



# MIAMI UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR SCHOOL-BASED  
MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

## School Mental Health Communities of Practice

*Micro-Skills to Support K-12 Students with  
Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic Attacks*

### Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic Attacks:

Being very afraid when away from caregiver/parent	Extreme distress when caregiver/parent is away	Tantrums that may include begging, crying, and whining
Reluctance to go places (even familiar ones) due to a fear that caregiver/parent will leave them	Intense fear of being negatively judged, based on inadequate social performance	Having extreme fear about a specific thing or situation, such as dogs, insects, or going to the doctor
Being very afraid of school and other places where there are people	Constant worry about saying or doing something embarrassing	Feelings of shame and inferiority during social encounters
Elevated heart rate, sweating, blushing, shaking, trembling, chest tightness, choking sensation, dry mouth, and dizziness	Extreme reluctance to express opinions or initiate conversations, motivated by a fear of being dismissed as stupid or pushy	A disproportionate (and uncomfortable) feeling of giddiness or satisfaction at being praised or applauded by others
A powerful desire to never be the center of attention	A debilitating fear of social situations before they arise	Numbness and tingling in hands or feet
Difficulty concentrating	Tense muscles	Irritability and/or anger
Excessive worrying	Feeling agitated	Restlessness
Being very worried about the future and about bad things happening	Somatic symptoms like weakness, headaches, or stomachaches	Feelings of severe awkwardness or inferiority around authority figures
Feeling out of control	Trouble breathing	Feeling dizzy or shaky
Problems sleeping, sleeping too much/too little, fatigue, and reluctance to go to sleep	Nightmares about and/or the fear of permanent separation from a caregiver/parent	Sense of terror, sense of impending doom or death, and/or a fear that you may die



## Action Steps (Micro-Skills) When You Recognize the Signs and Symptoms:

- **Educate students about how to recognize signs and symptoms of anxiety in themselves and how to ask for help when they experience anxiety:** It is important for students to understand the signs and symptoms of anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks so that they can accurately identify these concerns should they experience them. It is also important for students who experience anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks to know how to reach out for help.
  - Use universal education approaches (e.g., Tier 1) to educate groups of students about the general signs and symptoms of anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks. These general approaches, which should be developmentally appropriate to the age/grade of the students, can occur in a general education classroom setting (typically facilitated by a teacher or co-facilitated by a teacher and school-based mental health professional) or in specialized social-emotional-learning sessions (typically facilitated by a school-based mental health professional). Students should be given general information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use targeted education approaches (e.g., Tier 2) to educate students at risk of experiencing anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks. Typically, this would entail small group sessions led by a school-based mental health professional and would include more detailed information about signs and symptoms, along with specific coping strategies that students could use to prevent/reduce concerns. Students should be given specific information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use individualized education approaches (e.g., Tier 3) to educate students who are known to be experiencing anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks. Typically, this would occur through individual counseling sessions provided by a school-based mental health professional and would include student-specific information about signs and symptoms, along with student-specific strategies to mitigate those concerns. Students should be given information about additional sources of help (e.g., crisis lines, community-based providers) in case they need support at a time their school-based mental health professional is not available. Teachers and school-based mental health professionals should regularly consult about how to best support students with anxiety while they are at school.
- **Recognize what exists in the environment during school that may cause anxiety, worries, phobias, fears, and feelings of panic in students:** There are many different causes of anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks among students, including fear of being separated from their parent/caregiver, fear of social situations, performance anxiety, fear of specific things/situations, and general excessive worry about life. Recent studies have shown that the global COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on school can cause anxiety, worries, phobias, fear, and feelings of panic in students. It is important to identify how the school environment may contribute to students' anxieties, worries, phobias, fears, and panic.
  - Pay attention to any physiological reactions (such as flushing of the face, dilation of



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the pupils, sweating, hand tremors) that students may display when anxious, and note what is occurring in the environment that may be causing that reaction.

