



# Stress and Worry in the Classroom: Function-Base Strategies for Addressing Anxiety



## What do we mean by "stress, worry, and anxiety?"

Worry, stress, and anxiety are often used interchangeably; however, these have slightly different meanings. All of these can be considered emotional responses; however, stress is typically caused by an external trigger and worry is an internal experience (i.e., occurs in our thoughts). External triggers that evoke stress can be short-term, such as a school work deadline or conflict with a friend, or long-term, such as discrimination or chronic illness. People under stress experience mental and physical symptoms, such as irritability, anger, fatigue, muscle pain, digestive troubles, and difficulty sleeping. Anxiety, on the other hand, is defined by persistent and excessive worries that do not go away even in the absence of a stressor. Anxiety leads to a nearly identical set of symptoms as stress including insomnia, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension, irritability, and efforts to escape or avoid experiencing the stressor.

- 1. Identify the **developmental level**. Provide psychoeducation on stress and worry, including defining the adaptive nature, common signs/symptoms, and strategies or resources for support. Example script: "We all experience stress, worry, and anxiety sometimes. When we experience stress, worry, and anxiety, we might feel our heart beating quickly, the sensation of butterflies in our stomach, or have difficulty catching our breath. These are all signs our worry or anxiety alarm has been signaled. Anxiety helps us prepare for real danger (e.g., seeing a bear in the woods) and can also help us perform our best (e.g., getting ready for a speech or a soccer game). When we experience anxiety, it triggers our fight-flight-freeze response and prepares our bodies to defend themselves. Sometimes our anxiety alarm can be signaled, even when we are not in real danger. This is when anxiety can become problematic and get in the way of parts of our daily routines, such as learning and interacting with others."

Elementary (5-8)	Middle (9-12)	Teen (13-18)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students may appear off task, distracted, and/or fidgety</li> <li>• Students may be actively escaping or avoiding various stimuli, situations, and people</li> <li>• Students may make somatic complaints such as stomach pain or headaches</li> <li>• Students may appear more irritable and exhibit a lower frustration tolerance</li> <li>• Interventions should focus on skills-based strategies to alleviate stress and worry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same as Elementary Age (5-8)</li> <li>• Students are starting to become more aware of their thoughts and how their thoughts impact their behavior.</li> <li>• Students may experience intrusive and anxiety-provoking thoughts and have insight to identify those thoughts</li> <li>• Interventions on this age should expand beyond skills-based strategies and include learning about how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are linked</li> <li>• Interventions should also include identifying thoughts, as well as investigating both the positive and negative impacts that those thoughts have on their feelings and behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same as Elementary Age (5-8) and Middle (9-12)</li> <li>• Students are typically able to engage in conversations around the positive and negative impacts of their intrusive thoughts and engage in problem-solving around the utility of those thoughts</li> <li>• Students may be able to engage in perspective taking around the impact of stress and worry on others, which may help them to identify the impact on themselves</li> <li>• Students are typically able to identify the differing levels of stress and worry, and understand how "typical" stressors are normal and needed, while more intense levels can be harmful to their overall well-being</li> <li>• Motivational interviewing strategies (outlined below) can be used to help students address ambivalence related to engaging in strategies to alleviate stress and worry</li> </ul>

2. **Align the developmental and symptom** intensity or frequency with an intervention or strategy using the following guidelines.

**Investigate the symptoms:**

- Administer baseline measure to assess anxiety symptoms
  - » Examples:
    - GAD-7: (Free. Available at: [GAD-7](#))
    - Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale: (Free. Available at: [Spence](#))
  - » Identify stressors and anxiety-provoking stimuli
  - » Identify perceived function of the behavior and contributing factors
- Develop evidence-informed steps to address the behavior:
  - » Psychoeducation, coping toolbox/anxiety-reduction techniques, graduated exposure hierarchy, goal-setting
- Program for generalization of the strategies (materials for parents/caregivers and materials for use within the classroom)

3. Identify an **individual-based strategy**. Align the developmental level above with an intervention or strategy using the following guidelines.

**Prepare and Plan for the Intervention:**

- Review data. Consider what data sources you have and what data sources you will need to collect. Ensure you will obtain pre and post intervention data.
  - » Health room visits
  - » Visits to school counseling office
  - » Data from screening tools: GAD-7
- Identify the target behavior and behaviors of concern.
- Identify the proposed function of the behavior or behaviors of concern.
- Refer to resource map for evidence-informed supports for the behaviors of concern

**After identifying stressors or anxiety-provoking stimuli, implement strategies to promote coping:**

- Calming strategies:
  - » All ages: Box breathing, Bubble breathing, Progressive muscle relaxation (vary script depending on age), Identifying colors of the rainbow, Mindful List making, Mindful music listening
  - » Middle and teen: Leaves on a stream

**Approach the difficulty:**

- Make a plan for how to address the stressor or anxiety-provoking stimuli
  - » Identify what “needs” to happen or desired end result
- Break steps down into as small as steps as possible. Build exposure hierarchy as needed, depending on nature of symptoms.
- Plan for reinforcement once stressor or stimuli is addressed. Work to make reinforcement functionally equivalent.

