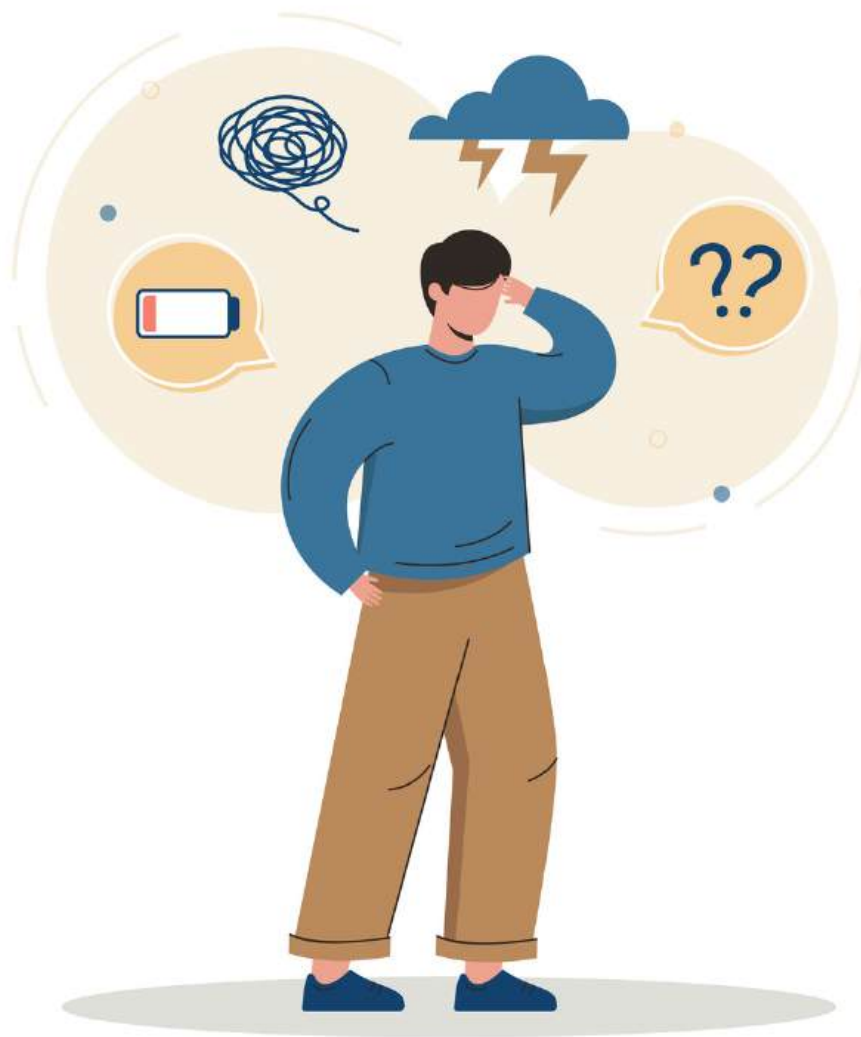


A guide to **UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY**



Developed as part of
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Being a student is like being a juggler—except instead of colorful balls, you are balancing school, friendships, extracurriculars, and family expectations. Some days, you keep everything in the air like a pro. Other days, it feels like everything might come crashing down. **Stress is a normal part of this balancing act, but when it starts to feel overwhelming and persistent, it might be something more—like anxiety.**

Sometimes it feels like our brain just won't switch off, with thoughts racing even when we try to focus elsewhere. Or like our heart is running a marathon while we are just sitting in class. That is what anxiety feels like; **it is constant, intrusive and it interrupts our day to day activities.**

Anxiety isn't just feeling "stressed" before an exam or "nervous" before a big event. It is like having a voice in your head that constantly keeps shouting, "WHAT IF?!" even when everything is actually fine. The good news? Everyone feels anxious from time to time and it is completely natural. Even better news? There are ways to handle it like a pro.

**Let's break it down and learn some creative ways to deal with it.
Let's do this!**



What is Anxiety?



Imagine your brain is like a superhero, always on the lookout for danger. **Anxiety is what happens when your brain mistakes "normal life stuff" (like a math test or a new social situation) for a giant fire-breathing dragon. It is your body's way of saying, "Hey! Be careful!"—except sometimes, it overreacts.**

Technically, anxiety is a natural response to stress, powered by your body's "fight, flight, or freeze" system. When your brain detects a possible threat, it releases stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, preparing you to react. While this response was essential for our ancestors to escape real dangers, modern challenges like exams and social interactions can trigger the same response—even when no actual danger exists.

