

Emotional Issues: Information for Teachers

Teachers are often among the first to suspect that a student may have an undiagnosed emotional issue. Emotional problems describe a wide range of different things such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. These may lead to your student facing difficulties at school such as overreacting to events and demonstrating sudden outbursts, frequent mood changes, and excessive periods of emotional upset. Students with difficulties in this domain have overblown emotional reactions to seemingly minor events.



ANXIETY:

Most children experience anxiety at some stage of their development and it is typically a normal part of growing up. However, approximately 14% of girls and 8% of boys experience anxiety to an extent where it interferes with their ability to complete day to day tasks. This persistent and excessive degree of fear and worry characterises anxiety disorders. Typical anxiety disorders include:

Social Anxiety: Excessive self-consciousness that goes beyond common shyness or nerves, leading to avoiding social contact.

Separation Anxiety: Fear of leaving their parents (or someone they care about) in case something bad happens to them whilst they are separated.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder: A tendency to excessively worry about many areas of life, anything from friendships to world events.

Specific Phobias: An excessive and uncontrollable fear of an object or situation.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: Frequent thoughts (obsessions) that are unreasonable and intrusive. Certain routines (compulsions) are performed to try to get rid of the thoughts.

Children with anxiety often:

- Worry that others will judge or think badly of them.
- Avoid situation in which they feel uncomfortable, coming up with a variety of excuses
- Appear socially withdrawn; exhibit signs of shyness, have few friends and avoid social situations.
- Avoid situations where they feel out of their comfort zone (e.g. younger children may have difficulty separating from parents, whereas older children may 'freeze' when their normal routine is broken).
- Worry about a range of things that rarely concern their peers (e.g. health, school, world events, having an accident themselves or that their parents will be involved in an accident, etc).
- Have perfectionistic tendencies (e.g. will tear up work and get distressed if they don't feel it is perfect).
- Avoid new situations.

If they reach the stage of panic attacks they may show symptoms, or complain of:

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Nausea
- Dizziness



Strategies for Managing Anxiety in the Classroom:

- Make students aware about anxiety and how it may affect them physically and assure them there is nothing wrong with them and this is a natural response.
- Acknowledge and validate the student's feelings. Show understanding that their worries/fears are real to them. It is important not to dismiss children's anxious feelings, but to help children see that the situations they are worried about may not be as bad as they think or predict.
- Provide children with specific strategies they can use to self-soothe. For example taking deep breaths, concentrating on a particular thing in the classroom, relaxing muscles, etc. Teach and model appropriate responses to stress.
- Ask the child what thoughts they are having about the situation and then ask them how likely it is that their fears will come true. Ask them to tell you evidence for their fears (eg. how often does this happen to their classmates). Get them to pretend that this is happening to a friend and ask them what they would say to the friend to make them feel better.
- Encourage the child to 'have a go' even if it is scary for them and tell them it is OK to feel scared and still do something anyway if it is important to them. Modelling situations in which others feel scared but still try anyway is helpful (eg. famous singers performing at a concert). This way the child learns that it is possible to cope with negative emotions and they don't need to run every time they face something difficult.

DEPRESSION:

Childhood depression is different from the everyday sadness that children display. It is characterised by feelings of sadness that persist over a period of time and may cause interference to social activities, interests, schoolwork and family life. Depression is a common illness; it is estimated that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 8 boys experience depression at some stage of their lives.

Children with depression may show:

- Feelings of sadness that persists for prolonged periods.
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt or that life is not worth living
- Changes in appetite and/or sleeping patterns, either increased or decreased.
- Social withdrawal.
- Loss of interest in activities that they previously enjoyed.



- Fatigue and low energy.
- Impaired concentration and poor work completion.

These children may talk about suicide or express that they wish they were no longer alive. Cutting is very common among teens as an outlet to deal with strong emotions or pressures. Children who are cutting may wear long sleeve tops in warm weather, have unexplained marks on their body, spend a lot of time alone or show secretive behaviour. If you suspect a child may be cutting immediate consultation with the school counsellor is recommended.

Strategies for Managing Depression in the Classroom:

- Check in regularly with the student to identify any worries they may have, assess their current mood, and let them know that you are available to talk to them at any time. You can also encourage them to see the school counsellor if there is one available.
- Consider allowing more time for the completion of schoolwork and adjusting the child's homework load to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed if you note that they don't appear to be coping.
- Provide child with positive feedback and praise them when they get involved in classroom activities and social interactions.
- Demonstrate the importance of friendship and support from peers; encourage students to create sense of belonging with one another.
- If the student is expressing overly negative thoughts, rather than telling them how to think, ask them what evidence they have for these negative thoughts (ie. try and get them to prove these thoughts to you). If they are unable to see how unrealistic these thoughts are, ask them what they would say to a friend to try and help them if they said the same thing to them.
- Provide outlets for the child to express their feelings, such as journal writing, or an online diary.

Referring Your Students for Treatment

If you suspect a student is suffering from an emotional issue contact their parents to see if similar behaviour has been displayed at home and the school counsellor to discuss assessment and management. The earlier the intervention the better the long term outcomes.

