

# Getting started -- stress and Anxiety Focus Group

Prepare this portion of the flipchart before the Focus Group

## What is Stress?

Usually a response to an external cause - a deadline, a test, an argument. Stress usually subsides once the situation is resolved. Almost everyone experiences stress. What helps? Physical activity, breathing exercises, adequate sleep, and connecting w/others.

## What is Anxiety?

Its origin is internal. A "persistent feeling of apprehension or dread" in situations that are not actually threatening. Anxiety persists after a concern has passed. Anxiety disorders are the most common emotional/mental health issues in USA. Stress is a common trigger for anxiety, but anxiety is more serious.

## Impact of chronic $\frac{1}{3}$ unregulated Anxiety:

Symptoms like those of a heart attack; chest pain, sweating, feeling faint, nausea, chills, breathing difficulties.

## Other words/descriptions for anxiety:

Social anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, OCD, PTSD, pain in the butt, tsunami, exaggerating, dramatic, childish, nervous

Solicit descriptive words from the students

# WHAT IMPACT HAS STRESS & ANXIETY HAD ON

## ME, MY FRIENDS, MY FAMILY?

### ME

Self-Medicating

Headaches

Fear of impending doom

Heart Palpitations

Numbness and Tingling

Makes me eat too much

Catastrophic thinking

Isolation works with my anxiety and depression to make me feel at my lowest with a lot of negative thoughts

Lots of worry about the future

Makes me angry at myself and sometimes others

Makes me isolate myself, withdrawn

Makes it hard to process my thoughts

Lack of focus, being distracted

It is hard for me to trust myself or others.

My stress and anxiety keep from doing the things I used to enjoy and now hate. People make fun of me and accuse me of faking my anxiety. My Dad worries about me and stresses. My family has pretty much disowned me because they can't handle me. My friends can't deal with me. I'm too much for them because of my anxiety.

Chest Pain

Upset stomach

Weakness in legs

Dizziness

Makes me not eat

Sleep problems

Over-thinking

### MY FRIENDS

I have lost friends. My anxiety ruins my relationships and keeps me from making new friends.

Makes me not know where I stand with my friends and I need lots of reassurance.

I impact my friends' emotions negatively.

My friends try to help but they don't know how.

I feel like they are talking about me behind my back.

It has gotten to where I don't like to be bothered by anyone and if someone does I get really mad, but I would really like to be more sociable.

I have become more isolated and withdrawn.

It limits my activities (parties, games, etc.)

I lie and struggle with being honest with my friends.

My friends get frustrated because they don't understand.

I can overwhelm and mentally drain people.

### MY FAMILY

Causes me to distance myself and has impacted my bond with my sisters.

They stress about me.

Addiction runs in my family and abuse runs in my family and it is all connected.

My relatives have disowned me.

Has had a financial impact on my family to have to pay for my services

It used to be bad enough to where I was closed off from my family and didn't form a good bond with my younger sisters.

I worry about acceptance from my family.

I am a burden to my family.

They have disconnected from me because they don't know what is going on with me.

They think something is wrong with me.

Sometimes they don't have time for it and I feel like they don't care about me.

It limits my family interactions.

I don't trust my family.

I don't get invited to family stuff.

## WHAT IMPACT HAS STRESS & ANXIETY HAD ON MY SCHOOLING?

Makes me miss school

Causes me to shut down and not listen

I drink at school.

Causes me to have angry outbursts that cause discipline consequences.

It causes worry which causes me to procrastinate

Makes me lose my motivation especially in the spring when it gets to testing time because stress and anxiety become overwhelming and I shut down.

Things students and teachers say to me and to each other make me lose motivation

It is affecting my learning when I am at school and when I am at home.

When I try to focus or complete my work I get distracted easily and I want to cry or sleep.

I hate school.

It affects how much I talk and how much I am involved.

Stress just seems to make it harder to focus and overall it can make most situations worse.

It has affected my grades and my eating habits at school.

I normally snap on people and shut people out and not pay attention to my schooling.

Sometimes I can't control my words and I want to be alone and calm down.

I notice my stress the most when I become angry and it makes everyone around me angry and upset.

