

Anxiety, Worry and Stress



Anxiety, worry and stress can place a heavy burden on students, their families and their teachers. In addition to underachieving in school, unmanaged anxiety can result in significant physical and mental health issues. Professional help and offering a safe, highly-enriched, and less stressful environment in which to learn are essential to successfully addressing these challenges.

Twice-exceptional students dealing with anxiety are best served through a coordinated effort that provides support for their challenges and a commitment to helping them develop their gifts and strengths both in and out of school.

Anxiety Explained

Anxiety begins in the amygdala, deep within the temporal lobes of the brain. The amygdala regulates heart rate, breathing, urination and sexual function. It is not consciously controlled yet serves as an alert system designed to protect us from danger. When it senses changes in the environment that signal potential threats to safety, it reacts by sounding an alarm and triggering a fight-or-flight response. Additional input from other parts of the brain allow for the threat to be rationally processed and a determination to be made about whether the threat is real.

When this system is operating properly, students are able to move beyond non-threatening situations to get on with their day. When this alert system is overactive, it can result in serious anxiety disorders that require attention. Although anxiety can be expressed in many ways, unmanaged anxiety can result in school avoidance, difficulty in social situations, debilitating perfectionistic tendencies, stressing and obsessing over minutia, selective mutism, and feelings of panic or worry about bad things happening in the future.

It is important to understand that not all anxiety and stress are bad. Occasional anxiety is part of everyday life. For instance, performance anxiety ahead of a big test is relatively common, especially for gifted and twice-exceptional students. Problems arise when anxiety is difficult to control and the resulting stress disrupts the student's ability to get on with living and learning.

Because gifted and twice-exceptional students often operate with intensity, they are prone to developing anxiety and are dependent upon parents, teachers and counselors to help them overcome it. Anxiety is considered a learning disability and should be diagnosed through an expert evaluation by a qualified professional such as a licensed educational or clinical psychologist. Professional counseling or treatment may be necessary.

Unmanaged anxiety produces a heavy emotional burden on students and their families. If left untreated, it can result in serious consequences such as academic underachievement, substance abuse, and increased risk of other illnesses and psychiatric disorders. Exploring and leveraging strategies, supports, and therapies is fundamental and takes time. In the case of twice-exceptional students, addressing their gifts and challenges simultaneously is essential for success.



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Signs of Anxiety, Worry and Stress

Common types of anxiety include perfectionism, generalized anxiety disorder, panic, phobias, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), social anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), agoraphobia and separation anxiety. Parents, teachers and counselors should seek professional help for the student if any the following telltale signs arise:

- Physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, headaches, nausea, shortness of breath, confusion, shakiness, panic, stomach pain and difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty with attention, impulsive behavior, relating to others, and reading
- Total shut down or behaviors deemed as defiant or oppositional
- Complaints of feeling sick, experiencing meltdowns, avoiding obligations to school and family, and avoiding activities that were previously enjoyed
- Constant worry about bad things happening, fear of social situations and interacting with others, and difficulty making friends

Supporting Students

In addition to seeking professional help for anxiety, techniques for managing it both in and out of the classroom include breathing exercises, mindfulness exercises, talking with a trusted adult, stabilizing in a safe space, engaging in regular physical activity, and participating in something enjoyable to restore calm feelings. Patience is essential for parents and teachers given it may take significant time to help the student develop and utilize helpful techniques. Assessments, counseling and therapy with a licensed professional along with support from school counselors to identify stressors and monitor the student's performance and wellbeing at school are essential. Approaching the situation as a coordinated team that consistently shares information and strategies increases the likelihood of improvement for the student.

In cases where a school system is unwilling to collaborate on behalf of the student, education advocates can assist in informing them of the legal protections in place for the student as well as ensuring appropriate special education services or classroom accommodations are in place and followed. Anxiety disorders is a disability included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and U.S. Civil Rights Law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Students diagnosed with anxiety may qualify for special support and accommodations in school. Parents of twice-exceptional students diagnosed with anxiety should be familiar with the protections offered by the law and the services required of schools.

Gifted Resources for Parents & Educators

- 2e News
- Bright & Quirky
- Davidson Institute for Talent Development
- GHF Gifted Learners (formerly Gifted Homeschoolers Forum)
- Hoagies' Gifted Education
- Let's Talk 2e
- National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC)
- Renzulli Center at University of Connecticut
- Roeper Review
- Summit Center
- Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

About Summit Center

Summit Center, founded by Drs. Daniel B. Peters and Susan Daniels, provides educational and comprehensive assessments, consultations, and counseling for children, teens, adults, and families. We work with clients who are neurodiverse, gifted, talented, twice-exceptional (have both gifted and less developed abilities), and/or are asynchronous in their development. Summit Center has assembled an expert team of professionals and specialists dedicated to using a strengths-based approach to help our clients reach their fullest developmental potential.