STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH

PROFESIONAL PRACTICES

If you want to make a difference in the lives of the children in front of you – look for differences you can make to your professional practice.

Some of these ideas are suited to working with one child, some will apply to the whole class and some are concerned with your teaching space or your professional approach.

These ideas and suggestions have been collated from a range of sources including:

<https://www.healthcentral.com/article/20-classroom-interventions-for-children-with-anxiety-disorders>

<http://teaching.monster.com/benefits/articles/8761-22-tips-for-teaching-students-with-autism-spectrum-disorders>

<http://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd-and-learning/>

<http://do2learn.com/disabilities/CharacteristicsAndStrategies/AutismSpectrumDisorder_Strategies.html>

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| **Input. Talk to the students about what interventions they would find helpful.** Having the student discuss strategies may help them to be involved in reducing their anxiety symptoms. This also provides the child an opportunity to talk about situations that cause anxiety symptoms as well as for them to be more aware of their symptoms. | 1 |  |
|  | 2 | **Alternatives. Discuss alternative ways of handling situations.** Talk to the student after an anxiety attack about how the situation could have been different or what strategies could have been used (by both the student and the teacher) to make the situation better. |
| **Positive. Teach positive self-talk to the entire class.** Helping children to be aware of the negative way they talk to themselves, such as the use of “I can’t” and help them to develop a more positive way of talking to themselves. | 3 |  |
|  | 4 | **Give fewer choices.** If a child is asked to pick a colour, only give him two to three choices to pick from. The more choices, the more confused an autistic child will become. |
| **Language.** Use clear and unambiguous language. | 5 |  |
|  | 6 | **Personalize.**  Address the pupil individually at all times. For example, the pupil may not realize that an instruction given to the whole class also includes him/her. Calling the pupil’s name and saying “I need you to listen to this as this is something for you to do” can sometimes work; other times the pupil will need to be addressed individually. |
| **Protect.** Protect the pupil from teasing at free times, and provide peers with some awareness of his/her particular needs. | 7 |  |
|  | 8 | **Give very clear choices** and try not to leave choices open ended. You’re bound to get a better result by asking “Do you want to read or draw?” than by asking “What do you want to do now?” |
| **Clarity.** If you ask a question or give an instruction and are greeted with a blank stare, reword your sentence. Asking a student what you just said helps clarify that you’ve been understood | 9 |  |
|  | 10 | **Ensure consistency** of expectations among all family members and staff. |
| **Express feelings.** Introduce opportunities for free writing, journaling, or drawing to express feelings. | 11 |  |
|  | 12 | **Skills.** Explicitly teach safety and community awareness skills as needed. |
| **Planning.** Teach student how to use and organize daily schedules and planners. | 13 |  |
|  | 14 | **What to do.** Reinforce desirable behaviours that serve as alternatives to inappropriate behaviours (teaching the student what to do rather than what not to do). |
| **Taking another perspective.** Target perspective-taking skills | 15 |  |
|  | 16 | **Avoid using sarcasm.** If a student accidentally knocks all your papers on the floor and you say “Great!” you will be taken literally and this action might be repeated on a regular basis. |
| **Check.** Repeat instructions and check understanding. Use short sentences to ensure clarity of instructions. | 17 |  |
|  | 18 | **Reward. Reward effort by a student with anxiety.** When a child shows effort or is able to control their anxiety symptoms through interventions, let them know you have noticed and are proud of their efforts. |
| **Role Play. Create group activities that role-play appropriate behaviors.** Teach young children what to do in specific situations. This can help all students learn how to handle situations such as anger management, stress reduction, test anxiety.  | 19 |  |
|  | 20 | **Reduce anxiety. Discuss what sections of a book will be read aloud with a student before calling on them to read**. If reading aloud in the class causes stress and anxiety, plan ahead of time and let a student practice a small selection the night before. |
| **Social norms.** Teach specific social rules/skills, such as turn-taking and social distance. | 21 |  |
|  | 22 | **Avoid using idioms.** “Put your thinking caps on”, “Open your ears” and “Zipper your lips” will leave a student completely mystified and wondering how to do that. |
| **Visualising.** Teach what “finished” means and help the students to identify when something has finished and something different has started. Take a photo of what you want the finished product to look like and show the students. If you want the room cleaned up, take a picture of how you want it to look some time when it is clean. The students can use this for a reference. | 23 | Image result for be the change you want to see |
|  | 24 | **Understand.** Recognize that some change in manner or behaviour may reflect anxiety (which may be triggered by a [minor] change to routine). |
| **Awareness.** Remind other students that some students may not get jokes or non-verbal language. | 25 |  |
|  | 26 | **Responses.** Be aware of teasing by peers; teach and rehearse appropriate responses to bullying. |
| **Movement.** Allow students the opportunity to move during instruction |  |  |
|  | 27 | **Signs.** Be aware of signs of anxiety or difficulties a student may be having with sensory and emotional overload (hands over ears, plugging ears, or repetitive behaviours, like rocking). |
| **Highlight.** When using worksheets, highlight directions and number the steps to complete tasks. | 28 |  |

