

Anxiety in Teenagers with SEND (ASD)

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural response to stress, fear, or uncertainty. It is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. While occasional anxiety is a normal part of life, persistent or excessive anxiety can interfere with daily activities and become a disorder.

Common symptoms of anxiety include:

- **Emotional Symptoms:** Excessive worry, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Increased heart rate, sweating, dizziness, muscle tension, stomach issues.
- **Behavioural Symptoms:** Avoidance of situations, difficulty sleeping, fidgeting, nail-biting.

The Neurology of Anxiety

Anxiety is rooted in the brain's **fear and stress response systems**, which involve complex interactions between different brain regions and neurotransmitters.

Key Brain Areas Involved in Anxiety

1. Amygdala (Fear Processing Centre)

- The amygdala is responsible for detecting threats and activating the body's "fight-or-flight" response.
- In people with anxiety, the amygdala may be **overactive**, leading to excessive fear and heightened emotional responses.

2. Prefrontal Cortex (Rational Thinking & Regulation)

- The prefrontal cortex helps regulate emotions and control responses to fear.
- In anxiety, this region may be **underactive**, making it harder to rationalize fears and calm down after a perceived threat.

3. Hippocampus (Memory & Learning)

- The hippocampus helps process past experiences and determine whether something is truly dangerous.
- In individuals with anxiety, an overactive hippocampus may store **excessively negative or fear-based memories**, reinforcing anxious thoughts.

Neurotransmitters & Hormones in Anxiety

1. **GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid)** – A calming neurotransmitter that reduces neural activity. Low GABA levels are linked to increased anxiety.
2. **Serotonin (5-HT)** – Regulates mood and emotional stability. Imbalances in serotonin can contribute to anxiety disorders.
3. **Dopamine** – Affects motivation and pleasure; imbalances may impact stress responses.
4. **Norepinephrine (Noradrenaline)** – Increases alertness and the fight-or-flight response; high levels are associated with heightened anxiety.
5. **Cortisol (Stress Hormone)** – Released by the adrenal glands in response to stress. Chronic high cortisol levels can contribute to persistent anxiety.

How Does Anxiety Affect the Brain Over Time?

- **Hyperactivity in the Amygdala** – Prolonged anxiety can make the amygdala more sensitive, causing overreactions to minor stressors.
- **Weakened Prefrontal Cortex Regulation** – Over time, chronic stress can weaken the ability to manage anxious thoughts logically.
- **Structural Changes in the Brain** – Research shows long-term anxiety can lead to changes in brain structure, affecting memory, decision-making, and emotional regulation.

Can the Brain Recover from Anxiety?

The brain has **neuroplasticity**, meaning it can change and adapt. Anxiety can be managed and even reduced through:

- **Therapy (CBT, mindfulness-based therapy, exposure therapy)**
- **Medications (SSRIs, benzodiazepines, beta-blockers, etc.)**
- **Lifestyle Changes (exercise, diet, sleep, relaxation techniques)**

Are levels of anxiety higher in students with SEND (ASD)?

Research suggests that **students with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and autism experience higher levels of anxiety compared to neurotypical students**. Several factors contribute to this increased anxiety, including differences in **neurology, sensory processing, social communication, and adaptability to change**.

Why Are Anxiety Levels Higher in Students with SEND and Autism?

Factor	Impact on Anxiety
Neurological Differences	The amygdala (fear response centre) tends to be more hyperactive in autistic individuals, making them more prone to anxiety. Difficulty regulating emotions due to underactive prefrontal cortex can also contribute.
Sensory Sensitivities	Many autistic individuals experience sensory overload (e.g., bright lights, loud noises, crowded spaces), which can cause constant stress and anxiety .
Social Communication Difficulties	Challenges in understanding social cues, non-verbal communication, and group interactions can lead to social anxiety, fear of judgment, or exclusion.
Uncertainty & Changes in Routine	Many autistic individuals thrive on predictability and structure . Unexpected changes can be distressing, leading to increased anxiety.
Masking & Camouflaging	Many autistic students feel pressure to hide their autistic traits to fit in, which is mentally exhausting and increases anxiety levels over time.
Higher Risk of Bullying & Social Exclusion	Autistic and SEND students are statistically more likely to be bullied or misunderstood , which can lead to social withdrawal and anxiety.
Academic Pressure & Executive Functioning Challenges	Difficulty with organisation, planning, time management, and processing information can make schoolwork overwhelming, increasing anxiety.
Interoception Issues	Some autistic students struggle to recognise internal bodily sensations (e.g., hunger, thirst, anxiety symptoms), making it harder to self-regulate emotions.

