

Respect | Integrity | Diligence | Compassion

17. Students with Anxiety Support Practices



Identifying and recognising anxiety levels in students

It's not uncommon for students who learn and think differently to also struggle with anxiety (Appendix 1). They might worry a lot or be withdrawn at school. They may hesitate to participate in the classroom, make frequent trips to the bathroom or go elsewhere to avoid class, or even refuse to go to school at all. All of this can get in the way of learning.

Letting a young person know that they are not alone, and that they can talk through what is going on for them with you or other staff as referred in a school '*Bluey*' will absolutely help in reducing those intense feelings.

It is also important for you, as teacher, to take care of your own emotional health. Ensure you have a support system of your own in place, so you are able to debrief regularly and offload any of your own feelings.

Collaborating with the young person's parents and/or caregivers is also vital in helping everybody feel supported. Family and school are the main areas a child can seek support from – it is essential that everybody works together.

When students are being treated for anxiety, it's crucial for all of the people working with them to have support information from the Student Support Services Team. Contact with the student's mental health providers will confirm school strategies like those that follow. Together, our goal is to ensure that any adjustments are a good fit for the student.

This guide articulates strategies and student management techniques that are intended to engage young people in periods of anxiety whether those periods be short term or chronic.

How anxiety can present in students

Anxiety can present in various ways – typical symptoms teachers can look out for follow. Referral by *Bluey* to Student Support Services with concerns about a particular student will facilitate contact with parents and/or caregivers:

- becoming irritable or other noticeable mood changes
- seeming withdrawn
- aggressive behaviour
- obsessive behaviour (over such as homework, timings, performing well, hygiene)
- constant worrying
- anxiety/panic attacks
- feeling physically ill (such as headaches, stomach aches, nausea)
- poor focus
- avoidance
- crying

For a young person experiencing feelings of anxiety, it is a very real, very frightening and often debilitating time.

Coping is about so much more than simply being able to 'pull oneself together', and the key to helping that young person is to respect and accept how they are feeling, and validate what is going on for them.

Strategies to help anxious students

1. Providing emotional support

- Encourage the student to use self-calming or anxiety-reducing techniques – calm breathing and taking deep breaths is always identified as important. A student may have specific strategies determined by their professional support people.
- Allow the student to have a self-calming object if that is recommended.
- Build in “call home” breaks (for students with separation anxiety).
- Let the student seek help from a designated staff member with mental health expertise when feeling anxious (*Time Out Card* if applicable).

2. Classroom setup, schedules and routines

- Provide classroom seating where the student is most comfortable (near a door, near the front of the room, near the teacher or a friend).
- Let the student sit near the back of the room or by an exit during assemblies.
- Assign the student a designated buddy for lunchtime and morning tea.
- Allow preferential grouping for excursions so the student is with a teacher or friends.
- Use a *Time Out Card* (if applicable) to let the student leave the classroom with a buddy to get a drink or leave the classroom when needed.
- Create a plan for catching up after an absence or illness (for example, excusing missed homework or having a known time frame for making up work).
- Give advance notice of planned TRS teachers or other changes in routine.
- Give the student notice and extra time before upcoming transitions, like before morning tea and lunch, and rehearse transitions in a private or low-stress environment.

3. Giving instructions and assignments

- Clearly state and/or write down classroom expectations and consequences.
- Break down assignments into smaller chunks.
- Check in frequently for understanding and “emotional temperature”.
- Provide a signal before calling on the student and a signal for the student to opt out of answering.
- Offer written instructions in addition to spoken directions.
- Exempt the student from reading aloud or demonstrating work in front of the class.
- Let the student present projects to the teacher instead of to the entire class.

4. Introducing new concepts/lessons

- Give extended time on tests and/or separate test-taking space to reduce performance anxiety.
- Allow use of word banks, cheat sheets, or fact cards for tests (for students who freeze or “go blank” during in-class tests).
- Set time limits for homework or reduce the amount of homework.
- Provide class notes via email or an online portal for the student to preview.
- Give notice of upcoming tests (no “pop quizzes”).

School management practices for anxious students

1. Identification and Adjustment

- Students who have a *Learner Profile* are identified on *Compass* with L.
- Identify student in 'S' Drive 'Access' – Learner Profiles.
- Refer to the adjustments described in the *Student's Learner Profile*.
- The learning support program is case managed by an STLAN.
- Contact the Access Centre to verify the STLAN and seek advice on the adjustments required for the student i.e. curriculum and behavioral adjustments.
- Plan your adjustments and then verify with the case managing STLAN.
- Teachers should refer to the HOSES and Access Team teachers for Individual Curriculum Plans (ICPs) and advice for students with a verified disability.

2. Lesson Time Out Card (white/yellow - coded by colour)

- The student's name is on the card and the destination person (role) is nominated on the card.
- *White Time Out Card* (general card) – allows the student to leave class to make their way to the designated person on the card; Dean of Students or Guidance Officer or Deputy Principal.
- **Yellow Time Out Card (new anxious student card) – allows the student to leave class and make their way to the Guidance Office.**

3. 'Bluey' Referral

- Use Appendix 1 as an indicator of student anxiety and complete a *Bluey* referral to the Student Support Services Team.



Signs of Student Anxiety

Physical signs of anxiety. The student:

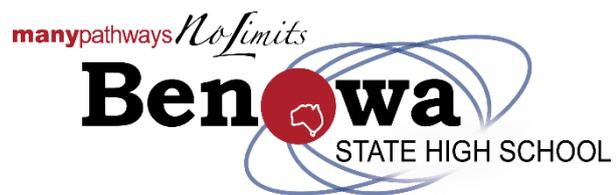
- often complains of headaches or stomach aches, even though there's no medical reason for them;
- refuses to eat snacks or lunch at daycare or school;
- won't use bathrooms except at home;
- is restless, fidgety, hyperactive or distracted (even without having ADHD);
- starts to shake or sweat in intimidating situations;
- constantly tenses muscles;
- has trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

Emotional signs of anxiety. The student:

- cries a lot;
- is very sensitive;
- becomes grouchy or angry without any clear reason;
- is afraid of making even minor mistakes;
- has panic attacks (or is afraid of having panic attacks);
- worries about things that are far in the future, like worrying about starting middle school in third grade;
- is worried or afraid during drop-offs (at daycare, school, relatives' homes, etc.);
- has frequent nightmares about losing a parent or loved one.

Behavioral signs of anxiety. The student:

- asks "what if?" constantly ("What if an earthquake happened?");
- avoids joining in during class activities like circle time;
- remains silent or preoccupied when expected to work with others;
- refuses to go to school;
- stays inside alone at lunch or morning tea;
- avoids social situations with other kids, like birthday parties or extracurricular activities;
- constantly seeks approval from parents and/or caregivers, teachers and friends;
- says "I can't do it!" without a real reason;
- has meltdowns or tantrums.



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