

Understanding Anxiety

A Guide for Students (and the Adults Who Support Them)

Anxiety is your brain and body's alarm system.

It is meant to protect you — but sometimes it goes off when you're not in danger.

Good News: You can learn how to calm it.



Key Words to Know

Anxiety – A worried or nervous feeling in your mind and body

Fight / Flight / Freeze – Your body's automatic survival response

Trigger – Something that starts your anxiety

Coping skill – A strategy that helps you calm down

Regulation – Bringing your body and emotions back to a steady state



Panic Attacks

What It Feels Like

- Racing heart
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Chest tightness
- Feeling like something bad will happen



A panic attack is not dangerous, even though it feels scary.
It ***always*** passes.

What To Do (Students)

- ✓ Name it: "This is a panic attack. I am safe."
- ✓ Slow your breathing (in for 4, out for 6)
- ✓ Push your feet into the ground
- ✓ Look for 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear
- ✓ Sit upright (opens lungs)

Parent Support Tips

- Stay calm — your calm helps regulate their nervous system
 - Use few words: "You're safe. Breathe with me."
 - Do NOT give long explanations in the moment
 - Praise recovery after the episode, not the panic itself
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Polyvagal Reset (Body Calm-Down Skills)

These help your nervous system shift from survival mode → safe mode.

Fast Resets for Students

- Hold an ice cube or splash cold water on your face
- Take slow breaths with long exhales
- Walk and swing your arms
- Listen to calming music
- Wall push or chair push (heavy work for your muscles)

Why It Works

Your body calms first → then your thoughts calm.

Parent Support Tips

- Encourage movement instead of lectures
- Model the strategy and do it together
- Create a “calm kit” at home (gum, ice pack, stress ball, headphones)



Emotional Escalation (When Feelings Get Big Fast)

Early Warning Signs

- Irritability
- Shutting down
- Negative self-talk
- Restlessness
- Sensory overload

Student Game Plan

- Green Zone: You're okay → stay on track
- Yellow Zone: Take a break early
- Red Zone: Use body-based coping (move, breathe, cold water)

- ✓ Ask for a break before you explode
- ✓ Use fewer words
- ✓ Change your environment

Parent Support Tips

- Watch for early signs instead of waiting for the meltdown
 - Offer choices:
“Do you want space or support?”
 - Talk later — not during the peak
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Nighttime Overthinking & Anxiety

Why It Happens

At night:

- It’s quiet
- Your brain has no distractions
- Your body is tired → thoughts feel louder

Student Sleep Strategies

-  “Brain dump” journal before bed
-  Stop screens 30–60 minutes before sleep
-  Calm music or white noise
-  Slow breathing in bed
-  Tell yourself: “I can think about this tomorrow.”

If you can’t sleep after 20 minutes:

- Get up
- Do something boring and calm
- Return to bed when sleepy

Parent Support Tips

- Keep a consistent sleep routine
 - Reduce late-night problem-solving conversations
 - Validate the feeling, not the worry content
 - Support structure (lights out, quiet time, no pressure to “fall asleep fast”)
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School Anxiety & Daily Stress

Quick Student Coping Skills

- ✓ Break big tasks into small steps
- ✓ Use a planner or checklist
- ✓ Arrive early to reduce social stress
- ✓ Sit near supportive peers

Parent Support Tips

- Focus on effort, not perfection
 - Avoid rescuing — coach instead
 - Help them build morning and homework routines
 - Communicate with the school when patterns appear
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What Helps Anxiety Most

For Students:

- Movement
- Sleep
- Talking to someone safe
- Predictable routines
- Self-compassion

For Parents:

- Co-regulation before correction
 - Calm presence > perfect words
 - Consistency at home
 - Celebrating small wins
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Most Important Message

Anxiety is ***not*** a weakness.

It means your brain is trying to protect you.

And you can learn to manage it.



Coping Skill “Recipes” for Students



Step-by-step plans you can actually follow

📖 Recipe 1: The 60-Second Panic Reset

When to use: racing heart, can’t breathe, panic feeling

- 1 Plant both feet on the ground
- 2 Inhale through nose for 4
- 3 Exhale slowly through mouth for 6
- 4 Push hands together for 10 seconds
- 5 Name 3 things you see

🧠 Say: “This will pass. My body is safe.”

Repeat this: 3 times



Recipe 2: The Polyvagal Quick Reset

When to use: overwhelmed, angry, shutdown, overstimulated

- 1 Cold water on wrists or face
- 2 Wall push or chair push (10 seconds)
- 3 Slow breath out like you’re fogging a mirror

Then:

✓ Take a short walk ✓ Sip water

Total time: under 2 minutes



Recipe 3: Nighttime Overthinking Shutdown

Before bed:

- 1 Write all worries in a notebook
- 2 Close the notebook and say: “Not for now. Tomorrow at ___.”
- 3 Turn on calm music or white noise
- 4 Take 10 slow breaths

If still awake:

→ Get out of bed. → Do something boring in low light → Return when sleepy