

Mental health & wellbeing in schools

Anxiety in young people: strategy booklet

Use this strategy booklet, created in partnership with Mental Health First Aid England, to ensure all staff are aware of how to identify anxiety, understand what it is, and can support pupils.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health issues, but it is commonly left untreated. One in six young people experience anxiety issues at some point in their lives – that's five in an average class.

What causes anxiety?

There are many factors that can cause anxiety, including genetics, brain chemistry, trauma, and stressful circumstances such as exam pressure, family issues or financial concerns. Most commonly, it is caused by the stress in a person's life.

Signs and symptoms

Anxiety may not look how you expect it to and will look different in different people. An anxious young person might experience any of the following:

Physical effects such as chest pain, racing heartbeat, rapid breathing, dizziness, headache, sweating, tingling, dry mouth, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, muscle aches and pains, shaking

Psychological effects such as excessive worries about past or future events, unwanted unpleasant thoughts, racing mind, anger, confusion, restlessness, tiredness

Behavioural effects such as avoidance of situations, excessive/repeated checking, stress in social situations, lack of sleep and crying

Recognising anxiety at school

It is important to look beyond the young person's behaviour and recognise what may be causing the distress. At school and college, an anxious young person might:

- behave aggressively or disruptively
- regularly fail to hand in work on time
- be extremely well behaved but quiet and afraid to ask questions
- overdo schoolwork
- demand extra time from teachers or require a lot of reassurance
- struggle with memory, concentration or decision making
- complain of frequent physical illnesses such as stomach aches, headaches, back or neck aches; have flare-ups of stress-related conditions such as eczema or psoriasis
- spend a lot of time alone at breaks and/or have difficulties with their friendship groups
- visibly appear to be anxious (sweating, agitated, rapid breathing).

How to help

- Ask the young person how they are (see listening tips below).
- Reassure them that it sounds like they are experiencing anxiety, that it is a real and common issue and that they can overcome it.
- Teach them skills to manage the anxiety. This may include minimising their caffeine intake, education on sleep hygiene, relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing.
- Point them towards resources where they can learn practical skills to manage their symptoms. e.g. [Headspace](#) app, [10 Keys to Happier Living](#).
- Keep the conversation going, follow up and ask them how they are doing
- Look after yourself and set a good example for self-care.

Listening tips

“Seek to understand before you seek to be understood”

- Sit down together somewhere safe and quiet.

- Give the young person your full focus. Listen without interrupting or judging.
- Keep your body language open and non-confrontational.
- Stay calm, don't panic or act shocked.
- Be empathetic and take the young person seriously. Accept their worries as real for them.
- Do not express frustration, criticise or blame them.
- Do not offer glib advice such as 'pull yourself together' or 'cheer up'.
- Sit quietly and patiently through silences.
- Take into account diversity and cultural differences in communication styles such as how much eye contact is appropriate.

Questions to ask

"How are you feeling at the moment?"

"How long have you been feeling this way?"

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Who do you feel you can go to for support?"

Panic attacks

A panic attack is a common symptom of acute anxiety and can be very frightening for the person. A young person having a panic attack may have several symptoms at the same time such as a feeling of choking, shortness of breath, chest pain or discomfort, chills or hot flushes, dizziness, nausea, thinking that they are dying.

Help a young person having a panic attack by moving them to a quiet space if possible. Reassure them that they are experiencing a panic attack, that it is not dangerous, it will soon stop and they will recover fully. Assure them that someone will stay with them and keep them safe until it stops.

If you are at all unsure whether the young person is having a panic attack, a heart attack or an asthma attack, call an ambulance.

Professional support

If a young person experiences signs of anxiety that are severe, ongoing, and impacting on their life, they may be experiencing an anxiety disorder. Early intervention is key so support them in seeking professional help via the school counsellor, their GP, or CAMHS.

Wherever possible, work with both the young person and their parents. It can be helpful to explain to the parents why you are concerned about their child and encourage them to seek professional support.

Leadership for a healthy school and college

Children with greater wellbeing achieve more academically. Below are some steps that schools can take to promote and maintain wellbeing.

- Build in relaxation time during the school day, enjoyable activities such as trips creative projects to give pupils an outlet.
- Ensure quality PSHE lessons and consider teaching skills such as mindfulness and resilience.
- Think about how mental health can be woven into the curriculum in other subjects to decrease stigma and ensure that mental health is seen as a normal part of life.
- School policy must ensure mental health is treated equally to physical health and both are seen as part of a whole person's wellbeing.
- Consider developing young people as peer helpers.
- Provide each staff member (especially the leadership team) with a basic level of mental health training to know how to support pupils.
- Offer mental health awareness training to parents and caregivers.
- Fully support the mental health and wellbeing of staff so that they can feel supported and set a good example for the young people.
- Encourage good networks and partnerships with outside agencies.
- Have effective evidence based talking therapies available in school.
- Consider starting a wellbeing group involving pupils, staff and parents.