I do lots of second guessing on tests.

It impacts my motivation and how I think about my future.

I can't make myself ask my teachers for help.

I don't finish my schoolwork.

I feel like people are talking about me or looking at me.

I don't do anything to draw attention to me.

Group work and presentations make me anxious.

Debates and arguments that are a part of assignments relying on conflict are very stressful to me.

I am overly involved as a way of coping

I can't be in crowded spaces.

I am not optimistic about my future and doubt that opportunities will really happen for me.

## WHAT WOULD YOU WANT OTHERS, INCLUDING TEACHERS OR SCHOOL STAFF, TO KNOW OR UNDERSTAND ABOUT A TEEN'S STRUGGLE TO MANAGE STRESS AND/OR ANXIETY? DOES STRESS AND/OR ANXIETY HAVE AN IMPACT ON HOW YOU ARE DOING IN SCHOOL?

Sometimes we have a hard time expressing our thoughts and questions and asking for help.

Emotions are sometimes contagious.

Mental illness, addiction, abuse, and suicide have all run in my family but it is not my fault.

Sometimes I NEED to disengage and the teachers keep trying to engage me right then.

When I hurt myself, it's because I don't have a release for all of the emotion.

Guys have anxiety too but it doesn't mean I'm weak.

It's not a bad thing to talk about it.

### BREATHE

I won't say it'll get better because for some, that's giving false hope. I would say to others struggling to do your best and to find something you like to do and do it with all you've got.

When you have anxiety, you first need to fix your actions like not hitting stuff and then your words and then your thoughts.

I choose my transition path to minimize interaction.

I shut down and get defensive even if it is not really about you.

My earbuds help me cope during transition – there isn't even music on but I use them to avoid people and conversation.

My grades are low because I don't ask for help and I really have a hard time focusing.

I want to leave school – every minute, every day.

It takes us time to get back on track after a panic attack. Right after, I feel weak, tired, and lost so give me time to get back to what I was doing.

I want teachers to know anxiety isn't just a stressful moment. It means my mind (or someone else's) is going on a rampage.

Most of the time, we really don't want to talk about it.

My anxiety makes me zone out and get paranoid. If someone is looking at me, it makes me run to the bathroom.

My anxiety makes me fearful. I don't feel like I can control it or predict it and some students get bullied. I have experienced that too.

I won't raise my hand. If someone is struggling, teachers should try to assist them or get the student to someone they trust and not just ignore it. If possible, maybe teachers could excuse the student from the activity or give them some time or a make up date.

## IS THERE A WAY THE SCHOOL OR SCHOOL STAFF CAN ASSIST YOU ADDRESSING/HANDLING STRESS AND/OR ANXIETY WHEN IT ARISES?

Mentoring

Meetings and activities with the student

Taking anxiety more seriously, and getting counselors that actually know how to deal with anxiety and depression

Just stick me in a room with a friend and my music and let me cry it out.

Making it ok to be alone at school

Let me have a quiet place and some privacy

Support groups or better education on mental health and emotion

Get to know me, connect with me personally so you understand me, pay attention to me/us, be consistent, be a "kid watcher", motivate me, give me lots of reminders beyond the class time, sometimes I don't hear everything you say when there is a lot else going on in my brain.

Sometimes my brain and feelings are like an electrical storm when everything starts building up and so I need you to tell me about due dates and homework more than once.

I know your class is important but sometimes I need you to understand that it might not be the most important thing going on right now.

Allowing me to outside the class.

Letting me listen to music.

Breathing exercises – help with and teach how

Frequent "check-in" meetings

Helping us find a job with real-life experiences that make us cope with our anxiety

Ask a friend to help me calm down if possible – if not, call my parents but NO hospital because I don't have insurance. I know the bill will be high and I will panic even more.

Give me a chance to express myself and LISTEN then talk to me CALMLY.

Squeeze my hand but not too hard. For me, that helps me snap out of it.

# ARE THERE CERTAIN SCHOOL SITUATIONS, EXPERIENCES, OR TIMES THAT ESCALATE OR "TRIGGER" STRESS OR ANXIETY IN A MANNER THAT IMPACTS YOUR LIFE IN A NEGATIVE WAY?