Evidence Supporting Higher Anxiety in SEND & Autistic Students

1. **Higher Prevalence of Anxiety Disorders** – Studies suggest that **40-50% of autistic individuals** experience clinical levels of anxiety, compared to **10-20% of neurotypical individuals**.
2. **More Frequent Panic & Meltdowns** – Anxiety in autistic individuals often presents as **shutdowns, meltdowns, or avoidance behaviours** rather than traditional symptoms like verbalised worry.
3. **Increased School Avoidance** – Autistic and SEND students often have **higher rates of school refusal** due to overwhelming anxiety.

What Can Be Done to Reduce Anxiety in SEND & Autistic Students?

- **Predictability & Structure** – Use visual schedules, advance warnings about changes, and clear expectations.
- **Sensory-Friendly Environments** – Create quiet areas, allow noise-cancelling headphones, and provide fidget tools.
- **Social Support & Training** – Teach social skills explicitly, provide peer support, and encourage autism acceptance.
- **Self-Regulation Techniques** – Use breathing exercises, emotion regulation strategies, and allow movement breaks.
- **Reduce Academic Pressure** – Break tasks into smaller steps, allow flexible deadlines, and provide alternative ways to demonstrate learning.

20 Common causes of Anxiety in students with SEND, how it might present and strategies that might help.

Cause of Anxiety	How the Student Might Present or Communicate This Need	Ways to Minimise or Reduce Anxiety
Changes in routine	Increased agitation, repetitive questioning, withdrawal, or refusal to engage in activities.	Use visual schedules, social stories, and prepare them in advance for any changes.
Sensory overload	Covering ears, avoiding certain textures, becoming distressed, shutting down, or engaging in repetitive movements.	Provide quiet spaces, noise-cancelling headphones, and allow sensory breaks.
Social interactions	Avoiding eye contact, withdrawing from conversations, displaying frustration, or having difficulty knowing when to speak.	Teach social skills using role-play, social scripts, and structured social activities.
Unstructured time	Pacing, looking lost, latching onto an adult, or becoming overwhelmed.	Plan structured activities during breaks or free time to provide a sense of predictability.
School transitions (e.g., moving to secondary school)	Increased worry, reluctance to attend school, emotional outbursts, or clinginess.	Offer transition plans, visits, and meetings with key staff before the change.
Struggling with communication	Frustration, shutting down, using gestures instead of words, or echolalia (repeating words/phrases).	Use alternative communication methods like PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) or assistive technology.
Fear of failure/perfectionism	Avoiding work, becoming upset over small mistakes, or redoing tasks repeatedly.	Encourage effort over results, break tasks into manageable steps, and praise small achievements.

