

Social Anxiety

The school environment can be particularly challenging for socially anxious students. These students often contend with lower peer acceptance, increased peer victimization, and fewer friendships. They may avoid contributing to class discussions, giving presentations, participating in extracurricular activities, and generally lose out on many confidence-building opportunities. Many fall into a vicious cycle of perpetuating anxiety, a cycle that involves the way they think about themselves and others, how they feel emotionally and physically, and how they behave.

Breaking the cycle is a complex task.

School staff can help by focusing on several areas to support socially anxious students.

Strategies and Skills	Teachers	School Counsellors
<p>Education Students can experience a range of symptoms from occasional mild/moderate levels of anxiety, to more chronic debilitating anxiety and panic.</p>	<p>Teach students about anxiety anxietybc.com/parenting/anxiety-101.</p> <p>Use storybooks, novels or movies to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help introduce students to the concepts of anxiety and assertive behaviour • Talk about how some anxiety is normal – the goal is not to cure anxiety, but rather to manage it and not let anxiety be in charge • Highlight fictional characters or real role models that have struggled in social situations • Share skills that lead to making, keeping and being a good friend, as well as dealing with bullies 	<p>Help students understand social anxiety anxietybc.com/resources/video/child-and-teen-social-anxiety-disorder.</p> <p>Help students learn about the connection between their thoughts and feelings anxietybc.com/what-cbt-1.</p>
<p>Relaxation Skills Students can learn to calm their physiological sensations and ‘turn down’ the anxiety.</p>	<p>Teach calm breathing and muscle relaxation anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/anxiety-bc-coping-strategies-v3.pdf to the entire class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the class engage in these skills throughout the day (e.g. the beginning of class, before presentations or tests, and after recess or lunch). • See the educator section of our website for additional resources. 	<p>Walk students through relaxation techniques such as calm breathing anxietybc.com/resources/audio/calm-breathing.</p> <p>Teach students about mindfulness anxietybc.com/resources/audio/mindfulness.</p> <p>Share resources with students, for example, Mindshift app anxietybc.com/resources/mindshift-app and AnxietyBC Youth website youth.anxietybc.com.</p>

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<p>Thinking skills Students with anxiety often make negative self-evaluations, ('I look weird'), anticipate more negative outcomes ('everyone will laugh'), and are more likely to see threat in ambiguous situations. They also tend to over-focus on themselves and their internal states during social interactions. These traps play a role in maintaining anxiety.</p>	<p>Students dealing with social anxiety fall into Thinking Traps anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/resources/documents/Thinking_Traps_Examples.pdf.</p> <p>Consult with the school counsellor about how to support students with challenging negative, unhelpful thoughts.</p> <p>Model realistic thinking and more helpful, balanced, realistic self-talk. Verbalize your healthy thinking in the classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is hard, but I can do it; everybody makes mistakes, I'm feeling anxious, and I expected some anxiety to show up. I can keep going with some anxiety. It means I care about this. <p>Use posters and other visual aids to promote helpful self talk and realistic thinking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students create art work that involves positive self talk or questions to challenge unhelpful or unrealistic thinking and have it on display in the classroom. <p>Have students become positive self-talk and healthy thinking 'coaches' for characters in stories and novels read in class.</p>	<p>Challenge overly negative, unhelpful thoughts by using realistic thinking and looking for evidence [link to anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Challenging_Negative.pdf].</p> <p>Encourage students to brainstorm several potential outcomes of a situation rather than just the worst-case scenario e.g. what else could happen?</p> <p>Behavioural experiments allow students to gather information to test the validity of their thoughts or beliefs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a student thinks that everybody will laugh if she answers a question incorrectly in class, ask her to test her prediction by paying attention to how many students laugh when others answer incorrectly, and then move to having the student answer a question and count the number of students who laugh vs. do not laugh. <p>Draw students' attention away from their own distressing experience to external aspects of the situation that are neutral or positive.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to pay attention to how many people are wearing the colour green at recess, or the eye colour of other students in the group, or to count how many classmates are smiling in the hallway.

