

# JANUARY 2020: STUDENT ANXIETY

## Coping with Student Anxiety

By Anna Duvall and Chrissy Roddy



Anxious students may not be able to verbalize the specific cause of their anxiety; they just know they are experiencing excessive and ongoing worry and/or fear about something. They may avoid situations or activities in school. They may start to decline in academics and have trouble focusing and concentrating, which many school counselors and teachers may confuse with ADHD. However, anxious students also typically exhibit other symptoms, which tend to become a pattern, such as always being sick on test day. Students with anxiety also may have irrational and negative thoughts.

Anxiety symptoms may present differently among students at different ages, who may not be able to express what's causing their anxiety and may instead exhibit symptoms. It is vital to be on the lookout for any of these symptoms:

- attendance problems
- clinginess/separation anxiety
- panic attacks
- academic problems/decline in schoolwork
- frequent urination
- frequent crying
- difficulty concentrating/staying focused
- blushing/sweating
- feeling weak/tired
- excessive worrying
- health problems such as headaches or an upset stomach
- avoidance of people/situations
- sleeping problems
- lots of "what ifs?"

Everyone has bad days and may exhibit one or more of these symptoms, but a pattern should raise red flags. Although diagnosing anxiety is not the school counselor's job, it is important to be cognizant of the types of anxiety disorders. These can include generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder,

post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety or panic disorder. Any of these can affect a student's ability to perform well in school. Students with anxiety may also be at risk for developing other mental health issues, such as depression, drug/alcohol use and suicidal ideation.

## Steps to Support Students

Experiencing anxiety can be frightening, especially for young students. An urgent sense of nervousness and apprehension can be debilitating for anyone. These feelings are amplified when students don't understand why they feel this way or what they can do to feel better. One of the most beneficial things you can do for anxious students is to help them understand their why – not just the surface why, but the deep, underlying reason they become so anxious. A technique to accomplish this is "The 5 Whys," developed by Sakichi Toyoda, an industrialist, inventor and founder of Toyota Industries. He believed by asking "why" five times, the nature of a problem and its origins become clear.

To use this strategy with a student, first ask, "Why are you experiencing anxiety?" Use their answer to pose another why question, and repeat this five times. Here is an example from "Anxiety Annie," a sophomore student with test anxiety:

*Why are you anxious about the test?*

I must get good grades, and tests count 80 percent of my final grade.

*Why is it important to get good grades?*

I want to have happy parents.

*Why is it important to have happy parents?*

It makes me feel good when they approve of me.

*Why do you want your parents to approve of you?*

I want to achieve what my parents achieved; I want to have the kind of life they have.

*Why do you want to have the kind of life your parents achieved?*

I don't want to be the odd man out.

Annie's fifth why indicates she doesn't want to "be the odd man out" – she wants to fit in with her family. Background information on Annie confirms that education is an important aspect of her family dynamic. All adults in her family (parents, grandparents, etc.) were excellent students and have pursued careers in education. Once Annie realized that fitting in was the root of her anxiety, she began to recognize that taking tests wasn't the issue; her sense of belonging was. This helped Annie put her anxiety into focus, and she began to view test taking in a different light.

With understanding, students can begin to determine how they can manage anxiety. You can teach students several techniques to use during class without drawing attention to themselves.

**Deep breathing:** Slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure and increasing oxygen intake all have a calming effect. Common exercises are belly breathing and the 4-7-8 breathing exercise (inhale for four counts, hold for seven, exhale for eight).

**Grounding:** Grounding can distract students' mind from their anxiety and keep them grounded in the present. Common exercises include the 5-4-3-2-1 senses technique (five things you can see, four things you can feel, etc.), counting how many things in shades of a particular color can you see around the room and counting backward by 7, starting at 100.

**Imagery:** When students create a detailed mental image of a safe and peaceful place, they redirect attention away from what is stressing them and toward an alternative focus.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:** This is the practice of tightening one muscle group at a time followed by a relaxation phase with release of the tension. Students tense and relax the muscle groups one at a time in a specific order, beginning with the lower extremities and ending with the face.

**Positive self-talk and affirmations:** This helps students challenge self-sabotaging and negative thoughts. Students can practice through journal writing, negative-thought stopping or snapping a rubber band during negative thoughts. You can help students select affirmations that speak to them. When students repeat the affirmations – and believe them – they can start to make positive changes.