What Can Trigger Anxiety?

You may have heard the word "trigger" used casually, but in the context of anxiety, a trigger is something that causes a strong emotional or physical response.

Unlike minor annoyances, true anxiety triggers activate your body's alarm system, making you feel threatened, even if there is no real danger. They can be different for everyone and may sometimes be obvious, while at other times, they sneak up unexpectedly.



Common Triggers of Anxiety:



School Pressure: Tests, assignments, and expectations can create a sense of overwhelm.

Social Situations: Talking to new people, giving presentations, or feeling judged by peers.



Fear of Failure: The pressure to succeed or meet high expectations

Overloaded Schedules: Trying to manage school, extracurriculars, and personal life all at once.



Uncertainty About the Future: Worrying about grades, career choices, or what is next in life.

Big Changes: Moving to a new school, changes in friendships, or new responsibilities.



Negative Self-Talk: Thoughts like “I am not good enough” or “What if I mess up?” can create anxiety.

Lack of Sleep or Poor Nutrition: A tired body and mind are more prone to stress and anxiety.



Social Media & Comparison: Seeing “perfect” lives online can make you feel like you are not doing enough.

Difference Between Anxiety, Nervousness, and Stress

Think of it this way: if your brain was a radio, these three feelings would be different stations.



Nervousness FM:

This station plays just before something big—like a test or a performance. It's like a few butterflies in your stomach, but once you start, the nervousness slowly fades away.



Stress 101:

This station turns up when you are juggling too much—homework, deadlines, social life, family expectations. It is like carrying a backpack full of books; it's heavy, but once you put it down (or finish your tasks), the weight lifts.



Anxiety Central:

This station keeps playing even when there is no obvious reason. It is like a playlist stuck on repeat, making you feel worried and restless even when things are okay. Sometimes, it even plays random "what if" scenarios that may never happen!

While nervousness and stress usually go away once a situation is over, anxiety sticks around and can make even simple things feel overwhelming.

Signs of Anxiety to Look Out For

Anxiety can affect different parts of your life. Here's how:

Physical Signs:



Fast heartbeat



Sweaty palms



Stomach aches or nausea



Restlessness



Trouble sleeping



Dizziness or feeling light-headed

Emotional Signs:



Feeling overwhelmed



Irritability



Feeling scared without knowing why

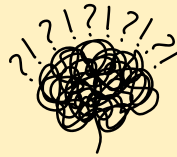


Feeling on edge all the time

Cognitive (Thinking) Signs:



Racing thoughts



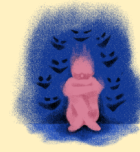
Overthinking



Trouble concentrating



Ideas of perfectionism or unrealistically high standards of self



Imagining worst-case scenarios

Behavioral Signs:



Avoiding certain situations



Procrastinating



Snapping at people



Seeking constant reassurance

What Happens When We Feel Anxious

When anxiety is mild, it can motivate us to prepare better. But when it is too much, it can:

- Affect school performance
- Lead to trouble sleeping and exhaustion
- Make socializing harder
- Cause avoidance of important activities

Did You Know?



Believe it or not, anxiety is not always a bad thing! In small amounts, it can actually help you:

- **Stay alert and focused** – A little bit of anxiety before a test can push you to study and perform better.
- **Prepare for challenges** – Anxiety can act as a warning signal, helping you plan ahead and avoid mistakes.
- **Increase motivation** – Feeling a little anxious about an assignment? That might be the push you need to get started!
- **Enhance problem-solving skills** – When you are anxious, your brain works extra hard to find solutions to potential problems.
- **Build resilience** – Overcoming anxious moments can make you more resilient and confident in handling future challenges.

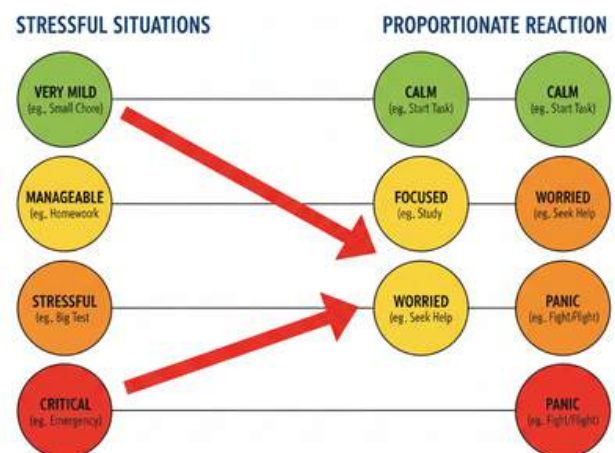
The key is to manage anxiety so it works for you instead of against you.

