

Understanding and Supporting Students Anxiety

Classroom Presentation

Academic Task Engagement

When the student feels safe and regulated:

Engaged and compliant
Works carefully and seeks reassurance
May demonstrate strong understanding
Often conscientious and motivated
May appear quiet but attentive

When anxiety is elevated:

Avoids starting tasks
Perfectionistic – erases repeatedly or restarts work
Seeks excessive reassurance
Freezes when unsure
Leaves work incomplete
Appears distracted but is internally preoccupied
Shuts down during perceived high-pressure tasks
May ask to go to sick bay or bathroom
May refuse tasks linked to evaluation or performance

Performance & Evaluation Situations

Tests, oral presentations, reading aloud, and public answering can trigger heightened anxiety.

Avoids eye contact when questioned
Says "I don't know" despite knowing content
Becomes tearful or visibly distressed
Complains of headaches or stomach aches
Requests to leave room
Freezes during timed tasks
Performs significantly below ability under pressure
Fear of making mistakes in front of peers

Response to Teacher Instructions

Anxiety can impair processing and working memory, particularly under stress.

Appears not to listen when worried
Requires repetition when overwhelmed
Delayed task initiation
Seeks reassurance before beginning
Over-checks expectations
Avoids asking questions publicly
Misinterprets neutral feedback as criticism

Written Output

Perfectionism and fear of mistakes often impact output.

Overly brief responses to "stay safe"
Erases frequently
Slow writing due to overthinking
Avoids risk-taking in responses
Difficulty completing within time limits
Strong ideas but limited expression under pressure

Emotional & Physiological Indicators

Anxiety is often internalised and not always obvious.

Quiet withdrawal
Tearfulness
Irritability
Restlessness or fidgeting
Head down
Frequent reassurance seeking
Somatic complaints (stomach aches, headaches)
Catastrophic thinking ("What if I fail?")
Avoidance of transitions or new tasks

Peer & Social Impact

Fear of negative evaluation often drives behaviour.

Avoids group leadership roles
Allows others to take over
Reluctant to share ideas
Seeks alignment with safe peers
Withdraws during competitive activities
May be socially capable but inhibited

Functional Understanding

- Anxiety activates a threat response.
- The brain prioritises safety over learning.
- Cognitive resources shift from thinking to survival.
- Working memory capacity reduces.
- Performance drops despite intact ability.
- Avoidance behaviours function to reduce distress, not to defy authority.

Teacher Adjustment Guide

Instruction Delivery

- Provide clear, predictable instructions
- Preview expectations before tasks
- Give advance warning before calling on the student
- Offer choice where possible
- Check in privately rather than publicly
- Use calm, neutral tone when correcting

Assessment & Performance Supports

- Provide additional time for tests and exams
- Offer small-group or separate room testing
- Allow alternative demonstration of knowledge (verbal, typed, recorded)
- Reduce time pressure
- Break assessments into smaller segments
- Avoid surprise oral reading or questioning

Task Initiation Supports

- Provide structured starting points
- Use sentence starters or scaffolds
- Offer brief check-in at task commencement
- Set small, achievable first steps
- Reinforce effort rather than outcome

Emotional Regulation Supports

- Teach and normalise use of regulation strategies
- Allow access to calm corner or break card
- Provide subtle exit option if overwhelmed
- Pre-plan coping strategies for high-stress tasks
- Model that mistakes are expected and safe

Classroom Climate

- Avoid public comparison
- Avoid sarcasm or humour directed at errors
- Reinforce bravery, not just correctness
- Praise risk-taking and attempts
- Maintain predictable routines
- Prepare student for changes in advance

Key Principle

An anxious student is not refusing — they are protecting themselves. Support safety first. Learning follows regulation.