

## Supporting Students with Anxiety

### *Tiered Interventions for the Classroom and Beyond*

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#### Purpose

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health needs in schools, and one of the most misunderstood. Students with anxiety aren't avoiding work to be defiant; they're avoiding *discomfort that feels overwhelming*. Educators can reduce anxiety's impact by pairing empathy with structure. This worksheet provides practical Tier 1–3 interventions for identifying, supporting, and empowering anxious learners.

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#### Understanding Anxiety in the School Context

Type of Anxiety	Common School Presentation	What Students Need
<b>Generalized Anxiety</b>	Perfectionism, constant worry, stomachaches	Reassurance + clear expectations
<b>Social Anxiety</b>	Avoids groups, fears embarrassment	Gradual exposure + peer safety
<b>Separation Anxiety</b>	Difficulty separating from caregiver	Predictable routines + safe adult connection
<b>Performance Anxiety</b>	Freezes during tests, avoids participation	Structured practice + positive feedback
<b>Selective Mutism</b>	Speaks in some settings, not others	Pressure-free communication + visual responses

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## Tiered Framework for Anxiety Support

Tier	Focus	Example Supports
<b>Tier 1 (Universal)</b>	Classroom climate and predictable routines	Visual schedules, calm tone, movement breaks, growth mindset instruction
<b>Tier 2 (Targeted)</b>	Small group or individual skill-building	Coping skills lessons, CBT strategies, mindfulness, break cards
<b>Tier 3 (Intensive)</b>	Coordinated mental health and team plans	School counseling, behavior intervention plan, therapeutic collaboration

## Recognizing the Signs

Observable Clues	Possible Interpretation	Supportive Action
Frequent nurse visits	Anxiety disguised as physical symptoms	Provide calm check-in or alternate safe space
Perfectionism or avoidance	Fear of failure	Emphasize progress, not perfection
Withdrawn behavior	Social or situational anxiety	Create structured, low-pressure participation
Meltdowns during transitions	Anticipatory anxiety	Use countdowns, preview changes, co-regulate

## Tier 1: Universal Classroom Practices

- Greet every student by name; predictability builds trust.
- Use calm, neutral language even during correction.
- Normalize emotion talk (“We all feel nervous sometimes”).
- Create a quiet corner or visual calm-down space.
- Provide movement or sensory breaks proactively.

- Teach coping skills like 5-finger breathing or grounding (“Name 5 things you see”).

## Tier 2: Targeted Interventions

- **Coping Menu:** Have student choose from 3–4 strategies (breathing, stretching, journaling).
- **Cue Cards:** Visual reminders of strategies.
- **Safe Adult Plan:** Identify a staff member student can check in with briefly.
- **Gradual Exposure:** Step-by-step increase in difficult tasks (e.g., 1:1 reading → small group → full class).
- **CBT Framework:** Challenge anxious thoughts (“What’s the evidence this will go wrong?”).

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## Tier 3: Intensive Support

- Collaborate with counselor or school psychologist for individualized plan.
- Include anxiety management strategies in IEP/BIP (e.g., extended processing time, breaks).
- Communicate with family and clinicians about triggers and progress.
- Ensure academic and emotional goals are aligned; anxiety can mask learning needs.

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## Language That Supports Regulation

Instead of...	Try...	Why It Works
“You’re fine.”	“I can see this is hard; let’s take it slow.”	Validates feelings, not dismissal.
“You just need to calm down.”	“Let’s do one thing that helps your body feel safe.”	Concrete action, not demand.

“Hurry up.”	“I’ll wait with you.”	Reduces time pressure.
“You need to stop worrying.”	“You’ve handled things like this before—what worked?”	Builds confidence through reflection.

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### Environmental Design for Anxiety-Friendly Classrooms

- Soft, natural lighting (avoid harsh fluorescents).
- Calm visual layout; declutter walls.
- Quiet zones or sensory-friendly seating options.
- Predictable routines and clear visual cues for transitions.
- Teacher calm = classroom calm.

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### Family Collaboration

- Share daily or weekly communication about triggers and wins.
- Use consistent language between school and home (“use your calm plan”).
- Encourage home routines that mirror regulation practices (same breathing script, same visual cue).

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### Common Pitfalls & Fixes

Pitfall	Fix
Overreassurance (“It’s fine!”)	Validate, then redirect (“You’re safe; let’s plan next step”).
Avoiding anxiety triggers completely	Gradual exposure builds tolerance safely.

Focusing only on academics	Regulation first, then access learning.
Isolating student	Encourage inclusion with flexible supports.

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### Student Anxiety Plan Template

Trigger	Early Signs	Student Strategy	Adult Support	Outcome
Tests	Fidgeting, sighing	Breathing exercise	Provide untimed setting	Reduced tension

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### Action Starter

- Identify one student showing signs of anxiety.
- Add a **Tier 1 classroom change** (predictable schedule, safe space, calm language).
- Track behavior changes over two weeks, then adjust if needed.