**Journaling:** Journaling helps students clarify their thoughts and feelings, gaining valuable self-knowledge. Students can process their anxiety by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved.

**Desk yoga:** Neck rolls, cat-cow stretch, shoulder shrug, triceps stretch, seated twist and the seated pigeon pose are all exercises students can discretely practice at their desk.

Once students determine which techniques work for them, you can assemble a list with descriptions for the student to discretely tuck into a notebook as a quick reference. Or, the student can keep their journal, list of affirmations or picture of their peaceful place where they can access it without classroom disruption. Having this survival kit available can bring a feeling of control over their anxiety.

### **Strategies with Teachers**

In addition to working with individual students, you can equip teachers with strategies to use with an entire class. All the techniques above can easily be modified for classroom use. Teachers may find these activities useful at the beginning of the day, during transition times or before a test. Teachers can also serve as compelling role models for students. As teachers model relaxation techniques during class time, students internalize the importance of lifelong stress management.

School counselors are tasked with working with the whole student, not just academic, career or social/emotional development. It is crucial that students with anxiety learn positive coping techniques now to become healthy and productive citizens in the future.

There is no quick, easy fix for students with anxiety, especially those who are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Offering support and flexibility, however, allows you to help students as they discover meaningful, effective ways to address their anxiety.

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# A Journey to Mindfulness

By Julie Chamberlain, Jennifer Perilla and Erica Herrera



Anxiety affects more than 40 percent of U.S. students and is the leading mental health issue among youth. At Tyler Elementary School, in Gainesville, Va., we noticed that students were entering kindergarten unable to manage their emotions and displaying disruptive behaviors. Older students were anxious about tests and academics, with frequent trips to the nurse and school counselor. Discipline infractions were increasing, and teachers were showing signs of burnout.

We knew we needed more than a program or an idea; it had to be a total philosophical shift from reactive to proactive. Offering students, families and staff skills to use any time, in any situation, could be transformative. For adults and students, mindfulness changes the brain, emphasizes focus on the present and leads to happier people. Therefore, a mindful-centered school made sense.

## **Mindfulness vs. Meditation**

What is mindfulness, and how is it different from meditation? Mindfulness, as defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, means, “Paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally.” Mindfulness is about noticing whatever experience you are having, including all thoughts, feelings or physical sensations. It is not about blocking out thoughts or removing stress; mindfulness helps change the relationship with stress. Mindfulness can be practiced anytime, anywhere by purposefully being engaged with all senses focused on the present moment and without judgment of thoughts and feelings that may be attached. Mindfulness is not the same as meditation – meditation is an intentional internal practice, with an inward focus increasing calmness, concentration and emotional balance.

Our journey began with the principal, school counselor and school social worker brainstorming ways to become a mindful-based school. During the teacher workweek that year, we shared a presentation on growth mindset, mindfulness and empathy with faculty and then with students on the first day of school. Each team of teachers brainstormed ways to implement mindfulness in their classrooms. We implemented schoolwide events, including a family mindfulness night and the Great Kindness Challenge.

Our core focus areas are: awareness, focus/attention, emotions and acceptance. Implementing our mindfulness philosophy has resulted in increased test scores, decreased referrals and lowered anxiety. We've also seen a significant difference in how students acknowledged and took control of anxiety.

### **Lizard vs. Wizard**

Central to mindfulness is understanding how the brain works and how to create balance between internal feelings and what is happening around you. Students are taught that the amygdala is where the fight/flight/freeze reaction occurs. This is similar to a lizard that reacts instinctively when a perceived threat approaches; his amygdala is on high alert. When the lizard brain is activated, information cannot pass to the prefrontal cortex, the "wizard brain" (the wise decision-making part of the brain) because it is blocked by the emotions of the lizard brain. It is great for protection but does not allow one to focus, decide and reason – essential skills needed in school.

By practicing mindful activities, students build their capacity to respond instead of react when the lizard brain is activated, and they can instead use their wise wizard brain, ultimately allowing their hippocampus to store it into long-term memory and create new neuro-pathways. Following are some of our approaches to helping our elementary school students practice mindfulness.

