

ANXIETY IN YOUNG PEOPLE:
A GUIDE FOR ART EDUCATORS

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This essay is divided into four parts:

I: Anxiety in Young People

II: Current Special Education Research Relating to Anxiety

III: Art Education Research Relating to Anxiety

IV: Applications for the Classroom

Part I: Anxiety in Young People

While everyone experiences anxiety, some individuals experience severe anxiety. An anxiety disorder, according to Kitchner (2012), differs from normal anxiety by *a) being more severe b) anxiety is long lasting and c) anxiety interferes with studies, activities, as well as relationships with family and peers* (p. 58). Signs and symptoms of anxiety can be physical, psychological, and behavioral at varying degrees.

Physical	Psychological	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pounding heart, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, and blushing• Rapid, shallow breathing, and shortness of breath• Dizziness, headache, sweating, tingling, and numbness• Choking, dry mouth, stomach pains, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea• Muscle aches and pains (especially neck, shoulders, and back), restlessness, tremors, and shaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unrealistic or excessive fear and worry (about past and future events)• Racing thoughts or mind going blank• Decreased concentration and memory• Indecisiveness• Irritability• Impatience• Anger• Confusion• Feeling on edge• Nervousness• Sleep disturbance• Vivid dreams	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoidance of situations• Obsessive or compulsive behavior• Distress in social situations• Phobic behavior• Increased use of alcohol or other drugs

(Source: Kitchner, B. A., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). *Youth mental health first aid USA: For adults assisting young people*. Baltimore, MD: Mental Health Association of Maryland. pp. 58-9.)

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent of all mental disorders for children and adolescents and anxiety disorders affect one in eight youth (Kitchner, p. 58).

With anxiety disorders being one of the most prevalent disorders in youth, educators need to be aware of common indicators of an anxiety disorder. As Kitchner (2012) points out, a common misconception about those with anxiety disorders is the stereotype that youth with anxiety disorders are typically introverted and not very communicative (p. 59). While this is true for some, this is not true for all. Some common indicators include:

At home, young people may:	At school, young people may:	In social settings, young people may:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complain of headaches and other physical problems to avoid going to school • Be tearful in the morning, saying they do not want to go to school • Spend more time doing homework or express unnecessary concerns that the work is not good enough • Demand constant reassurance from parents • Be touchy and irritable in interactions with family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be extremely well behaved and quiet, fearful of asking questions • Demand extra time from teachers, asking questions constantly and needing a great deal of reassurance • Not hand in assignments on time because the work is seen as less than perfect • Complain of sudden, unexplained physical illness, such as a stomachache or headache, when exams or presentations have been scheduled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid meeting new people or socializing with groups, spending time with only a few safe friends • Use alcohol or other drugs at parties to make it easier to talk to people • Leave social events early • Avoid speaking up for fear of embarrassment

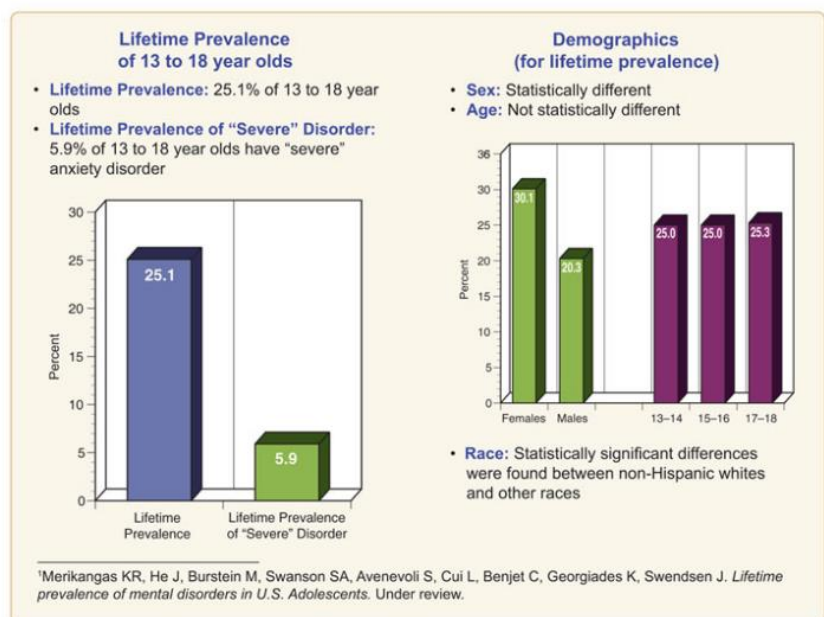
(Source: Kitchner, B. A., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). *Youth mental health first aid USA: For adults assisting young people*. Baltimore, MD: Mental Health Association of Maryland. p. 59.)

There are also multiple types of anxiety disorders. The most common types of anxiety disorders include: *Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia, Social Phobia, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)* (Kitchner, 2012, p. 59). As educators, we must note that many people can have more than one anxiety disorder. Each anxiety disorder is unique and each student has specific needs associated with his or her anxiety.

