.
- **Assignments** – Consider breaking assignments down into individual steps and introducing intermediate deadlines with continuous progress reviews.
- **Presentations** – Consider allowing the pupil to present only to the teacher and not to a large class group, or perhaps use audio recording techniques. Gradually help the pupil to present to a bigger audience when you think s/he is ready.

2. Be Proactive

Pupils with anxiety may be very reluctant to ask questions or contribute in class for fear of unwanted attention. This does not mean that they do not have something to say, it is therefore very important that teachers:

- Don't wait for the pupil to ask for help
- Check how the pupil is doing
- Ask the pupil for her/his opinion
- Check the pupil understands as s/he may be unable to ask questions

3. Encourage Participation

Encourage the pupil to take part in class activities based on their strengths and knowledge. Engage with the anxious pupil on topics that they are confident in. Consider using a 'signal' so that the anxious pupil knows her/his turn is coming to contribute to class discussion and group participation.

4. Give Positive Reinforcement and Validation

Let the anxious pupil know that you understand their feelings of anxiety, fear and worry. By creating a supportive, safe and positive classroom environment the anxious pupil will be more comfortable. Gently encourage the anxious pupil to try new things and positively reinforce the areas they are confident in as this will allow them to shine. Ensure feedback to the anxious pupil is positive but challenge them in a supportive way if they are not performing to their potential.

5. **Create a Safe Environment**

Ensure the anxious pupil is seated away from dominant classmates so as to engage fully in the class. Consider seating the pupil with a classmate s/he feels comfortable and confident with. Consider talking to the whole class about stress and its consequences with the cooperation of your school counsellor/psychologist.

6. **Make Appropriate Referrals**

Make appropriate referrals to the principal, parent, school counsellor, school psychologist, doctor, or mental health specialist according to school policy. Ensure written parental consent where necessary.

Adapted, in part, from

<http://www.heysigmund.com/anxious-kids-at-school-how-to-help-them-soar/>

<http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/40>



School-based practical tips (focus on instructional methods)

Announcement / Sign at School

Change in Routine

Let the anxious pupil and her/his family know of any planned changes to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

Class Divisions / Arrangements

1. **Assemblies**

In large group assemblies consider seating an anxious pupil at the back or at the end of a row so that the pupil can easily be excused if a comfort break is needed. At a suitable moment, ask the pupil discreetly if s/he is comfortable attending assemblies.

2. **Change in Routine**

Let the anxious pupil and her/his family know of any planned changes to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

Educational Visits / Field Trips / Camps / School Exchanges / Trips Abroad

Change in Routine

Let the anxious pupil and her/his family know of any planned changes to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

Homework

1. **Exam Management / Accommodations**

Develop modifications and accommodations to respond to the pupil's fluctuations in mood, ability to concentrate, or side effects of medication. Assign an individual to serve as a primary contact and coordinate any necessary interventions. A pupil suffering from anxiety may be better served sitting exams separately to other pupils. Check in with the pupil to ensure s/he is aware that testing will occur and is prepared.

2. Missed Time Management

Ensure the anxious pupil is furnished with any subject material covered when absent due to illness. Ensure the anxious pupil is given adequate time to catch up on any work missed.

Parents / Parents' Associations

Change in Routine

Let the anxious pupil and her/his family know of any planned changes to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

Safety

Mental health Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy, Healthy Eating Policy

Develop and implement health policies, which can be of great benefit to an anxious pupil. Healthy eating has been shown to reduce levels of anxiety and stress. Having a clearly defined school Mental Health Policy will provide your school with clear guidelines when dealing with mental health issues. A stringent Anti-Bullying policy may reduce the possibility of an anxious pupil becoming the victim of bullying.

Scheduling Events

Change in Routine

Let the anxious pupil and her/his family know of any planned changes to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

School Breaks

Break Times

Consider the use of peer mentors and assigned seating at break times, so the anxious pupil has someone to sit beside, to limit the opportunity of exclusion taking place and feeling 'left out'. Create an organised environment and consider providing structured activities or games for all pupils during break times.

