

## Identifying Anxiety in Autistic Students: Common Symptoms and Considerations



In the U.S., approximately 2% of youth have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Mental health challenges are much more common among autistic youth. This infographic describes anxiety symptoms often seen in autistic students.

Autistic students experience both common and unique types of anxiety.<sup>1-3</sup>

### Common Types of Anxiety and Examples



**Specific Fears:** Fear of bugs, doctors, the dark, and/or heights



**Separation Anxieties:** Worry about being away from caregiver



**Social Fears:** Worry about what others think; Fear of being teased/bullied



**Chronic Worry:** Worry about school performance, death and dying, and/or the future

### Unique Types of Anxiety and Examples

**Idiosyncratic Specific Fears:** Fear of graffiti, fans, beards, mechanical objects



**Transitions/Change:** Worry about a change in schedule (for example, if a substitute teacher is present and not the regular teacher)



**Sensory Oversensitivity:** Worry about situations that involve strong sensory experiences (for example, fire alarms or assemblies)



**Not Being Able to Engage in Special Interests:** Worry about not having enough time to play a specific game (for example, Minecraft)



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Caregiver and teacher descriptions of anxiety symptoms in autistic students<sup>4</sup>

### Caregivers may notice their child...

- Refusing to do things
- Refusing to go to school
- Getting stuck in a loop ruminating about worries
- Getting tough and saying threatening things
- Becoming nonverbal
- Being clingy

### Teachers may notice their student...

- Disrupting class
- Having attendance issues
- Hiding under desks, leaving class
- Getting upset when a mistake is made (perfectionism)
- Starting peer conflict
- Lacking confidence

Factors that may make it difficult to identify anxiety in autistic students<sup>2,4</sup>



#### **Problem Behaviors**

Anxiety symptoms can result in aggression, self-injury, or other behaviors seen as "bad" behavior rather than mental health challenges.



#### **Diagnostic Overshadowing**

Symptoms of anxiety and other mental health challenges are sometimes viewed as part of autism rather than a separate mental health condition.



#### **Psychosocial Masking**

Autistic students may be able to "hide" their anxiety or mental health challenges at school because they do not want to stand out.



#### **Symptoms Present Differently**

For autistic youth, anxiety may also look like an increase in repetitive behaviors (such as an increase in hand flapping).

**For more information about anxiety symptoms in autistic students, view "Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities"**

Watch the Southeast MHTTC webinar here: [bit.ly/3jFaNyQ](https://bit.ly/3jFaNyQ).

## References

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2. Kerns, C. M., & Kendall, P. C. (2012). The presentation and classification of anxiety in autism spectrum disorder. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 19(4), 323.
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