

OBSERVING FOR ANXIETY IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENCE:

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Feeling anxious is a fairly normal reaction when experiencing exciting, stressful or new situations. However, students who experience anxiety at school could potentially have a more serious anxiety disorder that requires treatment.

Anxiety becomes an issue when it begins holding the student back from opportunities, such as participating in extracurricular activities or social engagements. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that approximately [25% of teens](#) between 13 and 18 years old have an anxiety disorder and slightly less than 6% have a severe anxiety disorder.

This means one out of every four teenagers is struggling with anxiety that is negatively impacting their daily life.

The Three Forms of Student Anxiety

Usually student anxiety observed in children and teens from kindergarten to 12th grade manifests in three different forms: school refusal, test anxiety and social anxiety. These three branches of student anxiety can be caused by any number of factors and are usually a sign of a deeper anxiety disorder.

There are six major types of anxiety disorders. These include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, phobia, post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety disorder. Since student anxiety usually stems from one of the major disorders, it is important for teachers and schools to have a strong understanding of anxiety and how it works in order to provide effective support and resources for struggling students.

The most effective way to help students who are dealing with anxiety is to know how to address it.

Often, anxiety in students goes unnoticed and their unpredictable behavior, such as missing class, might be assumed to be lazy or irresponsible. If teachers are prepared and can identify signs that a student may have anxiety then they are able to create a safe environment for the student to seek help and necessary resources.

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Top 10 Signs of Student Anxiety

1. Emotional Changes

When a student is experiencing anxiety, it is common for them to constantly feel on edge and uneasy. They may find themselves getting easily irritated by small things that wouldn't normally bother them and can find it very difficult to concentrate.

The student may also feel restless and may act out in unexpected ways to avoid a situation they perceive as threatening. For example, a student might purposely get kicked out of class before a quiz if they have test anxiety.

Emotional changes can also include constant worrying, having overwhelming and irrational fears regarding everyday activities, consistent nervousness and prevalent low self-esteem.

2. Social Changes

Another key indicator of student anxiety are the social changes that occur. For example, a student with an anxiety disorder may suddenly stop engaging with friends and social activities altogether. They may start to find excuses as to why they can't make plans with others. Social anxiety usually begins around the [age of 13](#), making it something middle schools and high schools can be vigilant about looking out for.

Students with social anxiety will isolate themselves and start to spend the majority of their time alone. In some severe cases, selective mutism is a major sign of social anxiety. It is very helpful for teachers and school staff to understand that these behaviors are not coming from a disobedient place, but that the student is struggling and most likely needs professional intervention.

3. Physical Changes

When it comes to physical changes` it is crucial to look for patterns rather than jumping to conclusions right away. Some physical changes can include headaches, dizziness, sweating, body or muscle aches, nausea and upset stomach, excessive fatigue, change in diet and unexplained illness.

While a few sporadic headaches probably don't indicate student anxiety, teachers and school staff should be aware and if they notice a pattern forming they can make an action plan to reach out to the student and offer support.

4. Sleep Disturbance

Sleep is a huge part of the overall health and well-being of students. It is recommended that students between the ages of 13 and 18 get [eight to ten hours of sleep](#) each night to function properly. A common effect of anxiety is that it can negatively impact sleeping habits. This can include having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, nightmares and waking up still feeling tired. Many things can impact the sleep of children and teenagers so it's important to look for recurring patterns that seem to be happening for no reason.

5. Poor School Performance

A very common sign indicating student anxiety is poor school performance. Students who suffer from anxiety *may miss school due to physical ailments brought on by anxiety* and might have a hard time concentrating due to sleep disturbance and constant worrying.

Signs to identify include a decrease in grades, frequently missed assignments, feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork, consistent procrastination and difficulty focusing on tasks.

6. Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be a sign of an anxiety disorder, however, not everyone with anxiety will experience a full blown attack. Certain individuals may experience panic to a certain degree and others might not ever endure this.

Some cues to notice in students' behavior includes sweating and body tremors. It is also important to take note if the student complains of dizziness, upset stomach, having trouble breathing, chest pain, numbness in limbs, derealization or feeling as if they are dying or going crazy.

If a panic attack occurs in the classroom teachers need to be prepared and understand how to handle the circumstance with care so as not to make the situation worse for the student.

7. School Refusal

One of the most obvious signs of student anxiety is referred to as school refusal or school phobia. This is when the student will go to great lengths to avoid school in every sense. School refusal can look like losing touch with their regular social circle, dropping out of extracurricular activities, skipping class, and refusing to go to school. In severe cases of student anxiety, school refusal can be so serious that it leads to the student dropping out of school temporarily or permanently.

8. Tantrums

Unpredictable behavior and tantrums can be an indicator of student anxiety for children of all ages. For example, a student may throw a fit when being dropped off at school, which may be a sign of separation anxiety. A student might also act out in class so that they can avoid an uncomfortable situation like taking a test or giving a presentation.

It is important for teachers and school staff to see beyond these outbursts and get to the root of the issue, which could potentially be an anxiety disorder.

9. Obsession With Perfection

Students who suffer from anxiety, especially performance anxiety, are likely to have an obsession with perfection. This involves the student constantly worrying about being perfect and putting pressure on themselves to never make a

mistake. An obsession with perfection is very unhealthy and can be extremely detrimental to the student's well-being and self-esteem.

10. Accustomed to Assuming The Worst

Another sign of student anxiety is when a student is always assuming the worst. For someone who has anxiety it can be natural to always focus on negative thoughts in order to prepare for the worst case scenario, no matter how unlikely it is to actually happen. When it comes to relationships, academic life, family and more, a student with anxiety will probably assume negative results.

Look for patterns with this behavior to determine whether the student is simply having a bad day or whether they may need to seek treatment.

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Teachers and Schools Impact Student Success

Children and teens spend the majority of their developing years in school. These are crucial years that play a key role in the general direction of each student's life and this is also the time when mental health disorders, like anxiety, usually become apparent.

During this time, teachers and school staff are extremely valuable in helping students become healthy, productive members of society. *Teacher training in mental health is a major key to student success and is one of the best ways to boost teacher confidence and lower turnover rate.*