

In *15-Minute Focus: Anxiety, Worry, Stress, and Fear*, Leigh Bagwell gives counselors and educators a step-by-step primer on how to support students who struggle with anxiety.

Anxiety can cause students to feel isolated and overwhelmed, preventing them from learning and engaging in the classroom. Rather than tell our students not to worry, our job as educators should be to recognize when our students are struggling with anxiety and get them the support they need. In this book, Bagwell explains the physiological progression from a trigger to a full-blown anxiety attack, and provides a variety of prevention and intervention strategies for school counselors, educators, and administrators.

What you'll get:

- Understanding of anxiety and clarification of anxiety vs. misbehavior
- Breakdown of various anxiety disorders and how they present
- Helpful tips for parents who have anxious children
- Curated list of resources, including organizations, curriculum, books, and more!

When students experience anxiety, they need help navigating through it. This guide will teach school counselors, educators, and administrators how to become powerful advocates for their students so they can thrive in the classroom and in life.



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In addition to her work in Tennessee, Leigh has shared her experiences and knowledge with school counselors and school counseling leaders in Georgia, Texas, Kentucky, and Iowa as well as working with the American School Counselor Association. She is currently working on her doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision at the University of Tennessee. Her experience includes working as a school counselor and school counselor supervisor in both suburban and urban school districts.

Working alongside experts in various fields of mental health, the *15-Minute Focus* series is designed to home in on a specific mental health topic, signs to look for, practical intervention and classroom management strategies, and effective ways to communicate and collaborate with internal staff, outside referrals, and student families.



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**See page 79 for information about Downloadable Resources.**

# Introduction

Rachel sits quietly in the back of the classroom. Her long hair shields her face as she looks up at the screen. Her teacher is asking for a volunteer to work the problem out for the class. Rachel tries to avoid eye contact with the teacher. Her heartbeat quickens at the mere thought of getting up in front of her classmates. Her thoughts have been whirling since she took her seat. She has to do a presentation in her English class the following period, and she is terrified. All she can think about is what she is going to do when her teacher asks her to give her presentation. Her family only has one computer and her older brother had to use it the night before, so Rachel was not able to finish her project. Even if she had gotten it done, Rachel still was not sure how she could stand up in front of her classmates and teacher and talk about her presentation. She was beginning to think about just telling her English teacher that she did not do the project. Getting a failing grade would be easier than facing the class.

Rachel's thoughts are interrupted when her teacher approaches her desk. Her mouth goes dry and her head starts throbbing. It is then that Rachel realizes another student is talking in front of the class. Her quick relief, though, is followed by panic as her teacher towers above her. She assumes she is in trouble, so she tugs her jacket sleeves over her hands trying to become more invisible. She glances up at her teacher and wonders if she could ever understand what is happening in her mind and in her body. She can feel the tears begin to form in her eyes. Should she tell her how afraid she is of speaking up in class? Her teacher leans down and . . .

...

So many of our students have experiences like Rachel. They are overwhelmed with worry and fear and do not know what to do with those feelings. Whether their anxiety is rooted in their performance, a loss of a loved one, a potential crisis, or just how their brains are wired, the fear can be debilitating. Anxiety makes them feel isolated and steals any hope for a time when worry will not win the battle in their minds. Although students' bodies may show up in our classrooms, their whirling minds keep them from learning the material that we want them to know.

Rachel and her fellow students suffering with anxiety need to know that we see them, we believe them, and we want to help them. In the absence of knowing the right approach, educators have tried to calm their students with advice such as: “You will be okay.” “Don’t worry about that.” “You need to believe in yourself.” When Rachel tells adults that their well-meaning words do not provide any comfort, they often misinterpret her behavior as apathy or defiance, scolding her with punishments that only heighten her anxiety.

As teachers, school counselors, and administrators, we recognize these students’ symptoms but do not always know how to help them remedy them. What can we do to truly help these students? There have been many studies about what happens in our brains and bodies when we feel anxiety. When, as educators, we understand the process that the brain uses to protect its body, we can begin to see our anxious students from a new perspective. We can employ proven practices to interrupt the cycle of symptoms the students experience.

In this book, we will explore the physiological progression from a trigger to a full-blown anxiety attack. We will investigate the difference between an anxiety diagnosis and inappropriate behavior. Finally, we will identify a variety of prevention and intervention strategies that can be used—from the classroom, to the school counselor’s office, and even to the administrator. We have included resources to share with parents and extend support from the school to home.