Part II: Current Special Education Research Relating to Anxiety

Current research on anxiety in adolescents requires special assessment to recognize anxiety disorders in youth. Many characteristics of anxiety disorders are similar for children and adults; thus, many disorders are lumped together. Assessing variations from adolescents and adults with anxiety is becoming a key focus in more recent studies. Unfortunately, as stated by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) (2016), while anxiety and depression are treatable, “80 percent of kids with a diagnosable anxiety disorder and 60 percent of kids with diagnosable depression are not getting treatment.” This study from the Child Mind Institute Children’s Mental Health Report in 2015 warns us of the problem of this “lack of awareness and entrenched stigma” is prohibiting many youth with anxiety and/or depressive disorders from receiving the help and care they require (Children’s Mental Health Report, 2015). Awareness is needed for youth with anxiety disorders to begin receiving the care that is needed. With negative stigmas of mental disorders, there is a lot of work to do for children with anxiety disorders to become more comfortable with receiving treatment.

The National Institute of Mental Health (2016) describes anxiety as “a normal reaction to stress and can actually be beneficial in some situations” but for some individuals, “anxiety can become excessive, and while the person suffering may realize it is excessive they may also have difficulty controlling it.” Anxiety disorders disrupt daily life and is a very prevalent group of disorders.



(Image source: National Institute of Mental Health. (2016).)

Part III: Art Education Research Relating to Anxiety

Most research for children with anxiety disorders is done by art therapists, but art educators are also becoming more aware of the importance of art for students with anxiety disorders. Being able to assist a student that struggles in school is a frustrating experience for parents and educators alike. Katrin Robertson (2013) discusses in her PBS article, *How the Arts Can Help Struggling Learners*, examples of art class being important for struggling children. Robertson provides multiple accounts from parents and writers and their beliefs of art education being beneficial for children with a variety of disorders. Beth Olshansky, the author of *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy Through Art*, believes that art class has the potential to “provide a lifeline to children who are having trouble succeeding in school” (Robertson, 2013). Robertson provides this strategy “to lean on the arts as your ally and advocate:”

“If your child shows anxiety facing a blank page, give him the chance to build something, dance, make music, create a collage or draw a picture before ever putting a pen to paper. Engaging in concrete visually and kinesthetically rich experiences will stimulate language development and support his ability to express his ideas with words.” (Robertson, 2013)

Certainly, if developing visual works of art are seen to be an aid to students with anxiety problems, the art classroom is a beneficial part of their education. The art classroom allows anxious students to become engaged through creating which, in turn, becomes an aid to other educational areas.

Alexandra Ogle (2013), wrote a paper titled, *Art Educational Practices: Fostering Self-control and Improving Focus for Students Coping with Anxiety*, in which she studied students in her art classroom who were classified with issues relating to anxiety. She notes that of the six students that were classified as struggling with anxiety problems, five of these students “showed signs of struggle and required additional support” (p. 2). Her findings “confirmed that art practices, specifically curriculum, instructional strategies and the environment, played a vital role in reducing stress by building students’ focus and developed more self control. Throughout the duration of this research, the high school student participants increased their self confidence, were able to creatively problem solve, developed

an independent work ethic and utilized instruction strategies to assist them in the production of their assignments” (p. 2). Ogle believes that the evidence she collected proves that “educators should utilize art making as a tool in reducing anxiety for students suffering from severe stress or depressive like symptoms” (p. 2).

Part IV: Applications for the Classroom

Early intervention is important for anxiety disorders, and as educators, knowing how to intervene is critical. Kitchner (2012) states that treatment and support is important for youth to learn how to manage symptoms of anxiety disorders (p. 62). “Research has shown that children and youth with untreated anxiety disorders are at a higher risk of performing poorly in school, missing out on important social experiences, experiencing early parenthood, and engaging in substance abuse”

(Kitchner, 2012, p. 62). Kitchner’s Mental Health First Aid Action Plan for Anxiety suggest a series of action steps that are helpful when working with a student showing initial signs of anxiety.

Youth Mental Health First Aid Action Plan	
Action A	Assess for risk of suicide or harm
Action L	Listen nonjudgmentally
Action G	Give reassurance and information
Action E	Encourage appropriate and professional help
Action E	Encourage self-help and other support strategies

(Source: Kitchner, B. A., & Jorm, A. F. (2012). Youth mental health first aid USA: For adults assisting young people. Baltimore, MD: Mental Health Association of Maryland. p. 63.)

Art lessons can be helpful for those with anxiety disorders by engaging students through ways to cope with stress and anxiety. Alexandra Ogle (2013), believes that creative art lessons are helpful to all learners because art “provides an opportunity for people to create something that constitutes ownership and personal expression; individuals learn best when material is relevant” (p. 22). Art lessons that focus on the individual can be exceptionally helpful for students with anxiety disorders. Art class allows students to problem solve with little to no negative consequence in comparison to a math class. Art class allows students to learn through trial and error, which can be used as an effective learning tool for all students.

References

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