



Anxiety and How to Help

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by worried thoughts and feelings of tension.

Anxiety looks different for everyone but may include: repetitively asking questions, avoiding tasks, withdrawal, repetitive body movements or sounds, pacing, fidgeting, crying, throwing items, kicking, yelling, or hitting. As everyone engages in different behaviours when they are anxious, it is important to know the person's typical demeanor and calm state in order to identify their signs of anxiety.

How to prepare for anxiety inducing situations

- ☀ Use visuals (e.g., routine strips, first-then, people locator, social scripts)
- ☀ Make their day predictable using a schedule and explain any changes as soon as possible
- ☀ Teach coping strategies and self-regulation outside of anxious situations and continue practicing once learned
- ☀ Make environmental modifications by adjusting the sensory input (e.g., dimming the lights)

How to provide support during a moment of anxiety

- ☀ Use short and concise instructions
- ☀ Provide clear limits
- ☀ Limit verbal instructions
- ☀ Reduce expectations
- ☀ Provide extra space if needed
- ☀ Keep a calm demeanor
- ☀ Use visuals as applicable (e.g., first-then)
- ☀ Validate their feelings

Self-Regulation

- ☀ Teach how to identify their own levels of emotions (e.g., what does your body do/feel when you are happy versus excited versus sad?)
- ☀ Teach coping strategies that are **specific to the person**
- ☀ Practice coping strategies and roleplay together when calm, outside of anxiety provoking situations
- ☀ Then, once they have acquired the coping skill, prompt them to use it during an anxiety provoking situation that cannot be removed or avoided (e.g., unexpected change in plans)

Common examples of coping strategies:

- ☀ Square breathing
- ☀ Activities that focus on the 5 senses
- ☀ Visual imagery of their favourite place
- ☀ Vestibular movement such as swinging
- ☀ Counting to 10 (forwards and backwards)
- ☀ Taking a break
- ☀ Proprioceptive movement through exercise or simple physical movements

Buron, K. D., & Curtis, M. (2012). The incredible 5-point scale: assisting students in understanding social interactions and controlling their emotional responses. Shawnee Mission: AAPC Pub.

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Anxiety. <https://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety/>