Coping with Anxiety

1 Identifying Anxiety Triggers

As mentioned earlier, knowing what makes you anxious helps you manage it. You can start by noticing which situations lead you to feeling overwhelmed and uncomfortable, and what is your reaction to it.

An easy way to map this is make two columns, with four circles each, green, yellow, orange and red. In the first column, write down stressful situations starting from very mild (green), to manageable (yellow) to stressful (orange) to critical (red). Now, in the next column, write down the proportionate reaction to those circumstances. If you are reacting to a green situation with an orange/red response, it means that the body's alarm system is getting activated, helping you identify the situations that make you feel anxious in an unhealthy manner.



2 Keeping a Thought Journal

Write down your anxious thoughts. Seeing them on paper can make them feel less overwhelming. Try doodling around them or rewriting them into a funny or positive version.

Journal Prompts

Understanding anxiety

- What is making me feel anxious right now?
- What is the worst that could happen? What is the best that could happen?
- Have I been in a similar situation before? How did it turn out?
- What emotions am I feeling, and where do I feel them in my body?

Challenging Anxious Thoughts

- Is this thought 100% true, or is my mind exaggerating?
- If my best friend had this thought, what would I tell them?

Reframing and Problem-Solving

- What is one small step I can take to feel more in control of this situation?
- What is something I have overcome in the past that I didn't think I could?
- If I were feeling calm and confident, how would I handle this?

Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

- What is something I'm grateful for today?
- What is one thing I did well today, no matter how small?
- How would I treat a friend who was feeling the way I do right now?
- What is one positive thing I can tell myself right now?

3 Grounding Techniques



5-4-3-2-1 method:

Name 5 things you see, 4 you touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste.



Hold an object and focus on its texture and temperature.



Imagine your feet are roots growing into the ground, keeping you steady and strong.

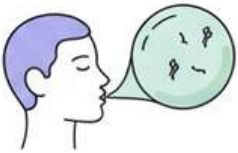


Temperature Shift: Splash cold water on your face or hold an ice cube to activate the body's natural calming response.

4 Relaxation Techniques

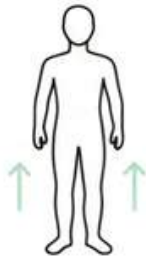
Deep breathing:

Inhale for 4 counts from your nose, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts from your mouth. You can place your hand on your belly to feel the rise and fall which might help you ground yourself



Bubble Breathing

Try "bubble breathing"—imagine blowing your worries into a bubble and watching them float away.



Body Scan Meditation:

Close your eyes and focus on relaxing different parts of your body, starting from your toes and moving up.

4-7-8 breathing:

Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, breathe out for 8 seconds.



Progressive muscle

Progressive muscle relaxation (tense and relax each muscle group)



Visualisation:

Imagine a peaceful place that could make you experience pleasant feelings and try to focus on as many details as possible. This could be the colour of the things around you, the smells you experience and the people who might be there in your peaceful place.

5 Distraction Techniques

Distraction techniques can effectively manage anxiety by redirecting focus away from distressing thoughts and help gain a sense of control. While these techniques are not a permanent solution for anxiety, they serve as effective temporary strategies. By redirecting your focus, you can create space to address underlying issues more calmly and thoughtfully later.



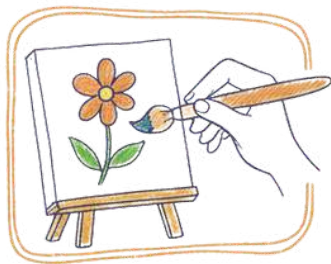
Listen to music



Read a book



Do a puzzle



Engage in a hobby



Count backwards from 100 or list items in a category

6 Mindfulness Techniques

- **Focus on the present moment** without judgment.
- Try **guided meditation or mindful breathing**.
- **Picture a calm place in your mind** and visualize yourself there, engaging all five senses.
- **Finger Breathing:** Trace the fingers of one hand with a finger from the other hand, breathing in as you move up and out as you move down.
- Try **“Mindful Doodling”**—draw random patterns or shapes while focusing on how the pen feels in your hand.