Being invited to a meeting and not knowing why.

Academic competition of all types but especially competition in front of others.

Being called over the intercom.

## Storms

Pep Rallies, Assemblies, events with lots of noise, energy, and emotion.

Crowded hallways and cafeteria.

Being the center of attention.

Having to make presentations.

Some topics can increase stress or anxiety, especially those topics that bring a lot of emotion or conflict

Situations with conflict (debates, heated discussions, disagreements) can be terrifying and I shut down, cry, or my emotions become heightened or overwhelming.

Being late to class or having to leave class early.

Sometimes student joking can make it worse, especially when there is sarcasm or when someone turns my actions or circumstances in to a joke.

When I come home and have to deal with family issues when I should be doing my homework.

When I get upset, I can't focus and I get behind and the more behind I get, the more upset I get.

Coming to school, riding the bus, some teachers and a lot of the students, my Dad's side of the family.

## Fights

Every single day something sets me off. It could be anything.

Sometimes when I smell the cleaner in the bathroom, it reminds me of when I went to the mental hospital and all those memories come back so being in the hallways can be a problem for me.

Talking to people and teachers that I do not know.

Teachers not listening or believing me.

Being yelled at, having lots of homework, tests, and projects that are all overlapping at the same time.

Seeing someone I am trying to avoid.

Having to present in front of class.

Not being given options.

Large crowds

Transition times

Talking to others

Being called out.

Having to be in groups in class when you don't know anyone.

Being called out even when my hand isn't raised.

Being told to "calm down."

Being told "I'm overreacting."

When someone touches me.

Lots of the same due dates, I procrastinate.

Fighting with friends – every guy friend I've had has left me. Starting with my Dad.

## WHEN MY ANXIETY PEAKS AT SCHOOL, OTHERS MIGHT SEE (PERSONAL BEHAVIORS) ...

Sometimes others don't know what stress and anxiety looks like. It can look like...panic attacks, tics, outbursts, cutting, involuntary responses, zoning out, getting high or drunk, being on my phone in social settings, being confused and not being able to remember what happened or what was taught.

Passing out, stomach aches, headaches.

I stutter.

I'm mad and sometimes aggressive.

Fidgeting

I disassociate.

Speedwalking

Breathing fast

Talking to myself.

Chest pain

Sleeping in class

"Hiding" in my clothes

Acting stupid or loud

Nervous laughter

Foot tapping

Wide eyes

Stretching, cracking, snapping fingers

Walking out of class

Shaking

Get quiet

I walk away.

Eyes watering

Itching, Itching all over

Leg Bouncing

Not making eye contact

I go to the bathroom a lot and I cry a lot at school.

Crying

Being rude

Wheezing

Stare off in the distance

Paranoia

Can't focus

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE SCHOOL A SAFE PLACE FOR YOU TO TALK ABOUT OR SEEK HELP RELATED TO STRESS OR ANXIETY?

Teacher, staff, and nurse training on anxiety.

We are afraid of overreaction and we don't want to be sent to residential treatment or the alternative school.

Having trained counselors, therapists available who know how to LISTEN and how to communicate with empathy, non-judgment, compassion, and how to help you "unpack" but they aren't trying to solve it because they can't. They need to go soft of solutions and suggestions.

Less Judgment.

Having staff or someone to talk to who has experienced it.

Knowing there could be consequences to me or my family or that I will be labeled or stereotyped makes me not want to ask for help.

Making me feel safe – not labeled or watched, not targeted and not making me feel like there is something wrong with me.

Let me have a quiet place.

Helping me find someone who has the same personality or interests as me.

Meetings, field trips, activities, bonding, etc.

A safe, calm place like a room that's comfortable to calm down in.

Having classes for makeup and self-confidence, self-image, self-esteem

I don't really feel close or connected to any one at school so it is not likely I am going to share my feelings with anyone.

# WHAT TYPES OF INFORMATION, ACTIVITIES/SERVICES, PROGRAMMING, AND STAFFING RELATED TO STRESS AND/OR ANXIETY DO YOU THINK WOULD BENEFIT STUDENTS?

