The Anxious Student: A Non-Clinician’s Guide for Working with Anxiety in the Classroom

NYSAIS Brain Conference
March 5, 2020

Agenda
- Understanding & defining anxiety
- Working skillfully with student anxiety

Practice: Orienting/Attuning

Notice five things that are...

Scope of Practice Disclaimer
- We are (mostly) teachers, not clinicians.
- It is not our job to diagnose or treat any clinical condition--anxiety or otherwise.
- We can develop a toolbox to use in our interactions with students that will help them to stay regulated or to regulate when they become dysregulated.
- Take care of yourself as needed.
Tell Your Neighbor...

- What does student anxiety look like in your context? How does it show up?
- How do you respond to or work with student anxiety when it arises, and what are the challenges to doing so?

Understanding Anxiety
Our common framework

Remember How Our Brains Understand Threat:

- Face flushed
- Digestion slows
- Bladder relaxes

Remember How Our Bodies Understand Threat:

- Tunnel vision
- Heart races
- Shaking

adapted from “The Fight or Flight Response” by Jemfood, CC by SA 3.0

www.learningtothrive.nyc (c) 2020
Reflect for yourself:

What does this look like for you? What happens in your own body when you feel anxious, afraid, agitated, etc? (as we all do)

Practice: Shape Breathing

1. Choose your favorite shape
2. Trace it on your hand
3. Connect your breath to the action of tracing

Anxiety (Clinical*)

“excessive worry”...”more often than not”...

- Generalized anxiety
- Social anxiety
- Separation anxiety
- Selective mutism

*note economic & cultural disparity

Anxiety (Practical)

- Strong sense of worry
- Physical and cognitive experience of perceived (often future) threat
- Brain and body mobilizing against present “felt-sense” of distress
“Fight”
- Distractibility or hypervigilance
- Hyperactivity or restlessness
- Test anxiety
- Difficulty with transitions

“Flight”
- Avoiding social interactions
- School refusal
- Homework avoidance
- Frequent bathroom or nurse trips

“Freeze”
- Can’t move ahead
- Video games/tv
- Constant need for feedback
- Producing bare minimum of work

In a classroom, this might look like:

How To Help

Working skillfully with anxiety

**General Approaches**

We want to help young people build resources to that they can meet rather than avoid challenge:

- Building distress tolerance
- Building (or using) capacity to self-soothe
- Building broader perspective

This usually means not removing the challenge entirely.**

**You’re not likely to be the one to determine “dosage”**

**Optimal Arousal Theory:**

The Yerkes-Dodson Law
**Mindset Theory:**

How hard I think it is.
+ How capable I think I am to handle it.

**Perceived Challenge**

- How anxiety affects performance:
  - Low challenge, low skill:
    - Immune response and stress response
  - High challenge, low skill:
    - Immune response and stress response

**Perceived Skill/Resources**

- Growing the Window of Tolerance / Range of Resilience

**Put Your Tail Down and Mask On!**

1. [Image: Person putting on a mask]
2. [Image: Person holding a bottle]
3. [Image: Person holding a child]
4. [Image: Person holding an animal]

**Practice: Tapping**

[Image: Person tapping their fingers]

Graphic: NICAMB.com

Image: Janice Bowles
Helpful Practices

Working skillfully with anxiety

Non-Cognitive Strategies

- **Movement**: allow for a walk, exercise
- **Touch**: tapping, squeeze, soothing holds
- **Orienting**: name 5 things that are ___
- **Breathing**: tracing shape, counting, movement + breath
- **Inquiry**: what would feel soothing in this moment?
- **Connection**: INCRA (“Inherently non-clinical relational activity”)
  - e.g. Tell me about something you like
  - e.g. Play a song for me that you enjoy

Cognitive Strategies

Only helpful when the rational brain is “back online”:

- **Re-storying**: And then what happened? (i.e. how did the story end?)
- **Seeing possibilities**: Tell me about a time when... (...you did well...you were able to overcome this obstacle, etc.)
- **Perspective**: What’s the worst thing your mind imagines will happen? If that came true, how bad would it be and how long would it last? From 0%-100%, how likely do you think that is to happen?

**NOTE**: Soothing strategies need to be bounded or they reinforce the flight response.
**Increasing Protective Factors**

*General resilience-builders:*
- Positive emotion (savoring, gratitude)
- Connection to others
- Sense of purpose & accomplishment

*Resilience-building prompts:*
- Something you’re grateful for or enjoyed today...
- Something that’s going/gone well this week...
- Something you’re proud of? Someone you’re proud of...

**Watch Out for Minimizing Responses**

- “Oh, don’t worry about it”
- “Just ignore it”
- “You need to try harder”
- “Don’t be so dramatic”
- “It’s not a big deal. This is all in your head.”
- “Everything’s going to be fine.”

*More Helpful Language:*
- “This is hard right now, but it won’t last forever.”
- “It sounds like there’s a lot of ___ present right now. How can I help you to be with that challenge”

Questions? Contact?

Alan Brown
alan@learningtothrive.nyc
www.learningtothrive.nyc