Cause of Anxiety	How the Student Might Present or Communicate This Need	Ways to Minimise or Reduce Anxiety
Difficulty understanding emotions	Misinterpreting others' emotions, overreacting to situations, or struggling to self-regulate.	Use emotion cards, social stories, and teach self-regulation strategies like deep breathing.
Unclear expectations	Constantly asking for reassurance, reluctance to start a task, or avoiding participation.	Give clear, step-by-step instructions and check for understanding frequently.
Fear of being misunderstood or judged	Becoming anxious in group settings, reluctance to speak, or masking (hiding autistic traits).	Foster a supportive environment where neurodiversity is accepted and celebrated.
Academic pressure	Refusing to do work, complaining of feeling sick, or displaying perfectionist tendencies.	Provide extra support, allow more time for tasks, and adapt work to suit their learning style.
Bullying or exclusion	Increased anxiety before school, social withdrawal, or sudden changes in mood.	Implement anti-bullying programs, encourage peer support, and create safe spaces.
Overwhelming workload	Meltdowns, procrastination, difficulty starting or completing tasks.	Break tasks into smaller chunks and provide visual timetables for homework and assignments.
Fear of making mistakes	Erasing work repeatedly, reluctance to try new tasks, or needing excessive reassurance.	Promote a growth mindset and reassure them that mistakes are a natural part of learning.
Struggles with changes in environment (e.g., new classroom, seating changes)	Distress, refusal to enter a room, or seeking out familiar objects/people.	Allow gradual adjustments and involve the student in decision-making about changes.
Lack of sleep	Irritability, difficulty concentrating, frequent yawning, or struggling to stay engaged.	Establish a bedtime routine, limit screen time before bed, and create a calming night-time environment.

Cause of Anxiety	How the Student Might Present or Communicate This Need	Ways to Minimise or Reduce Anxiety
Difficulty expressing needs	Becoming upset, using behaviour rather than words (e.g., pushing, grabbing), or withdrawing.	Encourage the use of emotion charts, cue cards, or a trusted adult to communicate with.
Fear of being left out in group activities	Sitting alone, hesitating to join in, or appearing sad when others are interacting.	Provide buddy systems, small-group activities, and structured peer interactions.
Anxiety over unpredictable situations (e.g., fire alarms, substitute teachers)	Panic, refusal to enter a room, or covering ears and eyes.	Prepare in advance using visual aids and explain what to expect in different scenarios.
Separation anxiety from parents or caregivers	Clinginess, reluctance to go to school, frequent calls home, or emotional distress.	Gradually increase independence and use comfort items or transition objects.

Websites for More Advice and Support on Anxiety

1. **National Autistic Society (UK)** – <https://www.autism.org.uk>
2. **YoungMinds** – <https://www.youngminds.org.uk>
3. **Mind (Mental Health Charity)** – <https://www.mind.org.uk>
4. **Childline** – <https://www.childline.org.uk>
5. **Anna Freud Centre (for mental health resources)** – <https://www.annafreud.org>
6. **Ambitious About Autism** – <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk>
7. **NHS Mental Health Support** – <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health>
8. **Anxiety UK** – <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk>
9. **The Mix (Support for under 25s)** – <https://www.themix.org.uk>
10. **BBC Bitesize Wellbeing** – <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zndp6v4>

In Context at Foxwood – Questionnaire answers from students, Parents and staff that support them

While a small sample and by no means intended to be reflective of the whole cohort the answers provided by the students do reflect similarities in the way their own anxiety makes them feel about school and what things trigger them. The questionnaires have been anonymised but you may be able to use your own knowledge of our students and staff to identify them from their responses. Please respect their privacy and that of the answers they have provided for this project.

Interview Questions for the Teaching Assistant (TA)

Understanding the Student's Anxiety

1. How long have you worked with this student, and in what capacity?

I have worked with this student for 4 years and am a Teaching Assistant.

2. In your experience, what situations or activities at school seem to trigger their anxiety?

Other students' actions and their own emotions.

3. Have you noticed any patterns in when or where their anxiety tends to increase (e.g., certain subjects, transitions, break times)?

Break times and lunch times

How Anxiety Presents in the Student

4. What are the main signs that the student is feeling anxious? (e.g., stimming, withdrawal, avoidance, shutdown, physical discomfort)

Withdrawal and avoidance to any demands put on them.

5. How does their anxiety affect their ability to engage in learning activities?

They will not engage in lessons and will go outside without any engagement with adults.

6. Are there differences in their anxiety levels depending on the classroom environment, group size, or staff interaction?

It depends on who could be in their class and needs adults who know them.

Strategies and Support

7. What strategies have you found most effective in helping the student manage their anxiety?

Talking to them and giving them space to think. Any sort of distractions which we can offer.

8. Are there specific accommodations or tools (e.g., visual supports, sensory aids, structured routines) that work well for them?