Parent and teacher education about stress and anxiety.

Having a room that we can chill, calm down, process without consequences – really think and concentrate.

Having a place to post thoughts about emotions.

A place that is calm that we can go instead of pep rallies, assemblies, or lunch or to deal with social anxiety.

Having more choice in how to provide a presentation or participate in class activities like debates.

I think it is great when teachers give us the chance to tell them "10 things I should know about you."

Health curriculum should be updated to include more information about mental and emotional or social health.

Yoga and meditation classes as a PE option.

Having the option to bring an ally with us to meetings.

Having a part of the health curriculum that teaches self-calming techniques or what helps in calming others. I think teachers need this training too.

Having a school therapy dog.

Peer to peer mentoring and support groups (through messaging or in-person).

Stressballs and conversation, coloring books, yoga classes, peer to peer support.

Yoga, gym, bowling, skating, paintball (basically anything physical)

Teen groups to discuss anything – sometimes just having people to talk to one another to get their minds off things.

Giving us the option of bringing an ally with us to meetings that cause us to have stress or anxiety.

Group stuff like this.

Makeup, tai-chi, yoga, knitting classes, having fidget items available in classrooms and offices.

It would be great if teachers were trained in breathing and de-stress activities and if they were allowed in class.

Having positive quotes in classrooms and in the school building.

Teacher training regarding anxiety and how they can respond to their students and lessen anxiety.

Having some mental breaks during the day or at the beginning of class to focus.

Having therapists at school.

Having support groups at school to help me learn how to help calm myself and others.

# What types of services, programming, staffing, events, and activities related to stress, anxiety, and emotional wellness do you think would benefit our students?

## PREVENTION

Having more choice in classes about having to participate in debates, make whole class presentations, or lessons that involve "forced" conflict

Having a "do not call my name over the intercom" list

I think it's great when teachers give us the chance to tell them "10 things you should know about me."

Having clubs that are chill-reading, board games, chess, art, music, knitting, crocheting

Yoga, meditation, Tai chi classes as a PE course

Therapy dog

PLEASE don't YELL or fuss at the whole class about something only a few students are doing

Pop tests are awful and real "triggers"—just know it

## EDUCATION

Parent and teacher education about stress + anxiety

Community screening of the movie "Angst" with a Q+A afterward with therapists

The health curriculum REALLY needs to be updated with information about social and emotional and mental health—not just physical health. Information like:

1) Signs of...

2) Successful coping... Unsuccessful coping

3) How to know when it is time to get help...

4) How to be a good friend to someone who has...

Having a place students can get info about emotional health, strategies for calming down, and letting students know who they can go see about different issues.

Training all staff in de-escalations techniques

## SUPPORT

Having a "safe" and comfortable room where we can chill, calm down, and process without consequences

Really good information in advance with reminders about about assignments and tests is really helpful

Having a place to post thoughts and get information about available support

1:1 therapy

Alternatives to suspension when you have screwed up in handling your emotions

Support groups (Peer or Friend or Therapist led)

Being able to talk to an adult who had anxiety as a teen and who is getting along well as an adult

Having a place to go when social anxiety peaks, like during lunch, a "crazy" transition time (if there was a fight, during pep rallies or something)

Art + music therapy options

I need more encouragement than other students and it's helpful when teachers know that

Being in a mentoring program

Listening to music and having my headphones in even if I am not listening to anything helps during class change or in loud activities.

## SUSTAINABILITY

1:1 Therapy

Support groups

Having a school climate that decreases stigma

A lot of kids with anxiety have big issues with self-esteem, self-doubt, and overthinking. It may sound silly, but having positive quotes in the classroom and around the building and hearing positive words can help a lot.

Having teen groups just to talk about all kinds of subjects and to meet others. Sometimes just having others to talk to really helps.

Having a designated ally (friend or staff member) as a source of support to talk through emotions or experiences—being able to bring them to uncomfortable meetings.

Yoga, meditation, Tai chi classes as a PE course or after school and open to all students

It would be great if teachers were trained in breathing techniques and de-stress activities and meditation and they used them or encouraged us to use them in class.