**Mindful breathing:** Breathing is central to mindfulness. Deep, full breathing calms the amygdala and helps the wizard brain think clearly. With lights dimmed and calming music or a guided mindfulness app playing, students sit in a comfortable position. They are invited to close their eyes or choose a focal point in the room. We then focus on breathing slowly. It is okay if the mind wanders; the purpose is to recognize that and bring it back to focus on breath or a focal point. It is wise to start with a short period of time, increasing as the students become used to the technique, with a shared debrief on what was easy or challenging. Students who have difficulty sitting still can add a sensory component such as tapping their leg as they inhale or exhale.

**Belly buddies:** Students choose a small stuffed animal or squishy to use when they practice breathing. Students lie on their backs and place the belly buddy on their abdomen; the belly buddy will rise and fall with inhale and exhale.

**Five-finger breathing or shape breathing:** Students hold their hand upright and trace around each finger, breathing in as the finger traces up and breathing out as the finger traces down the other side.

**Mind bubbles:** We read "Mind Bubbles," by Heather Krantz, to demonstrate we all have thoughts that come and go. Students are allowed to pop bubbles, and we point out that this is a natural reaction. Next, they watch the bubbles float around and recognize the desire to pop them but are encouraged to respond rather than react. This helps students make the connection that we can respond to thoughts/emotions instead of acting on instinct. This exercise builds self-control.

**Anchoring:** We tell students, picture yourself on a sailboat riding the waves of your emotions. Some days are calm, and your boat gently bobs. Other days are rough, tossing your boat around. As a captain for your boat, would you choose your lizard brain or wizard brain? Your wizard brain is wise and knows when to drop an anchor to keep your boat steady, even in choppy waters. An anchor is a word, phrase, symbol or technique, such as breathing, that brings one back to the present moment, a core mindfulness practice.

**Brain dump:** Students are asked to write down all of their thoughts, such as homework, friend issues, activities, etc. They then review it and indicate which thoughts are related to the past, present or future. We open a discussion about what they recognize about their thoughts. Awareness of one's thoughts, without judgment, is an important exercise in mindfulness.

**Mindful movement:** Yoga and mindful walking are simple ways to include mindful movement during the day. Students can listen for new sounds and record them or spot items in the colors of the rainbow. Books for this activity include “Yoga Bunny,” by Brian Russo, and “Good Morning Yoga,” by Mariam Gates.

**Mindful body:** Awareness of how and where emotions are felt allows one to respond mindfully. One tool is a body map identifying emotions with colors, symbols and words and where they physically happen in the body. Explain that having uncomfortable emotions is normal, but they come and go. Have students close their eyes and tell them an uncomfortable object will be placed in their hand. They are instructed to pay attention to how the object feels and fully explore it. They sit with the uncomfortable feeling and are directed to focus on their breath. Books for this activity include “Angry Octopus,” by Lori Lite; “Shubert Learns to Be a S.T.A.R.,” by Dr. Becky Bailey; and “Listening to My Body,” by Gabi Garcia.

**Mindful calming bottle:** Students can create personal or classroom calming and feelings bottles. While reading aloud “Moody Cow Meditates,” by Kerry Lee Maclean, students listen to the feelings Moody Cow experiences and how he is able to calm down. Students choose colored glitter to place in a bottle to represent a feeling they have. We emphasize that feelings are not good or bad, but they can be pleasant or unpleasant. A calming bottle is a great tool as a focal point during mindful breathing.

**Mindful chime or singing bowl:** To begin a mindful practice, use a chime or ringing of a bowl, encouraging students to be still until they can no longer hear the chime. This builds their capacity to slow down, pay attention and be purposeful.

Staying in the present moment is a challenge. The mind wanders between the past and the future, which can lead to stress and unhappiness. A quote from Lao Tzu expresses why mindfulness is so critical: “If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.” We hope these activities will enable more moments in the present.

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## Battling Test Anxiety

**By Naomi Howard, Ed.D.**

Test anxiety can show in ways from headaches and shortness of breath to crying or lack of concentration. It can affect students physically, emotionally, behaviorally and mentally. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America names failure as the leading cause of test anxiety: fear of failing the test, failing to prepare for the test and feelings of failure from failing previous tests.