- If possible, modify the environment to be more supportive of students experiencing anxieties, phobias, and panic attacks (e.g., allow students with performance anxiety to sit in the back of the classroom, offer consistent reassurance to students who are afraid that a caregiver will leave them, remove any things/situations from the environment that cause phobias in students, make plans for students with panic attacks to have a safe space and safe person in the school building to go to when feeling overwhelmed).
- Understand that signs and symptoms of anxiety are 'internal' experiences for students and it may not be readily apparent that students are struggling. Look for other clues (such as students who are very quiet, who do not speak during class, who do not participate in remote learning sessions, who spend time alone, who do not make eye contact, or who are restless) and find a non-threatening time to connect with them in order to ask them about any anxieties or worries that they may be having.
- **Help students find coping strategies for their anxiety, worries, phobias, fears, and feelings of panic:** Students who experience anxieties, phobias, and panic attacks can benefit from using coping strategies to calm themselves and cope better during school.
  - Teach students who are experiencing anxieties, phobias, and panic attacks how to use relaxation techniques to calm down/slow down the intense feelings and emotions they are experiencing. Relaxation techniques include strategies like deep breathing (taking three deep, slow breaths while breathing in for a count of three and out for a count of three); muscle relaxation (squeezing a muscle tightly for a count of three, then releasing all the tension and focusing on the sense of relief/calm); and the mindfulness grounding exercise (name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste).
  - Help students create their own calming/coping toolbox. Items that might be helpful in a calming/coping toolbox include stress balls, kaleidoscope, piece of tactile fabric, smooth stone, scented play dough, chewing gum, bottle of bubbles, MP3 player loaded with relaxing music, photo of a loved one/message from a loved one, or relaxation prompt cards/positive affirmation cards. It is important to include things that are meaningful and helpful for that specific student, as not all of these items will be helpful for all students.
  - Teach students to use distraction techniques when they notice signs and symptoms in order to move their attention away from that uncomfortable experience. Distraction techniques include strategies like thinking of their favorite things (e.g., being with their pet, walking on a beach, eating their favorite food, listening to birds sing), squeezing something (e.g., stress ball), counting (e.g., counting to 100 slowly, counting backwards, counting your breaths, counting your steps), or doing something else (e.g., exercising, yoga, reading, journaling, playing a game, doing a puzzle, taking a walk).



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- **Provide a safe place for students to talk about their anxiety, worries, phobias, fears, and feelings of panic:** Students who are anxious, worried, fearful, and panicked may need adults at school who can support them through this overwhelming, intense, and difficult time.
  - It is important to establish, maintain, and sustain positive relationships with students so they know that someone at school is available to them when they may need support. For remote learning students, it is important that adults at school check in with them regularly so they know who is available should they need support. The Search Institute's *Developmental Relationships Framework* provides a strong foundation for building relationships with students: <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>
  - It can be helpful for students to talk about their anxiety, worries, and fears. School professionals can encourage students to talk about their anxiety when they feel ready, while being careful not to force the conversation if students are not ready to talk.
  - Sometimes students who experience anxiety, worries, phobias, fears, and panic are unable to talk about their concerns, but still need a supportive adult in their lives. In this case, it is important to understand that just sitting with students quietly can let them know you care about them, provides a safe place for them, and communicates that you are available for them should they need you. For remote learning students, regular check-ins can let students know that you care about them and want to support them.
- **Use micro-skills daily during class to support students who have experienced anxiety, phobias, and panic attacks:** Students who experience anxiety, worries, phobias, fears, and panic can benefit from being in a supportive class environment.
  - Allow flexible deadlines when students with anxiety find a particular assignment worrisome. If possible, break the assignment into smaller, more manageable components to keep students from feeling overwhelmed.
  - Encourage students to follow-through and be accountable for their work, but not in ways that promote stress and discomfort.
  - Provide students with choices for assignments, which can help them feel like they have some control over their environment.
  - Ensure that students write down assignment instructions correctly so they have a thorough understanding of what is expected of them.
  - Post the class schedule daily so students can know what to expect and to ensure that there are no surprises in their daily routine.
  - Encourage involvement in extra-curricular activities to help alleviate some anxiousness through exercise and/or a sense of belonging in a social group.
  - During class, model calmness and self-control for your students.
- **Advocate for students to visit a mental health professional, if needed:** If symptoms become overwhelming, it may be important for students to visit a mental health professional to help alleviate their symptoms and identify coping strategies that work for them. School professionals can share referral information with students and their families about options for mental health treatment at school or in the local community.