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<p>Facing Fears Avoidance is a key feature of anxiety. Resist the urge to rescue anxious students from distressing situations and, instead, provide warm encouragement of the gradual facing of feared situations. This will help the student build self-confidence and autonomy.</p>	<p>Consult with your school counsellor about how to support students facing fears.</p> <p>Collaborate with school counsellors or mental health professionals by i) brainstorming ideas for small, gradual steps and ii) sharing observations and feedback about progress.</p> <p>Make accommodations that allow the student to progressively engage in the feared activity.</p> <p>Provide rewards for brave behaviour, especially small first steps - facing fears is hard work!</p>	<p>Encourage small steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with the student, parents, and teachers to identify helpful steps and how to implement them anxietybc.com/parenting/social-anxiety/facing-my-fears e.g., giving a presentation in front of the class. anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/Climbing%20 my%20Fear%20Ladder%20Adrienne%20Social%20 Anxiety.pdf <p>If needed, refer anxious students to a mental health professional for support and to facilitate progress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having multiple sources of support who are collaborating and communicating with each other can be especially helpful when student school functioning is greatly diminished. <p>Provide multiple opportunities to face fears, practice, practice, practice!</p> <p>Communicate with teachers about which step the student is working on and encourage teachers to share updates on progress.</p> <p>Reward effort as students engage in more brave behaviour and begin to participate more. Ask students what type of reward they feel comfortable with e.g. thumbs up, high-five, words of praise, in private or publically.</p>

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<p>Fostering relationships</p> <p>It is important to note that not all socially students lack social skills. Some struggle with the skewed perception that they are very likely to act inappropriately or are embarrassing themselves, despite having the necessary skills.</p>	<p>Encourage relationship between socially anxious students and friendly students who will model strong social skills.</p> <p>Assign partners when requiring partner or group work rather than letting students pick themselves.</p> <p>Consider the seating arrangements in the classroom: seat students who have more difficulty with social anxiety away from peers who may act out and draw attention.</p> <p>Some socially anxious students are not as self-conscious around younger peers; consider multi-aged pairings or mentoring programs e.g. reading buddies.</p>	<p>Students with social anxiety are more likely to bring about negative reactions from their peers compared to non-anxious students because of the vicious cycle perpetuating anxiety.</p> <p>Educate students about effective communication anxietybc.com/self-help/effective-communication-improving-your-social-skills.</p> <p>Hold social skills groups for the student body to help those in need of social skills training, as well as those who may have the skills, but lack the confidence to use them e.g. assertive communication or conversation skills groups.</p>

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<p>Dealing with bullying and peer victimization Up to 50% of victims of bullying do not report being victimized to a parent or teacher. School staff play an essential role in preventing and intervening in school bullying.</p>	<p>Students who perceive their teachers as being proactive and effective in dealing with bullies are less likely to experience anxiety symptoms. For more information about bullying, see <i>Bullying: A Module for Teachers</i> apa.org/education/k12/bullying.aspx.</p> <p>Have clear rules and protocols for dealing with peer victimization and bullying in the classroom and school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model assertive communication and helpful response strategies to bullies • Have students role play assertive responses • Request training and ask for support from administrators, as needed <p>Encourage students to ask for help by providing options of who they can approach and how.</p>	<p>Helping to create a safe and responsive school environment can help socially anxious students feel more at ease.</p> <p>Collaborate with administrators to ensure that all staff are educated about bullying and aware of protocols and supportive strategies for dealing with peer victimization.</p> <p>Assist teachers by helping to educate students about school policy for dealing with peer victimization and bullying.</p> <p>Inform students of how they can seek help if being bullied or if witnessing a peer being bullied.</p> <p>Provide multiple opportunities for students to share concerns. e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a comment box outside school counsellor's office • Work with parents to encourage a safe environment at home to facilitate open communication with their children

1. Williford, A., Boulton, A., Noland, B., Little, T. D., Kärnä, A., & Salmivalli, C. (2012). Effects of the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program on adolescents' perception of peers, depression, and anxiety. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 40(2), 289–300. doi: 10.1007/s10802-011-9551-1

2. Whitney, I., & Smith, P. K., (1993). A survey of the nature and extent of bullying in junior/middle and secondary schools. *Educational Research*, 35(1), 3-25. doi: 10.1080/0013188930350101

3. Guimond, F. A., Brendgen, M., Vitaro, F., Dionne, G., & Boivin, M. (2015). Peer victimization and anxiety in genetically vulnerable youth: The protective roles of teachers' self-efficacy and anti-bullying classroom rules. *Journal of abnormal child psychology*, 43(6), 1095-1106. doi: 10.1007/s10802-015-0001-3