

# Anxiety Skills for Students

A 4-Session Skills Group

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## Group at a Glance

### FORMAT

**Four Sessions**  
45-minute duration each  
4-10 students per group

### CORE FOCUS

Understanding anxiety, increasing distress tolerance, and practicing brave action

### 01

#### Key Skills

Students learn to recognize triggers, notice anxious thoughts and body sensations, and respond differently

### 02

#### Active Practice

The group emphasizes practice: students repeatedly do things that feel uncomfortable while learning, "I can handle it."

### 03

#### Support Network

Support systems—parents, teachers, and friends—are incorporated as anxiety coaches

## Core Ideas to Reinforce Throughout the Group

**01. Physical Sensations & Danger** • Anxiety can produce strong physical sensations and a sense of danger.

**02. "Glitchy" Alarm System** • The brain's alarm system can sometimes send a "glitchy" danger signal when a situation is uncomfortable rather than dangerous.

**03. Reinforcing Responses** • Avoidance, reassurance seeking, and other anxiety responses can reinforce the alarm signal.

**04. Practicing Tolerance** • Students can build their ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings by practicing rather than escaping.

**The Ultimate Goal** • The goal is not to eliminate uncomfortable feelings—it is to increase the student's ability to handle them and keep moving toward what matters.

## Suggested 4-Session Flow

### SESSION 1

Understand anxiety, the brain's alarm, triggers, and responses

### SESSION 2

Values, automatic thoughts, and cognitive strategies

### SESSION 3

Practice uncomfortable sensations and build "I can handle it" muscle

### SESSION 4

Review progress and build an ongoing practice plan

## Session 1

Understanding anxiety, the brain, triggers, and responses.

## Session 1: What Is Anxiety Doing?

**01. Group Introduction** • Introduce the group, purpose, and confidentiality.

**02. Discomfort Activity** • Use a brief discomfort activity to demonstrate that students can tolerate a "yucky" feeling.

**03. Everyday Connection** • Connect discomfort tolerance to everyday situations: lunchroom, presentations, friendships, tests, and other challenging activities.

**04. Brain's Alarm System** • Teach the brain's alarm system using the amygdala and the "glitchy brain" concept.

**05. Triggers & Behaviors** • Identify common anxiety triggers and the behaviors students use to feel better.

**06. Next Session Setup** • Set up the next session: practicing anxiety sensations without responding to them.

## The “Glitchy Brain” Model

| Signal Function                                                 | The “Glitch”                                                                                                         | Body & Action                                                                                                                 | Reinforcement                                                                                   |
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| The amygdala helps signal when something is wrong or dangerous. | Sometimes the alarm system becomes “glitchy” and sends a danger signal when the situation is actually uncomfortable. | Creates physical sensations (headaches, stomachaches). Students respond by avoiding, seeking reassurance, or skipping school. | When students repeatedly respond to a false alarm, the brain learns that the alarm was correct. |

Key Takeaway

“Not every alarm means danger.”

## Danger vs. Discomfort

### The Alarm System Analogy

A home alarm can sound because of burnt pizza rather than a real fire. Anxiety often triggers false alarms for uncomfortable situations, not dangerous ones.

### DISCOMFORT (Anxiety / False Alarm)

- **Feeling Nervous:** A dog near you might make you feel anxious or nervous.
- **Physical Symptoms:** An upcoming test may cause a stomachache.  
*Feels intense, but you are completely safe.*

### DANGER (Real Threat / Harm)

- **Immediate Threat:** A dog actively biting someone right now is dangerous.
- **Long-Term Harm:** Avoiding school because of tests creates larger problems.  
*Requires immediate safety action or problem solving.*

### COME BACK TO TEACH

“Learning not to treat every uncomfortable feeling as evidence of danger.”

**DANGER**  
OR  
DISCOMFORT?



**Fire**



What if I  
don't pass  
the test?



## Identify the Anxiety Cycle

| 1. Trigger                                                                                              | 2. Alarm                                                                        | 3. Response                                                                               | 4. Learning Opportunity                                                                                              |
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| <b>What sets off anxiety?</b><br>What situation, thought, sensation, or uncertainty triggers the cycle? | <b>Internal Reaction</b><br>What does the student notice in their body or mind? | <b>Coping Behavior</b><br>What do they do to feel better or get away from the discomfort? | <b>Breaking the Cycle</b><br>What might happen if they stayed with the discomfort instead of immediately responding? |



## Session 2

Core cognitive and behavioral strategies for guiding students through anxiety

### Session 2 Overview

## Values, Thoughts & Application

|                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                            |
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| <br><b>Values</b><br>Connecting anxiety work to what truly matters—friendships, school, independence, and personal growth. | <br><b>Automatic Thoughts</b><br>Identifying internal trigger responses and automatic fear-based thinking patterns. | <br><b>Cognitive Strategies</b><br>Teaching reframing, validating emotional discomfort, and unhooking from catastrophic predictions. | <br><b>Practice</b><br>Taking brave, values-consistent action in real-world social and classroom settings. |
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## Why Do Hard Things?

### Values → Action

#### Key Reflection Question

Ask: "What is important to you that anxiety gets in the way of?"

#### Example 1: Social Connections

**Value:** Friendships matter deeply to the student.

**Anxiety Barrier:** Makes attending school difficult.

#### Example 2: Academics & Growth

**Value:** Doing well in school matters to the student.

**Anxiety Barrier:** Makes asking for help difficult.

#### Action Strategy

Use the identified value to pinpoint one concrete action the student can take—even while feeling nervous.

