



# Anxious or worried students

Behaviour support and student management are key aspects of teaching. Teachers and other school professionals are constantly required to respond to challenging, difficult or emotionally 'needy' students on a day-to-day basis. The following strategies can be used as part of general teacher practice or more formally through the establishment of individual learning plans, behaviour support plans, student management plans or whole school management plans.

You can also [watch our tutorial on writing Behaviour Support Plans](#) or [read our guidelines for writing a BSP](#) created with the Victorian DEECD for their Bullystoppers resources.

<b>Teacher strategy.</b>
<b>1. Acknowledge the student's worries and listen to the concerns.</b>
<b>Purpose.</b> To reassure the student that an adult will assist in dealing with their worries. Statements such as 'Don't worry about it, it'll be fine' or 'That is not going to happen to you' are dismissive of the student's concerns and are unlikely to reduce the child's worries, adding to their inner confusion.
<b>Action.</b> Speak with the student privately. Ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 'What are you worried about?'</li><li>○ 'Can I help you with them?'</li><li>○ 'Have you discussed the concern with your parents or another trusted adult?'</li></ul> Encourage the child to talk with their parents or a senior staff member such as the welfare coordinator or the deputy or assistant principal.
<b>Note:</b> There are always more senior or specially trained professionals who can follow up on a student disclosure about an issue of concern.
If a student discloses information that indicates the student is at risk of or is experiencing significant harm or abuse, then follow through with mandatory reporting as required. See <a href="#">Reporting child abuse: A guide for teachers</a> .

<b>Student strategy.</b>
<b>2. Share concerns indirectly via a 'suggestion box', email, <a href="#">Edmodo</a> or school intranet communication tool.</b>
<b>Purpose.</b> To provide the student with opportunities to share their problems and seek support without embarrassment.
<b>Action.</b> The student can write their concerns and classify them – 'private' or 'share' using their chosen form of communication. The student and teacher then either talks privately, or meets as part of a group to discuss concerns.



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**Teacher strategy.**

**3. Use confident language to help reduce student anxiety.**

**Purpose.** Use language confidently to establish and maintain a trusting relationship and decrease anxiety. A student who trusts others such as their teacher are more likely to share their concerns and talk openly about unresolved issues or concerns.

**Action.** Confident language that reduces anxiety includes:

- **Normalising the situation** e.g. 'Lots of students your age worry about those issues. Its normal to feel a little worried about world events'.
- **Putting everyday worries in perspective.** 'Is this a big or a little worry?' (See below).
- **It's okay not to have 'the' answer.** You just might just say – 'How about we talk about this to Mrs Jones (the Deputy or Assistant Principal).'
- **Statements that reassuring students that nothing is so bad that it can't be talked about.**
- **Congratulating the student for trusting you as the first port of call** for solving the problem.

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**Teacher strategy.**

**4. Model and speak about worries as problems that will pass, or that can be solved.**

**Purpose.** To adopt a proactive problem-solving approach that teaches the student to reframe worries. It can be empowering for the student to see worries as something they can solve through effort, planning or help from others; or to realise that in some cases, worries will just pass with time.

**Action.** Share your own (appropriate) worries aloud in class. For example if you forget how to spell a word when writing on the board, you might say, 'Oh, no I've forgotten how to spell, 'predicament'. How embarrassing. What can I do about it? I can ask someone. Does anyone know how to spell predicament? No, okay I can look it up. Okay great, that wasn't so bad. It's spelt, pre/dic/a/ment. I've got it and it wasn't that embarrassing.'



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**Teacher strategy.**

**5. Help the student to have a realistic perspective about every day worries.**

**Purpose.** To help the student to respond to a worry in a realistic way.

**Action.** Teachers can deal with typical everyday worries by using these steps:

1. **Rate the worry from 1 to 10**, where one is 'not a worry' and 10 is the 'worst worry ever possible'. Use a 'feeling thermometer' to illustrate the concept. Ask, 'What would it take for the worry to be one or two points less?' Discuss the student's response, and develop a plan to carry out appropriate actions to reduce the worry.
2. **Is the worry a 'big' or a 'little' problem?** Help the student to realistically consider whether the worry is 'annoying' or 'a little bit upsetting' rather than the 'worst worry ever possible'. Ask the student, 'what worry would be a 10? 5? 2?' 'Is your current worry as bad as the worry you gave 9-10?'
3. **Ask, 'What is the best and worst thing that could happen in this situation?'** Then ask, 'How likely is it that the worst will ever happen?' Have the student rate the likelihood between 1-10. Help the student to adjust any faulty thinking or predictions about future 'bad' outcomes. Then ask, 'What is the most likely thing that will happen?' Once this has been identified, help the student plan how they will be able to cope with the most likely outcome.

For students who worry a lot, see the Psych4Schools ebooklet, [Working with children who worry excessively](#).

**Teacher strategy.**

**6. Assist the student to pre-plan and encourage them to 'give-it-a-go'.**

**Purpose.** To encourage the student to act a little outside their comfort zone to give them a sense of accomplishment, and gradually reduce anxiety. This discourages task avoidance and allows the student to challenge him or her self for effective change.

**Action.** For the student who is afraid to answer questions in class, talk with them about the importance of contributing in class. Pre-arrange a question you will ask the student, and discuss their answer so they can practice and feel confident in what they will say prior to class discussion. Then call upon them to respond to that question in class.



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**Teacher strategy.**

**7. Incorporate exercise or physical activities into your daily class program.**

**Purpose.** To help distract the student from their worries and to concentrate better. Exercise releases endorphins, which makes people feel good. Exercise can also make it easier for the child to fall asleep at night. Good sleep aids concentration, memory and wellbeing.

**Action.** Turn maths activities into movement based games. For example, have the class walk around the room while you call out questions such as 'Don't sit down if your birthday can be divided by 5', or ' $5 \times 7 = 35$ . Don't sit down if you think this is correct.'

**Teacher strategy.**

**8. Document and share ways that others cope with worries.**

**Purpose.** To provide real life examples to enable students to see that their worries are not unlike their peers. Students can also learn what others do to cope with worries to enable them to increase available coping strategies.

**Action.** Make a 'Rebounding' class book. Talk with the class about small problems they have confronted and strategies they have used to deal with them. Encourage students to write a story about and how they coped with one small problem. Teachers will need to monitor the stories to ensure that they are not overly confronting, do not name anyone in a libellous way, and includes a positive outcome or useful strategies. Remind the class that parents and other students will read stories so names and identifying information need to be changed.

If the teacher is concerned about a child's story, they should discuss it with a senior staff member such as the deputy or assistant principal.

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