In his book “Brain Rules,” John Medina defines stress as “a measurable physiological response, a desire to avoid the situation and a loss of control.” He explains how it can affect a person’s cardiovascular system, immune system and memory.

School counselors can counteract the stress of test anxiety by planning, preparing, incorporating positive self-talk and advocating for parental support. Be aware of your school atmosphere and the emotional wellness of your staff and students throughout the year, and plan accordingly. Plan training sessions with staff to emphasize the importance of teaching foundational study skills, and lead classroom discussions addressing test anxiety on a regular basis, not just the week before testing. Strategically design group counseling sessions and school counseling core curriculum lessons to teach test-taking strategies to reduce testing anxiety, and keep an open door for individual counseling.



## Prepare the Battle Plan

Preparation for testing builds confidence in students. Create an environment of intentional and frequent conversation regarding good test-taking strategies. I recently learned the 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique: focus on five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Students can easily use this coping strategy in a classroom during an exam to reduce symptoms of test anxiety.

Here are a few resources and techniques I've found to be successful with test anxiety.

**Controlled breathing exercises:** Have students inhale for a four count, hold for five, exhale for another four count, and, if needed, do it again and exhale with puckered lips (do it as many times needed until breathing is regulated). Other breathing techniques are blowing bubbles or using musical instruments (e.g., deep breaths when playing a clarinet).

**Feeling thermometers:** Create feeling thermometers in the classrooms, giving students the chance to indicate how anxious they are feeling at that time, and then teachers can lead a discussion about handling it in a healthy way.

**Laughter:** Telling a corny joke or getting students to laugh some other way can help relieve some of the test anxiety.

**Exercise:** Incorporate modest exercise techniques such as walking, stretching, etc.

**Action plans:** Teach students how to develop an action plan when feeling test anxiety.

Also, be aware of attendance issues, which may be a symptom of avoidance or “planned forgetfulness” when confronting a test

**Apps:** Another tool is literally at our fingertips. Here are a few apps to consider:

- Breathe2Relax: Contains videos demonstrating relaxation breathing to reduce stress
- Calm: Contains tools to reduce anxiety and induce quality sleep
- Happify: Contains games and activities to reduce stress, strategies to build resiliency and ways to encourage positive self-talk

**De-Stress Fest:** This activity takes a little organization and planning, but it's relatively inexpensive and helped my students de-stress before the standardized testing cycle. We created rotation stations with one station per sense.

1. Smell: cotton balls with aromatherapy oils on them (keep them in plastic bags)
2. Touch: stress balls made from balloons and play sand or flour
3. See: glitter water bottles, coloring pages with positive quotes and/or encouraging poetry or short stories
4. Taste: chocolates, gum or peppermints
5. Hear: rain sticks made from paper towel rolls and rice/beans or playing classical music while doing coloring pages

**Positive self-talk:** Use these creative ideas with any age group.

- Crush the can'ts: Students write down a negative thought on a slip of paper and tape it to an empty soda can and stomp on it to literally "crush" their can'ts.
- Positive world wall: You can use positive quotes, list test-taking strategies and include can-do attitude posters or sticky notes to let students add their own positivity to the wall.
- Personal positive story: Ask students what makes them anxious about the test, what do they think will happen, what can they tell themselves to face the anxiety, what can they do to overcome the anxiety, what's the conclusion?
- Test anxiety argument: Why is it OK/not OK? Is it silly? What can you do instead?
- Daily positive quotes: Suggest students write positive quotes in their agenda or on their phone.
- Positive self-talk cards: Find ideas galore on Pinterest.
- Journaling: Have students express the anxiety in writing and evaluate their feelings.

### **Gather the Troops**

Parental/family support plays an integral part in reducing testing anxiety. Encourage parents/families to cultivate meaningful conversations with their students to reduce test anxiety. Support strategies include:

- Encouraging a good night's rest and eating a healthy breakfast (with protein) at home or school
- Giving positive affirmation (e.g., positive notes on snacks or lunches, bathroom mirrors, etc.)
- Talking openly and honestly about the test and their student's feelings, to lead into discussions of ways to handle test anxiety in a healthy way
- Ensuring the students are prepared – arriving to school early, being organized, etc.