Drawing is a good one for my young person. Giving them time go think and reflect.

9. How does the student typically respond to reassurance or intervention when anxious?

This depends on the reason for their anxiety. Sometimes they will ignore any input but others they will talk and have reassurance.

10. Have you noticed any self-regulation strategies that the student uses on their own?

Drawing

Collaboration and Communication

11. How do you communicate with the student when they are feeling anxious?

I talk calmly and not too much to allow time to process.

12. How do you coordinate with teachers, SENCOS, or other staff members to support the student's anxiety management?

We have regular conversations without our team and communication is key so all involved in our young person can help in the same way. Communication with parents is key to help our young person.

13. What challenges do you face in supporting the student's anxiety, and what additional resources or training would help?

Having more time to support and spending one on one time together.

Further Support and Recommendations

14. Are there any adjustments you think should be made to better support the student in school?

No, I feel that our young person is supported fully.

15. What advice would you give to new staff working with this student to help them feel safe and supported?

To listen and not to overwhelm them with too much talking. To be patient and keep the line of communication open with student, parents and other staff members involved.

Interview Questions (Student)

Understanding Anxiety

1. What does feeling worried or nervous mean to you?

Feels like I'm out of control a bit.

2. Can you tell me about a time at school when you felt anxious?

Today. Just knowing what is going on with other students makes my anxiety high

3. How does anxiety feel in your body? (e.g., heart beating fast, tummy ache, wanting to hide)

Stomach feels weird and I can't think straight.

4. Are there certain things at school that make you feel anxious? (e.g., loud noises, changes in routine, social situations)

Changes

How Anxiety Affects You at School

5. When you feel anxious at school, is it harder to do your work? How?

Yes. I struggle to concentrate

6. Does anxiety make it difficult for you to talk to teachers or classmates?

Sometimes yes.

7. What do you do when you feel anxious in class? (e.g., ask for help, stay quiet, leave the room, use fidget toys)

Sometimes I stay quiet and sometimes I draw or read

How Anxiety Presents

8. How do your teachers or classmates know when you are anxious?

They normally know when I go quiet or I am distant.

9. What do you feel like doing when you are anxious at school? (e.g., stimming, being alone, shutting down, avoiding eye contact)

I shut down and like to be by myself.

10. Do teachers sometimes think you are anxious when you don't feel that way?

No, I think they always know when I'm anxious

Coping Strategies in a School Setting

11. What helps you feel calmer when you are anxious at school?

Sometimes talking to friends or just being by myself. Drawing and reading help me. When you read, you can just get lost in the book

12. Are there special things at school that make you feel safe? (e.g., quiet spaces, sensory rooms, favourite teachers)

Talking to teachers I trust and a safe space. If I'm anxious at home and I know it's going to be worse at school, I like to bring a cuddly toy in.

13. Has anyone taught you ways to manage anxiety? Did they help?

Yes but some of them don't work. I like to work out my own strategies

14. What would make school feel better when you are anxious?

Probably having someone there to talk to

Interview Questions (Student)

Understanding Anxiety

1. What does feeling worried or nervous mean to you?

a. Overwhelming and I feel like I have to pace around the classroom.

2. Can you tell me about a time at school when you felt anxious?

a. I just feel worried about something or something that's been happening at home.

3. How does anxiety feel in your body? (e.g., heart beating fast, tummy ache, wanting to hide)

a. My heart beats fast and it feels like I have something stuck in my throat

4. Are there certain things at school that make you feel anxious? (e.g., loud noises, changes in routine, social situations)

a. Changes in routines is probably the most one.

How Anxiety Affects You at School

5. When you feel anxious at school, is it harder to do your work? How?
 - a. Yes. I can't concentrate and all I feel like is that I just can't do it.

6. Does anxiety make it difficult for you to talk to teachers or classmates?
 - a. No, I can trust teachers. I don't usually talk to classmates.

