



## School Anxiety

### How do I know if my student is experiencing school anxiety?

- They complain of a stomachache every Monday morning
- They have they a hard time making decisions before school
- They always forget things and often get to school late
- They say they hate school or they don't want to go
- They stay home from school sick, then feel better until the next morning
- Some additional signs:
  - Headaches
  - Many stomachaches over a long period of time
  - Trouble sleeping
  - Grouchiness
  - Feeling tired
  - Hard time making decisions
  - Clingy; follows parent around
  - Worries about getting hurt or loved ones getting hurt
  - Nightmares
  - Tantrums when forced to go to school
  - Truancy

### What might be behind your student's school anxiety?

School anxiety is most common between ages 5-7 and 11-14 when students are dealing with a lot of change. Transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school may be especially stressful. It is also very common to see a lot anxiety after a long illness or summer vacation when the student has been spending long periods of time with parents.

Though they may take some time to discover, the following reasons may be the source of anxiety:

- A conflict with a teacher or friend
- Schoolwork is too easy and boring or too hard and frustrating
- Learning disability
- Changes at home (divorce, extended illness, death of family member, moving)
- Enmeshment with a parent (not wanting to leave parent)
- Shyness
- Feeling nervous about a new school or grade level change
- Feeling nervous about a situation at school (tryouts, tests, being called on in class, presentation, etc.)
- School violence, bullying or harassment

### How can the school and parents work together to help the student?

- Explain the importance of school to your student (learn new things).
- Help a shy student connect with other students. Encourage them to join a club or after school activity.
- Look into extra help if they are struggling in school (tutor, learning lab, after school help with teacher, private learning center).
- Talk with student about any bully situations. Inform school counselor, teacher, or administration about any concerns.
- Talk with your student each day. Early intervention can prevent a problem from getting worse.
- Set aside some undivided attention for your student each night. Here are some activities you could do together to help them express their worries and feelings:
  - Write down worries and feelings in a journal
  - Draw or do any type of artwork
  - Encourage student to talk with trusted adults (school work is too hard/bullying).
  - List what they dislike about school. Talk about which things they have the power to change. How?
  - Practice relaxation exercises, encourage them to exercise and eat a healthy diet.

## What behaviors may be reinforcing the anxious behavior?

Once a fear or anxiety response has been elicited, the response tendency can be maintained in a number of ways. A few of these are:

- **Self-talk or "automatic" thoughts** (e.g. I can't handle new situations. Everyone at school will hate me.)
- **Avoidant behavior** (e.g. A student has a bad year last year at school. They are then afraid of school in general. They don't talk about their fears.)
- **Inappropriate response to fearful child** (e.g. The child is ridiculed by an adult for feeling afraid instead of being rewarded for their effort and courage.)

## What if after many interventions the school anxiety continues?

- Talk with your family physician. They may suggest you work with a child or adolescent therapist. This is especially important if your student starts to avoid their friends and family and usual activities.
- If left untreated, the anxiety can become worse and continue to cause problems as the student gets older.

## If anxiety is presenting its self in places other than school it may be a generalized anxiety disorder.

This is a very common psychiatric condition, which is responsive to treatment. Anxiety becomes a disorder when the symptoms are severe, lasting and interfere with normal life. Panic disorder is another common psychiatric condition. Panic is a spontaneous, unexpected, recurrent, intense and overwhelming form of anxiety. The feeling of panic is characterized as extremely unpleasant, a feeling of fear or dread, and may include symptoms of rapid heart beat, chest tension or pain, impaired breathing, dizziness and tingling sensations, etc. Anxiety disorders can develop gradually over long periods of time or very quickly. These disorders can become disabling and interfere with school, relationships, social activities and work.

There is reason to be concerned if the symptoms of anxiety or panic are severe, prolonged, unexpected, seem unusual or have no apparent cause. Recognizing the symptoms of anxiety and panic can help you deal with these conditions and seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

## Symptoms of Anxiety

- Experience of fear
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Avoidance
- Rapid labored breathing
- Sweating or perspiring
- Trembling or "shaking"
- Weakness
- Problems concentrating
- Poor memory
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Increased energy
- Frustration
- Impatience
- Rapid heart beat
- Chest pain or tension
- Muscle tension
- Indigestion or diarrhea
- Dizziness or feeling "light-headed"
- Racing thoughts
- Dwelling on fearful possibilities
- Problems performing tasks
- Frightening images
- Thoughts of danger

## Serious and Critical Symptoms

- Chest pain
- Weakness or paralysis
- Dizziness, fainting or passing out

## References

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