It's also important to help the parents recognize that avoidance is not an option – their child will need to face the test anxiety head on and work through it, not around it. Ignoring the anxiety isn't the answer; students need to be aware that stress affects everyone, in different ways, and the key is developing tools and strategies to reduce it.

As students learn to implement strategies to overcome test-taking anxiety, they grow and become more confident from one "battle" to the next. After a while, tests may not seem so stressful after all, and the tests can become a game or a challenge – no battle at all. Students can then see every test as a chance to succeed, rather than a chance to fail.

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# Using Tech to Beat Technostress

By Russell A. Sabella, Ph.D.



Experiencing stress is a normal part of living. It's a biological reaction – the body's way of telling us something isn't right. At healthy levels, stress acts as a motivator, helping us stay focused and more effectively accomplish tasks. Although technology has many benefits, it has also blurred the boundaries of time and space, which has made stress management more challenging.

Technology-related stress, or “technostress,” is a common experience as we all try to adapt to the introduction of new technologies. For better or worse, change is stressful, and technology is changing how we live every day. Whether adult, child or adolescent, technology can keep us in a state of high alert, feeling habitually compelled to connect, share and multitask. The sources of technostress include a mixture of internal factors (e.g., perceptions, level of technology use and coping skills) and external factors, such as one's support system, uncontrollable events (e.g., cyberbullying) or dealing with technology itself.

Remember, technology is a tool. Although some technologies, such as the internet, electronic communication and productivity tools, are nearly impossible to avoid, we still have some choices about the extent to which many technologies affect our lives. And, some technologies can help us live our lives better, get stronger and be more productive. In this way, technology is both part of the problem and part of the solution to dealing with stress.

## Decisions, Decisions

You observe a middle or high school student being irritable, angry and lethargic. It might be normal hormonal fluctuation, but some students exhibit such emotions because of decision fatigue – the deteriorating quality of decisions made by an individual after a long duration of decision making. Technology has multiplied the number of options and decisions we face every moment. On a student's smartphone, for example, they must decide whether to check their texts, watch a video, post on social media, check for new snaps, take a photo or video or avoid the phone altogether. Across multiple devices, together with offline decisions, both students and adults navigate hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions a day. What to do? What not to do? So many decisions can be exhausting.

Decision fatigue may also explain why some students make irrational and unreasonable decisions: stress and fatigue have compromised their judgment. Sometimes students randomly make a choice just to shut down the stressful decision-making process. We may interpret this as students being reckless or acting impulsively, without attention to potential consequences, when, in fact, they may have been doing this ad nauseum.

Conversely, decision fatigue can lead to “analysis paralysis” when there are just too many options and we can’t get ourselves to settle on just one. In this case, we may be too tired to compare the various aspects of numerous options. This may present itself as procrastination or, worse, being irresponsible.

### **Everyone’s Having Fun Without Me**

FOMO or “fear of missing out” is the worry that others elsewhere are having more fun or that you are missing an experience. It can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, envy, insecurity and loneliness. Not only are some children and adolescents stressed about missing offline activities such as parties or other functions, they also worry about not being included in online activities. FOMO might mean that you weren’t tagged in a social media post or included in an online group chat or snap. FOMO might happen when you see a photo on Instagram of a bunch of your friends together, and you weren’t there, intentionally or not. Some students experience FOMO when an online discussion or sharing focuses on an unfamiliar topic (e.g., a popular show everyone else seems to be watching).

FOMO has been around forever, although it seems to be escalating with real-time, location-based social media tools.

### **Unrealistic Expectations**

Students (and adults) go out of their way to share information online that depicts them in a positive light. Most people share only life highlights – their achievements, successes, promotions and awesome experiences – and leave out the rest. This can easily create a warped perception of others and, when compared with one’s own life, leave one feeling deprived, unlucky or like a failure. One of the worst-case examples is how technology has increased the proliferation of unrealistic body images, especially among girls. Students use filters that automatically remove blemishes, or apps designed to “nip and tuck” photos. Some spend hours taking hundreds of selfies then manipulating just the right one before posting. The final stroke of deception is a caption that indicates the image is normal or typical when it is not. Over time, the effects of this not only include stress but may eventually contribute to poor self-confidence, distorted body image and disordered eating.