School Celebrations / Events / Activities

Assemblies

In large group assemblies consider seating an anxious pupil at the back or at the end of a row so that the pupil can easily be excused if a comfort break is needed. At a suitable moment, ask the pupil discreetly if s/he is comfortable attending assemblies.

Pupil Support

Time Out

Consider allowing the anxious pupil the opportunity to take time out from a stressful class environment by getting a drink of water or having a short walk; a pre-agreed signal can be used. Consider the use of a 'safe person' such as the school counsellor or year head for the anxious pupil to engage with if feelings of anxiousness become overwhelming. Consider the use of relaxation exercises during time outs that may help the pupil destress.

[Reference: <http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/40>]

Timetabling

1. Exam Management / Accommodations

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Supportive Literature

Health is defined as "A complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of disease or infirmity." *World Health Organisation (WHO)*

"Mental Health is a balance between all aspects of life – social, physical, spiritual and emotional. It impacts on how we manage our surroundings and make choices in our lives – clearly it is an integral part of our overall health. Mental Health is far more than the absence of mental illness and has to do with many aspects of our lives including: How we feel about ourselves, how we feel about others, how we are able to meet the demands of life." *Mental Health Ireland*

Definition of anxiety:

"Anxiety disorders cover a range of disorders related to feelings of panic, worry or fear. They include specific phobias (an irrational or excessive fear of a specific object or situation, often leading to avoidance behaviour), social phobia (the experience of intense feelings of fear in social situations), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (engaging in repetitive behaviours or rituals and/or having obsessional or intrusive thoughts) and generalised anxiety disorder."

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, retrieved at <http://epubs.rcsi.ie/>

General signs of Anxiety:

- Demonstrating excessive distress out of proportion to the situation: crying, physical symptoms, sadness, anger, frustration, hopelessness, embarrassment
- Easily distressed, or agitated when in a stressful situation
- Repetitive reassurance questions, "what if" concerns, inconsolable, won't respond to logical arguments
- Headaches, stomach aches, regularly too sick to go to school
- Anticipatory anxiety, worrying hours, days, weeks ahead
- Disruptions of sleep with difficulty falling asleep, frequent nightmares, difficulty sleeping alone
- Perfectionism, self-critical, very high standards that make nothing good enough
- Overly-responsible, people pleasing, excessive concern that others are upset with him or her, unnecessary apologising
- Demonstrating excessive avoidance, refuses to participate in expected activities, refusal to attend school
- Disruption of child or family functioning, difficulty with going to school, friend's houses, religious activities, family gatherings, errands, vacations
- Excessive time spent consoling child about distress with ordinary situations, excessive time coaxing child to do normal activities- homework, hygiene, meals

Source: The Children's and Adult Center for OCD and Anxiety

The Children's Center on OCD and Anxiety (2009) believes that students with ASD do their best work in a classroom that is calm, supportive and organised.

Characteristics of pupil suffering from anxiety:

- Inattention and restlessness
- Attendance problems and clingy kids
- Disruptive behaviour
- Trouble answering questions in class
- Frequent trips to the nurse
- Problems in certain subjects
- Not turning in homework
- Avoiding socialising or group work

Websites and EU Reports

<http://www.worrywisekids.org/>

<http://childrenscenterocdanxiety.blogspot.ie/>

<http://socialanxietyireland.com/>

<http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/az/A/Anxiety/Treating-anxiety.html>

<http://ie.reachout.com/>

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_information/information_en.htm

<http://www.euro.who.int/>

European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being (2008) Available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf

WHO (2005) Mental health action plan for Europe. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. World Health Organisation

WHO (2008) Policies and practices for mental health in Europe. Copenhagen: World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe

Cannon M, Coughlan H, Clarke M, Harley M & Kelleher I (2013) The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

McLoone, J., Hudson, J. L., & Rapee, R. M. (2006). Treating Anxiety Disorders in a School Setting. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 29(2), 219–242. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42899883>