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| **Points system.** Use an individualized points system / token economy to increase target behaviours. | 29 |  |
|  | 30 | **Eyes.** Be aware that students may feel very uncomfortable with eye contact. |
| **Technology.** Explore word-processing, and computer-based learning for literacy. | 31 |  |
|  | 31 | **Role-Play.** Engage students in role-plays to target reciprocal conversation |
| **Reading. Find books that address children with anxiety.** Incorporate these books into reading curriculum. This not only helps the child with anxiety to feel better about their anxiety but also can help the other students in the class be more understanding of the condition. | 33 |  |
| Related image | 34 | **Simplicity.** Always keep your language simple and concrete. Get your point across in as few words as possible. Typically, it’s far more effective to say “Pens down, close your journal and line up to go outside” than “It looks so nice outside. Let’s do our science lesson now. As soon as you’ve finished your writing, close your books and line up at the door. We’re going to study plants outdoors today”. |
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| **Allow** a few minutes at the beginning of the day for the children to transition into the school day. Additional transitional periods might be necessary for other times when routine is disrupted. This can be providing five to ten minutes for the children to prepare their papers and school supplies or simply a few minutes for the children to sit quietly before the school day begins. If the time before school is difficult for a particular child, it may be beneficial for them to either enter the classroom a few minutes before or a few minutes after the rest of the class arrives. | 35 |  |
|  | 36 | **Part-time.** For children avoiding school because of anxiety, offer suggestions such as coming to school for a shorter day. The longer the child avoids going to school, the more difficult it is for them to return. Allowing them to come to school for shorter periods will give them a chance to face their fears but may make it easier if they know they will be able to return home at lunchtime. |
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| **Inclusiveness.** Providing instruction to the entire class will decrease the focus on the child with anxiety. | 37 |  |
|  | 38 | **Recognize.** Don’t take apparently rude or aggressive behaviour personally; and recognize that the target for the pupil’s anger may be unrelated to the source of that anger. |
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| **Routines.** Post the daily routine in the classroom and let students know in advance any changes in the schedule. Letting students know exactly what is expected will help lessen anxiety. For a student with anxiety, a sudden change can cause a panic attack. Knowing in advance what the day will be like will help in transitions. Ensure that the student knows the day's schedule at the start of each day and can reference schedule throughout day. Provide a very clear structure and a set daily routine including time for play. | 39 | Related image |
|  | 40 | **Avoid overstimulation**. Minimizing/removal of distracters, or providing access to an individual work area or booth, when a task involving concentration is set. Colourful wall displays can be distracting for some pupils, others may find noise very difficult to cope with. |
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| **Hands.** Have a "hands to yourself" rule to respect personal space of all students. | 41 |  |
|  | 42 | **Small Groups.** Use small group activities throughout the day. Children with anxiety may be better able to cope with small groups of a few students rather than large classroom study. Have the class break into small groups to complete class work to encourage participation. |
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| **Easy-Hard.** Intermix high probability tasks (easier tasks) with lower probability tasks (more difficult tasks). | 43 |  |
|  | 44 | **Exercise.** Incorporate exercise into the school day. Stop lessons for a few minutes or do stretching exercises in between lessons. This can help reduce stress. |
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| **Music.** Play soothing music during down time. Many times playing soft music can help children to calm down and can relieve stress. During quiet activities or seatwork, use soothing music. | 45 |  |
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|  | 46 | **Scales.** Use visual scales to label escalating emotions (e.g. 1-5 scales, Volcano scale). |
| **Label.** Teach students to accurately label their own emotions. Teach students to accurately identify how they feel as often as they can. | 47 |  |
|  | 48 | **Verbal or visual?** Minimize verbal demands when the student is upset, or escalating. Use visuals instead. |
| **Sequencing.** Use sequencing cards to teach order of events. | 49 |  |
|  | 50 | **De-stress.** Provide stress release activities or items, such as drawing, brushing, squeeze toys, weighted blankets, headphones, and music. |
| **Plan ahead.** Develop a coping plan; rehearse plan with the student when they are calm. | 51 |  |
|  | 52 | **Menu.** Give students a visual menu of appropriate behaviours to use when they become agitated or overwhelmed. |
| **Appropriate.** Explicitly teach discrimination between private versus public behaviours. | 53 |  |
|  |  | **Warning.** Provide warning of any impending change of routine, or switch of activity. |
| **Expectations.** When doing group work, provide a list of clear expectations and tasks for each member. | 54 |  |
|  | 55 | **Anxiety.** Allow student to avoid certain activities which may cause anxiety (e.g. large assemblies). |