### **Tech to the Rescue**

When helping students with stress, all of our traditional counseling approaches apply. And, as with anything, there’s also an app for that – portable stress management tools with a range of features. From providing detailed information on the effects of stress on the body, to tracking stress levels, to helping students learn stress management skills such as deep breathing, apps can provide a sophisticated and immersive experience on the go or on demand. Many stress-reduction apps are available across common platforms including Android, Apple and Kindle. Google these and find the right one for you or your students:

- Breathe2Relax
- What’s Up?
- Mindshift
- Relax Melodies
- Virtual Hope Box
- Take a Break
- Tactical Breather
- Headspace
- De-stress Me

Virtual reality (VR) is becoming more widely accessible due to falling costs of hardware and software. VR allows students to enter a computer-generated, interactive, simulated environment. A VR application can be

download to a smartphone and used with an inexpensive viewer such as [Google Cardboard](#) or used directly with a VR headset such as [the Oculus Go](#). VR can make learning about and practicing stress management a game-changer for students. VR can provide many of the same benefits of learning in an otherwise inaccessible physical environment – and sometimes without the accompanying safety risks.

Here are a few VR apps to get you or your students started:

- [Guided Meditation VR](#)
- [Relax VR: Rest & Meditation](#)
- [Happy Place](#)
- [Virtual Speech](#)

Other apps to help keep stress in check include ways to practice organizational skills, mindfulness, task management and even act as a virtual personal coach.

Indeed, technology has ushered in great opportunities and tools that can help students more effectively and efficiently achieve. The same technologies, when used excessively or inappropriately, can become a barrier. School counselors can be pivotal in helping students use technology intentionally, with focus and balance. In some cases, technology can supplement how we already help students establish healthy practices, boundaries and methods for meeting goals.

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#### **For More Info**

- [The 10 Best Calming Apps to Relax, Destress and Clear Your Mind](#)
- [GuardingKids.com](#)
- [ConnectSafely: Promoting Safety, Privacy & Security](#)
- [Common Sense Education Digital Citizenship Curriculum & EdTech Reviews](#)

## **Stress Busters**

### **By Barbara Truluck**

Having struggled with chronic worry and anxiety, I understand the difficulty students can face in the classroom. I focus my practice as a school counselor on stress and anxiety management and have certifications and training in this area. I often discuss with teachers and parents that many of our students are high-achieving but driven by details in a desperate attempt to calm racing thoughts, worry and fears that control the mind and body.

Treating students with severe levels of anxiety and stress, of course, requires therapy and services outside the school counselor's realm. However, for students suffering from lower levels of stress, anxiety and generalized worry, a small-group approach can help them deal with their concerns and focus on their schoolwork.

#### **Managing Student Stress**

A few years ago, we noticed a considerable increase in our middle school students reporting they were "stressed out" and having trouble regulating their emotions at school. Students increasingly asked to go to the

clinic with stomachaches, headaches and other stress-related symptoms. We also saw more students coming to the school counseling office for help with panic attacks, meltdowns and stressful situations. When school data showed absenteeism and school avoidance had become an issue, we knew it was time for a multitiered approach to help our middle school students learn coping skills, stress management strategies and resiliency building.



In our Tier 1 school counseling core curriculum lessons, we teach growth mindset and study skills schoolwide to help all students build resiliency. Data from our first quarter showed that we also needed a Tier 2 approach. Named “Stress Busters,” this small-group intervention helps students who need more support and coping strategies.

I couldn’t find a psychoeducational program that fit my students, so I developed my own five-session program using proven, research-based strategies. Group participants were identified by teachers, parents and self-reports, and frequent visitors to the clinic and school counseling office. I wrote and received a grant for yoga mats, journals, relaxation music, art materials and aromatherapy supplies.

Target ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors were:

- M 1. Belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional and physical well-being
- B-SMS 7. Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem
- B-SMS 10. Demonstrate ability to manage transitions and ability to adapt to changing situations and responsibilities

The group goal isn’t to eliminate stress and anxiety but to help students manage it. During the first session, I administer Cohen’s Perceived Stress Scale to the students to collect pre-test perception data. Then we establish our group norms of confidentiality, support and respect. I begin each session in the same way because a sense of routine helps students feel more in control. We then sit in a circle for share time to discuss stressors at school, at home and with friends. After share time, we stand and do a series of deep-breathing and stretching exercises. The breathing exercises slow heart rate, bring oxygen to the brain and cells and promote a relaxation response.