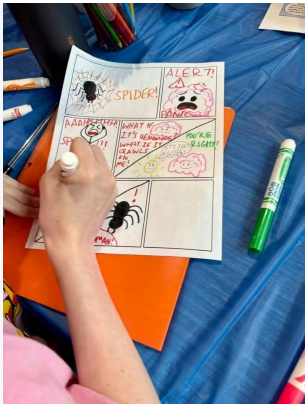
**Core Message:** Feeling anxious does not have to determine what the student does next.

## Coping Statements (validation + confidence)



Exposure Practice

- 1. Have students identify something triggering.
- 2. Identify automatic thoughts/ thinking patterns.
- 3. Practice reframing thoughts/ coping statements.
- 4. Find a way to face the fear.



Session 3

Practicing uncomfortable sensations and building “I can handle it” muscle.

Session 3: Practice, Don't Escape

| 1. Review                                                                                                                         | 2. Practice                                                                                           | 3. Notice                                                                                                                                                       | 4. Target                                                                                                                  | 5. Debrief                                                                                                                                     |
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| <b>Session 1 &amp; 2 Concepts</b><br>Review the "glitchy brain" idea from Session 1, as well as coping statements from Session 2. | <b>Create Sensations</b><br>Practice intentionally creating brief, uncomfortable physical sensations. | <b>Observe Reactions</b><br>Have students notice what they feel in their bodies, what they think about the sensations, and what they want to do to feel better. | <b>Stay With It</b><br>The practice target is to remain with the sensation rather than immediately trying to make it stop. | <b>Key Takeaway</b><br>Sensations can feel awful without being dangerous, and they can pass without students doing anything to eliminate them. |

Examples of Practice Activities

|                                                                                                |                                                                       |                                                                               |                                                                                                         |
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| <b>1. Jumping Jacks</b><br>Doing jumping jacks and noticing the resulting physical sensations. | <b>2. Spinning</b><br>Spinning in a circle or using a spinning chair. | <b>3. Visual Focus</b><br>Looking at a pencil until visual sensations change. | <b>4. Straw Breathing</b><br>Breathing through a straw briefly and noticing the sensations that follow. |
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Key Reflection Rule: Focus on Observation Rather Than Reassurance

After each activity, focus on observation rather than reassurance: What did you notice? What did your brain tell you? What did you do next?

Move From Triggers to Brave Practice

| Trigger List                             | Weekly Target                                                                    | Goal Mindset                                                  | Allow Discomfort                                                           | Empower                                                                                       |
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| Have each student create a trigger list. | Have students choose one situation they are willing to practice during the week. | The goal is not to make the situation feel comfortable first. | Practice the situation while allowing anxiety or discomfort to be present. | Review their personal "I can handle it" message to use when the brain gives reasons to avoid. |



Examples of Brave Practice

|                                                                                          |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                            |
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| <b>Social Anxiety</b><br>Answer a question in class, text someone, or sing in a hallway. | <b>Phobia</b><br>Move toward the feared object or situation and describe what is happening with curiosity. | <b>Panic</b><br>Return to places where panic has occurred and practice noticing that the setting itself is not dangerous. | <b>Procrastination</b><br>Practice starting early and notice the brain's reasons for putting the task off. |
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Session 4

Putting the skills together and creating a plan for continued practice

Session 4: Drive Your Own Bus

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| <b>CELEBRATE BRAVERY</b><br>Celebrate the ways students were brave during the week.                                    |
| <b>REVIEW OBSTACLES &amp; VALUES</b><br>Review how they climbed over obstacles and acted according to what they value. |
| <b>DISCUSS Coping Statements</b><br>Discuss the coping statements they used for difficult moments.                     |
| <b>EVALUATE SUPPORT</b><br>Identify which support people students can use and how those people can coach the student.  |
| <b>CONTINUED PRACTICE</b><br>Return to each student's specific struggles and create a plan for continued practice.     |

Change the Way Others Coach Anxiety

|                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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| <b>IDENTIFY A SUPPORTER</b><br><b>Find the Right Coach</b><br>Identify a parent, teacher, friend, or other support person who can learn how to coach rather than reinforce anxiety. | <b>EXPLAIN &amp; COMMUNICATE</b><br><b>Clarify Needed Support</b><br>Students can explain what they are practicing and what kind of support is most helpful during challenging moments.          |
| <b>ENCOURAGE BRAVERY</b><br><b>Face Hard Things</b><br>Encourage support people to help students move toward hard things rather than automatically helping them escape discomfort.  | <b>REFLECT &amp; ADJUST</b><br><b>Improve Future Coaching</b><br>Invite students to notice when coaching does not go well and identify what they want the supporter to do differently next time. |

The Goal Is Not “Never Feel Anxious.”

The goal is to help students learn that they can:

|                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                         |
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| <b>ACCEPT SENSATIONS</b><br><b>Experience Discomfort</b><br>Learn to sit with uncomfortable physical feelings and emotions without trying to immediately run away or escape. | <b>BUILD RESILIENCE</b><br><b>Tolerate Uncertainty</b><br>Develop confidence to handle unknown outcomes and unpredictable situations without demanding constant reassurance. | <b>TAKE ACTION</b><br><b>Do What Matters</b><br>Focus on meaningful goals, personal values, and important tasks even when anxious feelings are present. |
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