



Everyday  
Anxiety  
Strategies for  
Educators

## Behaviours Associated with Anxiety

Perceptions of danger and responses to anxiety vary for every human, giving us all a unique “anxiety fingerprint” that includes a range of related behaviours. Common behaviours that show up in the classroom include the following:

### Restlessness or fidgeting

When the brain perceives a threat, the body is flooded with neurochemicals to help it get ready to fight, run away or freeze. If the threat is misinterpreted, the circulating chemicals have nowhere to go and cause fidgeting and restlessness.



### Inattention

When the body’s internal alarm system is activated, the logical, reasoning part of the brain temporarily shuts down so we can expand our attentional focus to the big picture and scan for further threats in our environment. This makes it difficult to fully attend to specific tasks or remember details.

### Yelling or physical aggression

Aggression is the result of the fight response, designed to protect us by making us appear threatening. In the classroom, this type of self-protection can include physical and verbal lashing out, which results in negative social interactions and behavioural consequences.



### Avoiding tasks, people, places or situations

Avoiding real and immediate danger is the purpose of the fight-flight-freeze response; it's necessary for our survival. But when students constantly avoid situations that are moderately risky or unfamiliar (not actually dangerous), it prevents them from finding out that things often aren't as bad as we think they'll be and that they can handle some risk and uncertainty. And since avoidance leads to more avoidance, it can get in the way of engaging in new experiences and reaching full potential.

### Excessive silliness or joking

Acting silly or cracking jokes can be a way to reduce tension and avoid situations that cause distress. It can also be a way to manage the impressions you have on others by reducing uncertainty about what they think of you—when people are smiling and laughing, you have a good idea of what they're thinking.





### **Being overly controlling**

Anxiety demands certainty and control, so behaviours like directing others, micromanaging and acting like a “little teacher” can be ways to maintain control, reduce uncertainty, and make things feel safer and more predictable.

---

Anxiety-related behaviours are often seen in students with other behavioural and learning challenges, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), making it difficult to assess what’s going on for a student who is struggling. Because anxiety is such a common emotion, it’s always good to consider it as a possible driver of behaviour—even if the student isn’t aware of it.