

TEN WAYS SCHOOLS CAN REDUCE ANXIETY

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The biggest barrier for most students to doing well at school is not their attitude, intelligence or motivation; it is their levels of anxiety.

Recent research by Resilient Youth Australia (www.resilientyouth.org.au) has found that 25% of girls and 21% of boys feel anxious and under strain. These levels shoot up to 69% of girls and 36% of boys by Year 12.

These levels of anxiety are accompanied by sleep and concentration problems, memory difficulties and distractibility. Not to mention a lessening of the joy of learning.

Develop security and safety

Our sense of belonging and attachment is the foundation stone of resilience. Schools are an essential element of belonging.

Identify the fringe dwelling students who no one really knows and devise strategies to link with them.

We need to support teachers to create vibrant stimulating classrooms that are comfortable, safe and where a caring friendly adult is clearly in charge. Now that we have the research on optimal classrooms, we can no longer be content with barren, visually dull spaces that are anonymous and unowned by anyone.

Great schools nurture great souls

Education is about much more than just the marks. You can be good at passing the test but be bad at life.

If we allow the international rat race of PISA results and national testing programs to narrow our focus we will have collateral damage. The cost will come in a lessening of imagination, courage, character and empowerment.

The result on one specific test is transitory. The attitude people take towards learning has life long consequences.

Mistakes are opportunities for growth

Shame causes low motivation. It is better, some kids reason, to opt out than to endure humiliation.

Classrooms should be more about questions and less about answers. Many people say they learn more from their failures than their successes, Use guesstimation games, quizzes, puzzles, mazes, mysteries, forensic clues and problem solving games to build a have-a-go mindset. Ask students to give you a wrong answer and to tell you one reason they think it might be wrong.

Mindfulness is presence

Mindfulness is about being aware and being present. Now! Create rituals where everyone can stop and bring their energies and their awareness into the present.

To get great outcomes we need to lessen anxiety. We can achieve this by focusing less on the results and more on awareness and commitment.

Relaxation and Focusing Methods

Make sure staff know and use relaxation and focusing methods. These include guided relaxation, brain gym, breathing exercises, creative problem solving, yoga, drama games, visualisation, art, sport, chanting and body mathematics. Relaxation and focusing methods are not always passive or quiet. Exercise, sports, and rhythmic activities energise and focus brains.

Resilience based coaching

Use the increased presence of mind and focus to empower students to develop skills through resilience based coaching. In resilience based coaching everyone in a school - staff, parents, students - is asked to take on an area to improve upon each term. One of the mottos we use is, "Here everyone gets smart".

The process is to have each person select an area to focus on and rate their current level on a ten-point scale (10 = totally awesome to 1= dreadfully incompetent). They are then asked to describe what it would look like if they were two points further up that scale. What would be happening differently?

They are then asked to focus on noticing when that happens. That's it. They aren't asked to work at it, develop improvement plans or have additional coaching to make gains in that area. Just notice it when it occurs.

Instead of focusing on the outcomes and results, direct your attention to what you need to do each day in order to get the results.

Our energy follows our attention. If you can, review progress each term and then either select a new area to focus on or continue working on the current skill. Resilience based coaching reinforces the idea that schools are learning communities where everyone can get better at things.

Think long and hard before you introduce open learning areas

Open learning areas work well in some settings but can be factories for anxiety in others. Sixteen percent of students will have hearing problems to the extent that they will be unable to hear in an open learning area. Creative, independent thinking is often harder in noisy distracting circumstances.

Students who have traumatic backgrounds, have been bullied at schools, have family difficulties or are new arrivals to the country often report higher levels of anxiety in open learning settings.

When you are anxious, your levels of cortisol and adrenaline increase, blood is shifted away from your brain and you are focused on survival rather than learning.

Use apps

There are some wonderful apps that can be used to help schools implement relaxation and focusing programs. At the time of writing two of my favourites are Brainwaves and Buddify.

Teach kids about how their brains work

When students and their parents learn about how their brain works they have a choice. Learning about what drives anxiety and how to shift your gears down is useful information, Also learning that you can't believe all of your thoughts and some of your feelings are pretty shifty too, helps people to start thinking about their thinking rather than just being a victim of the latest idea that flies into their heads.

Anxiety is a sign of an overloaded brain. It is toxic to creativity and memory. Learning the signs of stress and knowing what to do to come back to a state of relaxed focus is a skill everyone needs.

We all need good refreshing sleep to learn well. It is a revelation to some people that if you start your day either by denying yourself some fuel or by having a few energy drinks and a bowl of chips you might feel like something has crawled into your head and died there by mid-morning.

Put the fun back into learning

Let's make happiness the key goal of schools. Happiness is the antidote to anxiety. Little kids move, play, explore and question. Then they are told to sit down and do some hard work called learning.

When we put the playfulness back into learning, motivation and engagement increase and performance improves dramatically.

When students are encouraged to take risks, play, create and learn, neuroplasticity increases. If we combine this with good sleep, nutrition and enough physical movement, learning outcomes soar.