7 Reframing Negative Thoughts

Our thoughts shape our feelings, and sometimes anxiety tricks us into believing things that aren't entirely true. Instead of letting these thoughts spiral, try reframing them like this:



- From **“I will fail this test”** to **“I will do my best, and that is enough.”** Imagine if you talked to a friend the way you talk to yourself—would you be so harsh?
- Challenge irrational thoughts: **Ask yourself, “Is this really true? Do I have evidence for this, or is my anxiety just making assumptions?”**
- **Personify your anxious thoughts:** Treat them like a grumpy neighbor—acknowledge them, but do not entertain!
- **Thought Defusion Exercise:** Picture your anxious thoughts as leaves floating down a stream. Watch them drift past without grabbing onto them. The thoughts are there, but they don't control you.
- Flip the script: Instead of **“What if I embarrass myself?”** try **“What if I have fun and surprise myself?”** Small shifts in language can make a big difference.

Externalizing Anxiety

Instead of saying, “I am anxious,” try saying, “Anxiety is visiting me today.” Imagine anxiety as a separate character—it could be a pesky gremlin, a storm cloud, or even a nosy parrot that won't stop chattering. When you separate anxiety from yourself, it becomes easier to challenge and manage it.

Ask yourself:

When does it show up and how do I respond to it?

How can I respond to it differently?

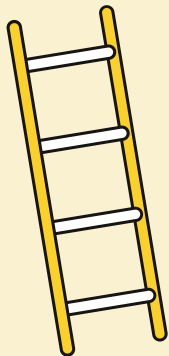
What does it usually say/do to me?

What does my “Anxiety Creature” look like?
What are the colour/shape/size/features?

What strengths do I have that Anxiety ignores?

The Coping Cat Strategy

C.A.T. Steps:



Bravery Ladder:

Make a list of anxiety-provoking situations from least to most scary and gradually work through them.



Feel-Good File:

Keep a collection of things that make you happy—like funny jokes, positive messages, or achievements.

Role-Playing:

Practice facing fears in a safe way by imagining different outcomes and problem-solving beforehand.



8 Self-Care



9 When and Where to Get Help

If anxiety starts affecting your daily life, it's okay to seek help. Talk to:

A trusted teacher

A parent or guardian

A school counselor

A mental health professional

Anxiety might be tough, but so are you! With the right tools, you can handle it and thrive.



How to Talk About Anxiety



If You Are Experiencing Anxiety:

Talking about anxiety can be tough, but expressing what you are feeling can help. Here are some ways to start the conversation:

“I have been feeling really anxious lately, and I don’t know how to handle it. Can we talk?”

“I feel overwhelmed all the time, and I need some support.”

“I don’t need advice right now, but I just want someone to listen.”

“Can you help me figure out some ways to manage my anxiety?”

If Someone Else Is Dealing with Anxiety:

If a friend opens up to you about their anxiety, your response can make a big difference. Here’s what you can say:



Validate their feelings:

“That sounds really tough. I am here for you.”

Offer support, not solutions:

“I do not have all the answers, but I will listen.”



Avoid dismissing their worries:

Instead of “Just relax,” try “I know this feels overwhelming, but you are not alone.”

Encourage professional help if needed:

“Have you talked to a counselor or someone who can help?”



Sometimes, just knowing that someone cares and understands can be a huge relief for someone struggling with anxiety.

Anxiety Toolbox: Your Personal Coping Kit



Think of an anxiety toolbox as a collection of go-to strategies that help you manage anxiety when it strikes. Here's what you can include:



Grounding Objects: A small object (like a stress ball or a smooth stone) to hold onto when feeling anxious.

Breathing Exercises: The 4-count breathing technique can quickly calm your nervous system.



Thought Journal: Writing down worries and challenging negative thoughts.



Favorite Playlist: Music that helps you relax or lifts your mood.



Mindfulness Cards: Simple reminders like “This moment will pass” or “I am safe.”

Calming Scents: A lavender sachet or essential oil to help with relaxation.



Comforting Quotes: A list of affirmations or motivational quotes.

Distraction Activities: A small puzzle, doodling pad, or a book to shift focus away from anxious thoughts.



Trusted Contact List: Names of people (friends, family, teachers) you can reach out to for support.

Building your own toolbox ensures you always have helpful strategies ready whenever anxiety shows up!



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