### **Coping Techniques**

I teach a different coping technique or strategy for students to practice until our next session. Students receive a journal, and between group sessions, keep a record of triggers/stressors and which coping technique they

used in each situation. The “worry journal” is a technique for the chronic worriers. Students write down a list of all worries, then separate them into columns of “What I Can Control” and “What I Cannot Control.” I tell students they can give themselves permission to worry about the column of “What I Can Control” for 15 minutes every day after school. After the 15 minutes are up, they are to take a mental break and aren’t allowed to worry about the list until after school the next day. Students say this has helped them by limiting worry time and still validating that they can worry within limits.

During group time, students also learn cognitive behavior therapy techniques including replacing ruminating negative thoughts with positive thoughts or statements they write in their journal and repeat out loud: “I am confident,” “I am safe,” “I am ok,” “I can relax,” “I am brave” and “I’ve got this.” By repeating these positive statements in stressful situations, students can break the stress cycle of negative self-talk.

We also engage in visualization and mindfulness activities with a stroll around the school building. I teach students about health and nutrition, the importance of a good night’s sleep and drinking water to stay hydrated throughout the day, which helps balance mental health and well-being. We play a game with coping skills cards, and the students receive a chart of 100 Coping Techniques for Students to carry with them in their schoolwork binder.

Students learn a squeeze and breathe technique for de-escalating anxiety attacks, and I give them a pocket-sized stress ball to carry with them. Art therapy activities include making glitter calm-down bottles, dreamcatchers and vision boards of happy thoughts.

Each group session ends with quiet time, lying on yoga mats listening to relaxing instrumental music. Although I created these sessions for my middle school students, all of the activities can be adapted easily for elementary or high school.

## **Stress Busters Results**

Stress Busters groups meet for five intensive sessions during the second quarter, and then I check in with group members during third and fourth quarters. Data from the pre- and post-survey showed 90 percent of participants had decreased stress levels, and overall absences improved by 80 percent.

Hearing students support each other during our group sessions and seeing their relief when they realize they aren’t alone in dealing with anxiety is always rewarding. And helping students return to calm helps them return to class faster. Students also learn how to use strategies to remain in class and remove the stress and anxiety cycle barrier to learning.

Results for this intervention were so positive the first year that I’ve continued to run Stress Busters groups every year thereafter. Students who have been through the three years of Stress Busters say that learning ways to get through times of high anxiety has helped them be healthier and happier both in and out of the classroom. As students learn to effectively manage stress, they build resiliency and make stress management a way of life.

I have learned through the years how important it is to empathize and not minimize what students are feeling. By providing students with practical solutions to overcome and calm the worried brain, we can teach them how to rewire their thoughts by acting with their smarts and not fears.

## **Stress Busters Small-Group Sessions**

### **Session 1**

Stress scale perception survey (pre-test)

Discuss group norms

Circle share: Stressors with transition to each grade

Breathing and stretching exercises  
What is stress? Good stress vs. bad stress  
Vision board, positive thoughts, talents  
Quiet your mind, relaxing music on yoga mats

## **Session 2**

Review group norms  
Circle share: Stressors with homework  
Breathing and stretching exercises  
Make a daily schedule (free time, study time, friends, family, TV time)  
Worry/stress diary  
Gratitude journals  
Visual imagery  
Quiet your mind, relaxing music on yoga mats

## **Session 3**

Review group norms  
Circle share: Journal  
Breathing and stretching exercises  
Coping skills practice: "Oh no" cards  
What can I control? What can't I control?  
Trash activity: Throw away negative thoughts  
Positive self-talk  
Dreamcatchers art activity  
Quiet your mind, relaxing music on yoga mats

## **Session 4**

Review group norms  
Circle share: Journal  
Breathing and stretching exercises  
Mindfulness activity: Walk and talk  
Calming jars art activity  
Quiet your mind, relaxing music on yoga mats

## **Session 5**

Review group norms  
Circle share: Journal  
Breathing and stretching exercises  
Coping skills handout  
Reducing test anxiety handout  
Eat healthy and stay well  
Stress scale perception survey (post-test)  
Quiet your mind, relaxing music on yoga mats

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