

Trauma-informed Practice:

Beginners Guide to Anxiety in the Classroom

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

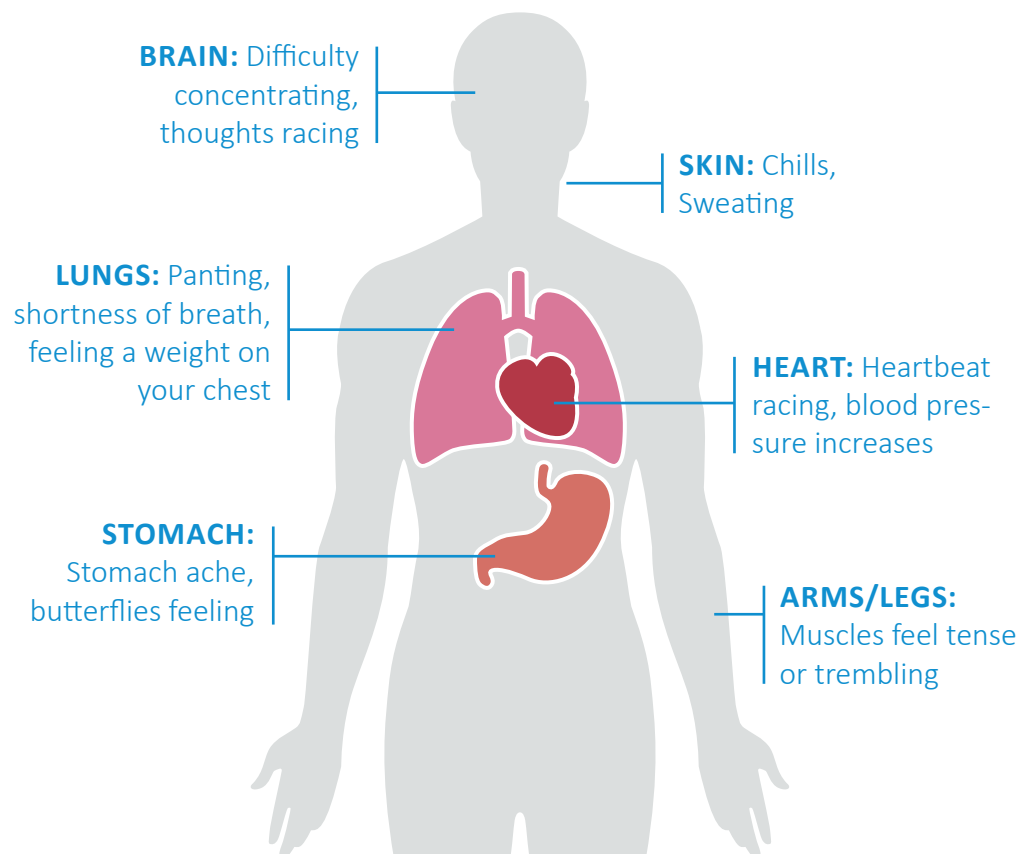
Anxiety is a normal system in the body that tells us when we are in danger by reacting or responding to outside signals. Think about the fight, flight, or freeze responses - these are examples of how our bodies respond to danger signals.

Sometimes though, our bodies warn us about danger that isn't real. Anxiety becomes a concern when it starts to get in the way of a child's normal activities or behavior. In order to decide whether or not a child's level of anxiety should be cause for concern, you should ask yourself these 3 questions:

1. What is the level of intensity of stress? (**Intensity**)
 2. Does the stress interfere with daily life? (**Impairment**)
 3. Can the child recover quickly when the source of stress goes away? (**Duration**)
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ANXIETY IN THE BODY

We feel anxiety in our bodies, and our thoughts can determine how we interpret our bodily sensations. Below are some of the ways that anxiety can show up in the body:



WHAT CAN I DO?

When we feel anxiety in our bodies, our thoughts can determine how we interpret our bodily sensations. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) focuses on changing thoughts and behaviors to reduce anxiety. The three strategies below are taken from CBT, and you can use them to help your child or student manage their anxiety.

Three strategies you can apply in a school setting

HABITUATION, OR FACING THE FEAR IN BABY STEPS

What is it?

Habituation is when you “get used to” what used to make you anxious

Through exposure therapy and practice, children will eventually “habituate” to whatever was making them anxious

Examples

“I know you’re scared, and that’s okay. I’m here, and I’m going to help you get through this.”

“Wow! I’m so proud of you for being brave and letting that dog say hello to you!”

What can I do?

Use ‘Do’ instead of ‘Don’t’

Be a cheerleader by encouraging students to face fears (use positive language)

Use lots of praise for when your student is being “brave”

EXTERNALIZE THE ANXIETY

What is it?

Externalization is when you separate the behavior from the child. It becomes easier to work on the real problem—the anxiety and related behaviors—when the child doesn’t see themselves as the problem

Examples

“Your anxiety is like a bully in your brain - you don’t need to let him tell you what to do”

“Sounds like ‘Nunu’ is getting the best of you right now. Let’s boss her back and go pet that dog together”

What can I do?

Give their anxiety a name. Sometimes names can reduce stigma or hesitance

When anxiety is taking over, help kids practice facing their fears by standing up to their inner anxiety bully

EASE OUT OF REASSURANCE-SEEKING

What is it?

Reassurance seeking is when children with anxiety repeatedly ask for comfort or reassurance that their fears will not come true. This might look like asking the same question over and over

Examples

“You already know the answer to that question. You can use your coping skills to help you get through this.”

“You are being so brave by handling this situation on your own!”

What can I do?

Model coping behaviors

Be a cheerleader using lots of positive language when they take risks (related to the anxiety)

Encourage them to practice being uncertain