7. What do you do when you feel anxious in class? (e.g., ask for help, stay quiet, leave the room, use fidget toys)
 - a. Stay quiet and sometimes ask to leave the room

How Anxiety Presents

8. How do your teachers or classmates know when you are anxious?
 - a. Usually it's more at home because Mum knows that I can start to talk a lot. In school, if I'm pacing around outside then someone will come to me and ask me if I'm alright.

9. What do you feel like doing when you are anxious at school? (e.g., stimming, being alone, shutting down, avoiding eye contact)
 - a. I like to go to the sensory room and be by myself.

10. Do teachers sometimes think you are anxious when you don't feel that way?
 - a. No

Coping Strategies in a School Setting

11. What helps you feel calmer when you are anxious at school?
 - a. Sometimes the sensory studio and sometimes just personal space. Sometimes just having my blanket over me.
12. Are there special things at school that make you feel safe? (e.g., quiet spaces, sensory rooms, favourite teachers)
 - a. Sensory room
13. Has anyone taught you ways to manage anxiety? Did they help?
 - a. Yes and yes they help. I used to have ELSA with Lisa that helped
14. What would make school feel better when you are anxious?
 - a. Nothing

Case Study Questions (Carers/Parents)

Understanding the Student's Anxiety in a SEND School

When did you first notice your child experiencing anxiety?

My child has experienced anxiety since starting school at the age of 5. In nursery they had a key worker who met their needs all the time & after a few visits with me there too they soon trusted their key worker. My child's anxiety stemmed from the strong attachment my child has with me which I strongly believe is linked to being an adopted child. It takes my child a long time to trust any adults that come into their life for whatever reason.

How does anxiety impact their ability to attend or engage in school?

Very anxious at any changes. I know that if there's a change in a regular teacher my child does not produce the work they are capable of, more so if they haven't been informed of change. Anything negative that happens in school plays on their mind for weeks & they believe it will happen again, they almost convince themselves it has happened again. A few lessons cause anxiety too due to the students who are in those lessons with them. A change to curriculum impacts hugely & they will not sleep well the night before making them tetchy.

How Anxiety Manifests in School

What are the most common school-related anxiety triggers? (e.g., transitions, social situations, noise)

Transitions, social situations, change in staff, change to normal lessons & a loud disruptive student are all triggers of anxiety for my child.

How do they typically respond to anxiety at school?

Shut down at home or at school. Hold it in at school but let it all out once home. When my child was a bit younger they would be violent at home because e.g. 'the teacher was unwell & had supply who couldn't control the students so it was too loud' Now they're a bit older they come home & say they couldn't cope today & really need a Mum hug or go & lay on their bed for a while & wont talk until they are ready to talk about how they were feeling. Sometimes it can be days before we find out what had happened, when they're ready to talk about it.

Are their anxiety signs different at school compared to home?

Yes. At home, if we have plans to go somewhere we haven't been before, a day out somewhere, then their anxiety shows in their behaviour & attitude towards us. And sometimes they will wake up earlier than normal because it's playing on their mind so then we have lack of sleep thrown in. The day before or the morning of the day we are going somewhere new they will be verbal towards us, almost like they want us to say we won't go then but we persevere because we know they'll enjoy it.

Coping Strategies in School

What strategies have helped your child at school?

Fortunate to have the same TA for a few years. Knowing where safe spaces are. Familiar staff recognising signs that they are becoming anxious & dis regulated. Visual timetable. Early warning of change & help to cope with the change.

Are there any particular school-based accommodations that work well?

Regular 'check ins' Less disruptions in class due to being in class with similar students. Being able to sit in same place. Staff that have got to know my child so recognise anxiety triggers.

What additional support do you think would help them in school?

More space around them in class/lessons. More staff recognising they're becoming anxious & offering to help instead of my child bringing it home & 'exploding' A trusted member of staff asking if they'd like to do something creative for a little while. Let them regress to 'bring their anxiety levels back down' but away from other students.

How can teachers and staff best support your child during anxious moments?

Explain in detail about any change that's going to happen but make it sound a positive change. Remind them about the change a couple of times a day & ask if they'd think the change will make them anxious & how can you help with that. Give them an 'important' job by helping you with the change.