This guide is intended to be a helpful resource for educators to use as they are working with a student experiencing anxiety. Practical information is organized so a classroom teacher, school counselor, or administrator can quickly find helpful strategies to help a student in their setting. When you are ready to take a deeper dive into the research about anxiety in students, a robust list of resources is included at the end of the book to guide your learning.

Teachers and educators are charged with teaching students important academic information as well as valuable life skills. But for so many of these coaches, mentors, and tutors, their students are much more than people in desks. They are developing children with growing minds, bodies, and hearts. When they experience challenges, they need help navigating through and continuing on with their journey. Once we are equipped with the right strategies to help them manage their anxiety, we can be a powerful advocate for our students.



# 1

## What Is Anxiety?

Does the thought of helping your students experiencing anxiety give rise to your own anxious thoughts and fears?

Most children and adults have experienced anxiety. They may worry and feel overwhelmed. Their pulse starts to race and the pounding in their head begins to drown out all other sounds. For some, their mouth may go dry and they will worry about having to speak in front of others. Or their face begins to flush, giving away the internal crisis to those around them.

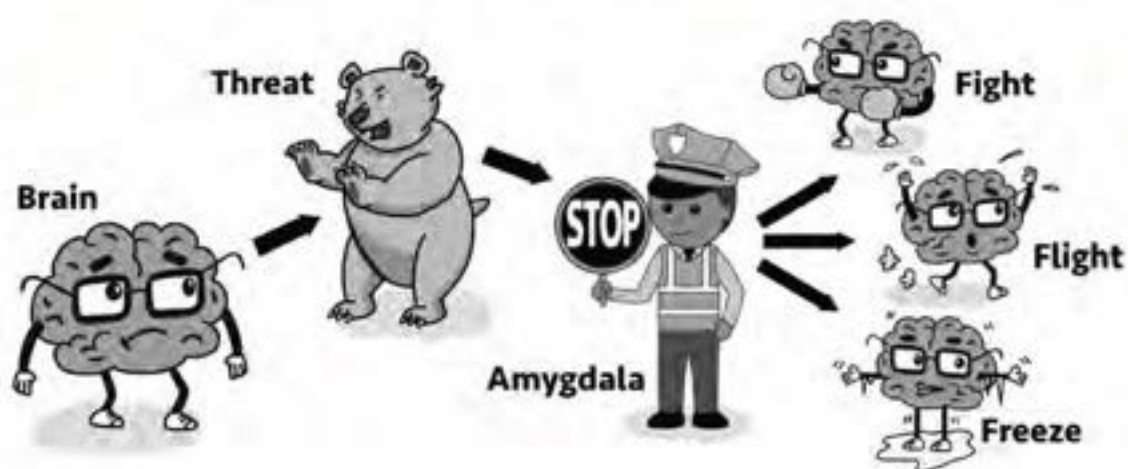
Sometimes anxiety can push people toward achieving a goal or desired outcome. It can motivate or even help them avoid danger. Other times, those same feelings can paralyze them or shut them down.

When students are not able to manage their feelings and thoughts and reduce those anxious feelings, they need support and assistance. This is when normal anxiety may become something more serious.

***Anxiety is the excessive concern about a potential triggering event or perceived threat to one's safety. That safety can be physical, emotional, or social.***

To help our students when they experience anxiety, it is important to understand where anxiety comes from. Often anxiety is associated with fear, but there is a distinct difference between the two. Fear is an emotional response to a triggering

When a person is in danger, they often must act quickly to protect themselves. When the amygdala (the part of the brain responsible for processing emotions) reacts to the threat, it activates the sympathetic nervous system by releasing hormones that include adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones communicate to the body's other systems that they need to stop and focus on the immediate situation. That hormonal release increases heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing. These changes in the body's homeostasis let those systems know they will have to work effectively and efficiently to find or create a safe environment.



By priming your body for action, you are better prepared to perform under pressure. The stress created by the situation can actually be helpful, making it more likely that you will cope effectively with the threat. This type of stress can help you perform better in situations where you are under pressure to do well, such as at work or school. In cases where the threat is life-threatening, the fight, flight, or freeze response can actually play a critical role in your survival. The fight, flight, or freeze response makes it more likely that you will survive the danger.

Understanding the body's natural fight, flight, or freeze response is one way to help cope with anxiety. When you notice the physical changes associated with the release of hormones, increased heart rate, and breathing, you can start looking for ways to calm down and relax your body so that you can determine if the threat is real or perceived.