



Supporting Anxious Learners

Austin Vaile, MA Ed. Therapy

Educators and caregivers alike are often faced with the challenge of supporting a learner who struggles with anxiety related to their learning. Whether the source of the anxiety is short-term or ongoing, it can impact a student's ability to engage with content acquisition or in demonstrating their understanding. This can be damaging to self-esteem and impact the student's view of themselves as a learner. Numerous studies have shown that anxiety impacts the learning processes of:

- Concentration/attention
- Working Memory
- Articulating understanding or thoughts
- Choice-making/prioritizing (Executive Function)

When someone perceives (whether or not the threat is actual) that they are in a threatening situation, they often experience a heightened sensitivity to sound or movement in their environment, causing them to lack the ability to attend to an academic task. Students can become distracted by their own thoughts and perceptions, missing important information needed for the process of learning. This can "snowball" into creating more anxiety when they realize that they are not able to recount what has been discussed or even read in class. This can become problematic when students don't have the metacognition to understand or language to express what they are experiencing, so this anxiety can manifest as physical illness, avoidance, disrespect, or "shutting down".

Situations that may create anxiety in learners:

- Learning differences: ADHD, dyslexia, auditory processing challenges, etc.
- Strained social relationships with peers or teachers/adults
- Trauma in the home or community
- Worry or fear that they are unable to succeed at the task before them

I believe that we must first create a sense of safety before we attempt to teach or ask students to accomplish learning tasks. It's important to acknowledge that educators and caregivers can also become anxious when faced with a reluctant learner due to feeling responsible for helping them to succeed. Before addressing anxiety expressed by the young learners in our lives, it is essential that we practice our own self-care strategies.

What adults can do to support the emotional aspect of anxiety:

- Recognize when we are feeling anxious or overwhelmed and practice strategies to soothe ourselves
- Acknowledge when we feel anxious and model the use of calming/soothing techniques before pressing forward with instruction or demands:
 - "I'm feeling a bit anxious right now. I'm going to pause and take a deep breath. Would you like to join me?"

- Destigmatize having anxious feelings and asking for help
 - “I can get really anxious when I’m trying new things. Sometimes I need to ask for support.”
- Remember that rude/avoidant/disruptive behavior from students may be an expression of anxiety
- *Be curious, not furious*: express wonder about what might be happening internally for the child:
 - “It seems like you’re having a rough moment right now. Would you like to take a short break and then check in with me?”
 - “Are you able to tell me what feels so difficult about this task? Maybe I can find a way to help.”
 - “Whew! Sometimes I can get really overwhelmed! Is that what’s happening for you right now?”
- Offer opportunities to express anxiety or resistance; model using expressive language in a non-charged, matter-of-fact manner
- Validate students’ expressions of anxiety or resistance while offering a message that we are here to support them in moving through those feelings.
 - “Yes, I understand that this feels really difficult right now. I appreciate that you’re letting me know what you’re feeling. Can we try doing this together to see if that helps?”

Ways to support Executive Function and engagement:

- Break tasks into small pieces:
 - “Let’s focus only on the first question” (You can use a sheet of paper to cover the rest of the page)
- To avoid extra anxiety caused by a feeling that you’re “hovering”, use a small timer to indicate when you’ll be back to check their progress
 - “Okay, you work on this one question, and I’ll be back in 2 minutes to see how it’s going. Do you have any questions for me before I go?”
- For students whose anxiety causes them difficulty with feeling “put on the spot” in classroom discussions, give nonverbal prompts in advance:
 - Place a Post-it note or index card with a written question (one you’re sure they know the answer to) on the desk in front of them with a quiet message, “I’ll ask you to share this in a few minutes”.
- Provide visual examples of completed work and concise directions
 - Visual models allow students to check their work to make sure they have done what you’ve asked them to do
 - Less is more in terms of directions. Use clear, concise language to avoid overwhelm
 - Remember that anxious students in a state of heightened auditory sensitivity may be overwhelmed by verbal instructions.

Gentle humor and the celebration of achievements can go a long way in helping to inform the anxious brain that it is safe and competent. Celebrating with a, “Yes! We survived that really challenging task! High fives all around!” can feel a bit over the top, but even when we get eyerolls in response, the anxious brain can begin to adjust its perception of “hard” tasks, and even start to look forward to the next celebration of achievement. Our anxious learners will benefit from knowing that we are willing to work right alongside them to accomplish their learning tasks. Building trust and a sense of safety can go a long way towards increasing confidence and willingness to tackle difficult tasks, helping to alleviate the “snowball effect” of anxiety in our learners. Find something to celebrate, no matter how small, and make sure to breathe through the process. Remember that small steps forward are progress, and that trusting relationships are the key to success.