**Consider the environment:**

- Have clear expectations
- Focus on positive behavior (e.g., focus on behavior that they should engage rather than behavior they should not engage in)
- Understand if there is a choice in how expectations are met (e.g., completing assignment in another room)
- If it is peer related, address concern with peer

**Provide coaching to teachers and staff on generalization of individual-based strategies for use within the classroom.**

■ Examples/resources by developmental level

Elementary Age (5-8)	Middle Aged (9-12)	Teen (13-18)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Example resource:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <i>Sometimes I'm Anxious: A Child's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety</i> by Poppy O'Neill</li> <li>» <i>How to Tame My Anxiety Monster</i> by Melanie Hawkins</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Example resource:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <i>Anxiety Workbook for Kids: Take Charge of Fears and Worries</i> by Robin Alter</li> <li>» <i>What to do when you Worry Too Much: A Kids Guide to Overcoming Anxiety</i> by Dawn Huebner</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Example resource:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <i>Anxiety Workbook for Teens : Activities to Help You Deal With Anxiety &amp; Worry</i> by Lisa Schab</li> <li>» <i>Anxiety Relief for Teens</i> by Regine Galanti</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Group-based Strategies for Educators**

Intervention	Grades	Who Can Implement	Price
<a href="#">Strong Kids Series (Strong Start, Strong Kids, Strong Teens)</a>	K-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General and special education teachers</li> <li>• Speech-Language pathologists</li> <li>• School Counselors</li> <li>• Social workers</li> <li>• Psychologists</li> <li>• Early interventionists</li> <li>• Other education or mental health professionals</li> </ul>	\$42.95
<a href="#">Resilience Education Program</a>	4-8	Individuals who specialize in school-based mental health support can implement, typically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School psychologist</li> <li>• Counselor</li> <li>• Social worker</li> </ul>	Free

## Advanced function-Based Strategies for Addressing Stress and Worry

### Individual-based interventions

- Provide coaching to teachers and staff on generalization of group and individual-based strategies for use within the classroom.
  - » Partner with teachers on implementation of anxiety reduction techniques in the classroom (e.g., beginning class with mindful breathing, guided imagery, or progressive muscle relaxation).
  - » Make “coping cards” available for students who are participating in group-based or individual-based services. Share these with teachers and determine how they will be used in the classroom.
  - » Provide scripts that teachers can use for communicating with students about worry, stress, and anxiety.
- Resources
  - » Modular Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Childhood Anxiety
    - Trained mental health therapist or counselor
  - » Coping Cat/Camp Cope-a-Lot: [Coping Cat](#)
    - Trained mental health therapist or counselor
    - Cost: \$25
  - » The C.A.T. Project: Treatment for Anxious Adolescents: [C.A.T. Project Manual](#)
    - Trained mental health therapist or counselor
    - Cost: \$25
- Motivational Interviewing
  - » FREE Motivational interviewing Module Series (NE Caribbean MHTTC, 2021)
    - [Module 1: An Introduction to Motivational Interviewing](#)
    - [Module 2: The Spirit of Motivational Interviewing](#)
    - [Module 3: The Processes of Motivational Interviewing](#)
  - » Example questions:
    - What makes you think that you need to do something about \_\_\_\_\_?
    - How important, on a scale of 1 to 10 is (this change)? Why a 7 and not a 2?
    - How would you like for things to be different?
    - What are the main reasons you see for making a change?
      1. What are the benefits of things staying the same?
      2. What are the challenges of things staying the same?
      3. If you were to try the plan, what might be some benefits?
      4. If you were to try the plan, what might be some challenges?
    - How confident are you that you can make this change?
    - What are you thinking of doing next?
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
  - » [Free Introductory Webinar: SE MHTTC](#)
  - » ACT Made Simple: An Easy to Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

### Group-based interventions

- [Cool Kids Program](#)
  - » Individuals who meet the following requirements can enroll to become accredited: 4 year undergraduate or 2 year postgraduate degree in health (psychology, counseling, social work, occupational therapy) or education AND Additional training in cognitive-behavioral therapy (dedicated postgraduate subject, introductory workshop or online training from recognized provider)
  - » Cost: \$300/person for accreditation + materials (\$40-50)

- [Fun Friends Series \(Fun Friends, Friends for Life, My Friends\)](#)
  - » Doctors/medical specialists, Teaching professionals, Speech therapists, Occupational therapists, Psychologists/counselors, Childcare workers
  - » Cost depends on implementation plan, organization size, and reach AND must become a licensed partner and become certified through an intensive training

## Trauma Informed Strategies for Supporting Students in Managing Stress and Anxiety:



### Authors & Contributors

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