Therapy dog

Having a school where students and teachers really care about each other and there is a lot of trust because my anxiety causes me to have trust issues

# What is Stress?

Usually a response to an external cause - a deadline, a test, an argument. Stress usually subsides once the situation is resolved. Almost everyone experiences stress. What helps? Physical activity, breathing exercises, adequate sleep, and connecting w/others.

# What is Anxiety?

Its origin is internal. A "persistent feeling of apprehension or dread" in situations that are not actually threatening. Anxiety persists after a concern has passed. Anxiety disorders are the most common emotional/mental health issues in USA. Stress is a common trigger for anxiety, but anxiety is more serious.

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## ANXIETY IS...

Anxiety is more than just worrying.

Anxiety is the restless nights of sleep, as you toss and turn. It's your brain never being able to shut off. It's the thoughts you over-think before bedtime and all of your worst fears become a reality in dreams and nightmares.

It's waking up tired even though your day just started.

Anxiety is learning how to function with sleep deprivation because it took you until 2 am to shut your eyes.

It's every text you wonder 'how do I word this properly?' It's a double or triple text in case you messed up. Anxiety is answering texts embarrassingly fast.

Anxiety is the time you spend waiting for an answer as a scenario plays out in your mind of what they could be thinking or are they mad?

Anxiety is an unanswered text that kills you inside even though you tell yourself, 'maybe they're busy or will answer later.' Anxiety is that critical voice that says 'maybe they're deliberately ignoring you.' It's believing every negative scenario you can come up with.

Anxiety is waiting. It always feels like you're waiting. It's the inaccurate conclusions drawn as your mind takes off and you have no choice but to follow its destructive lead.

Anxiety is apologizing for things that don't even require the words, 'I'm sorry.'

Anxiety is self-doubt and a lack of confidence both in you, yourself and those around you. Anxiety is being hyper aware of everyone and everything. So much so, you can tell if there's a shift in someone merely by their tone or word choice.

Anxiety is ruining relationships before they even begin. It tells you, 'you're wrong, they don't like you, they're going to leave.' Then you jump to conclusions.

Anxiety is a constant state of worrying and panicking and being on the edge. It's irrational fears. It's thinking too much, it's caring too much. Because the root of people with anxiety is caring.

But more than anything anxiety is caring. It's never wanting to hurt someone's feelings. It's never wanting to do something wrong. More than anything, it's the want and need to simply be accepted and liked. So you try too hard sometimes.

Then you realize this might be a battle you face every day, but it's one you won't have to face alone anymore.

It's sweaty palms and a racing heart. But on the outside, no one can see it. You appear calm and at ease and smiling but underneath is anything but that. Anxiety is the art of deception for people who don't know you. And for the people who do, it's a constant stream of phrases like, 'don't worry' or 'you're overthinking this' or 'relax.' It's friends listening to these conclusions you've drawn and not really understanding how you got there. But they're there trying to support you, as things go from bad to worse in your mind.

Anxiety is wanting to fix something that isn't even a problem.

It's the stream of questions that make you doubt yourself.

Anxiety is the uneasiness at a party because you think all eyes are on you and no one wants you there.

Anxiety is that extra shot you take and it seems like you're finally relaxing. Until you wake up the next day hungover, full of regret and wondering what you said to whom and do you owe them an apology?

Anxiety is the overcompensating and trying too hard to please people.

Anxiety is being everywhere on time because the thought of being late would put you over the edge.

Anxiety is the fear of failure and striving for perfection. Then beating yourself up when you fall short. It's always needing a schedule or a plan.

Anxiety is that voice inside your head that's saying 'you'll fail.'

It's trying to exceed people's expectations even if you're killing yourself to do so. Anxiety is taking on more than you can handle just so you are distracted and not overthinking something.

It's breaking down in private and crying when you're overwhelmed but no one will ever see that side of you. Anxiety is picking up and trying again because the only thing worse than overcoming other people is overcoming you and your own demons.

It's beating that critical voice that says, 'you really f\*\*\*ed up' or 'you should feel awful right now.'

Anxiety is the want and the need to control things because it feels like this thing in your life is outside of your control and you have to learn to live with it.

And when you come across friends who begin to understand, they help you through it.