



**Curriculum:** Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

**Course:** Fear & Anxiety

**Level:** Elementary

**Objective:** Students will be able to define fear and anxiety, identify differences between the two, sort statements that match each concept and practice techniques for managing anxiety.

**Course Intent:** Provide information and exercises for students to understand, apply and consistently practice identifying and managing fear and anxiety.

**Useful Applications & Benefits:** Students benefit from recognizing school and personal situations that lead to fear and anxiety. This course helps students understand that everyone experiences fear and anxiety at some point in their life, which provides the realization that they are not alone. This enables students to reduce anxiety, increase classroom engagement and improve content retainment and test scores.

**Course Snapshot**

This course incorporates the following lessons.

	<b><u>Activity</u></b>	<b><u>Time Required</u></b>	<b><u>Resources and Materials Needed</u></b>
Introductory Lesson: What are Fear and Anxiety?	Whole group Discussion Small group	15 – 20 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson definitions</li> <li>• Pre-printed statements of fearful or anxious situations</li> </ul>
Lesson 2: Signs of Anxiety Related to Fear	Whole group Discussion Individual journaling	15 – 20 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson information</li> <li>• Chart paper with pre-drawn figure</li> <li>• Student journals</li> </ul>
Lesson 3: Overcoming Fear and Anxiety	Whole group Matching	15 – 20 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher created scenario and technique cards</li> </ul>
Lesson 4: Exercises and Practicing at Home	Whole group Discussions	5 – 10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student journals (optional)</li> </ul>

**Lesson Rationale**

Research indicates that there is a connection between brain structure and chronic fear or anxiety. It has been shown that negative emotions such as anxiety also negatively impact a



student's GPA and achievement. Especially for young children, constant fear or anxiety impacts their ability to learn and interact with others. While most of the research in this area is focused on persistent, prolonged or excessive exposure to fear and anxiety in young children, every student would benefit from the ability to distinguish between fear and anxiety and learn strategies to effectively manage anxious emotions and bodily responses.

Prepare the class to talk about a sensitive subject by approaching it openly and directly. Nobody likes to feel afraid and talk about their fears, but if done safely and productively, students can benefit from discussing what scares them. During this course, students will learn about themselves and others, which can help them realize they are not alone in having a fear or anxiety.

**Helpful Tips:**

- Communicate that no fear is invalid, students can feel comfortable in the classroom by realizing that their feelings are important and valid.
- Feel free to share some of your fears with the class so that they understand that adults can experience fear and anxiety too.
- If students are uncomfortable or not ready to talk about their fears, don't put them on the spot. Everyone deals with situations differently. Encourage them to share, but don't force it.
- Express the idea that fear and anxiety are natural. There is no magic cure to never feel afraid or anxious again, but there are positive ways that students can deal with their feelings in a manageable way.

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## **Introductory Lesson: What are Fear and Anxiety?**

### **What to Know Before You Begin**

#### **Definition**

##### **What is Fear?**

Fear is the feeling the body experiences as a result of a threat to your physical safety. Fear is a strong and unpleasant emotion we experience during a dangerous situation. Some examples of common fears are fear of heights, fear of the dark, and fear of going to the doctor. How are all these fears similar? They all have a perceived element of danger, that is, they seem dangerous or hurtful. People who have a fear of heights are afraid of falling and people who are afraid of the dark are afraid of not being able to see their environment. Likewise, those who fear the doctor are often afraid of getting shots.



Fear is a natural reaction we experience when things scare us and not every fear is the same. Different people will have different fears based on their past experiences. Often fear is an emotion meant to protect us. For example, someone who has been stung painfully by a bee might be afraid of bees to prevent future bee stings.

Not all fears are based on experience. Being afraid of alligators when you have never met one, and have not had a negative experience, is fear designed to protect you from the physical harm that an alligator could cause.

### **What is Anxiety?**

Anxiety is a worry about a bad situation that is about to happen, but people often feel it when they are in a good situation and nothing is truly wrong.

Anxiety can have a specific cause, for example, imagine you are asked to speak in front of the entire class. You may feel anxiety over what you are going to say, and how other people might judge you.

### **What is the Difference?**

How is anxiety different from fear?

Fear is the result of a real, known threat to your safety, while anxiety is the way your body reacts to a perceived threat or internal conflict. Anxiety is a response to uncomfortable or unknown stimuli and may affect your comfort level but will not affect your physical safety.

### **Activity**

Begin a whole group discussion about fear and anxiety by asking students, "What are some things that people are often afraid of?" Explore with students the similarities and differences between fear and anxiety. Use the information provided to guide a discussion, focusing on key points that distinguish fear from anxiety.

- Fear is our reaction to threats of safety or danger
- Anxiety is related to perceived or possible threat
- Fear and anxiety produce similar symptoms

Divide the students into smaller groups of 3-4 students. Provide each group with various statements that contain a fearful or anxious situation. Have students work in groups to sort the statements into two piles, one for real and the other for anxiety. Below are some sample situations. Choose from the list below or create statements that are age specific to your students.

- You see a snake on the sidewalk ahead of you
- You have to give a presentation in class
- The teacher asked you to read, and you don't know how to pronounce a word



- The big dog that lives down the street is loose and coming your way
- You're swimming at the beach and a huge wave is coming
- You are selling chocolate as a fundraiser and have to talk to people as they walk in the store
- A bee just landed on your shoulder
- You have to go to the doctor for a blood test
- You are struggling with the spelling words this week and the test is tomorrow
- You're out on a four-wheeler with your uncle when you hit a pothole and the four-wheeler starts to tip over
- You are at a sleepover and miss your parents

Walk around to the different groups as they work and ask students, "Why did you choose to put that statement with fear/anxiety?" Focus on helping the students identify the differences between fear, as a threat to safety, and anxiety, as an emotional state related to the unknown.

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## Lesson 2: Signs of Anxiety Related to Fear

### Signs of Anxiety

Did you know that symptoms of anxiety can be the same as when you are sick? Some of those symptoms are:

- Shaky hands
- Sweating
- Headache
- Sleep problems
- Upset stomach
- Heart pumping racing
- Muscle Tensing

Anxiety is often felt when we are about to experience something that we are fearful of. If you are afraid of heights, you might start feeling anxious during an elevator ride to the top of a tall building. If you are afraid of certain animals, you might feel anxiety while entering a zoo.

Anxiety can also be felt when we are destined to be placed in an uncomfortable position. We may feel anxious while taking a test, in anticipation of eventually seeing poor test results that create a very uncomfortable situation.



Remember that anxiety is something everyone experiences at some point, but it can be helpful to figure out exactly when you are feeling it, and why you feel anxious because you can work on either getting over your anxiety or working on ways to manage your it in a healthy way. If you are feeling any of the symptoms above, then you should talk to an adult that you trust. If there is no physical or medical cause, these symptoms may be the result of anxiety.

### **Know the Causes of your Anxiety**

Are you scared to sing on stage during a school play? Are you afraid of being on stage, concerned about what the audience will think of you? If you know what causes your anxiety, you can work hard to overcome it.

### **Activity**

Explain to students that our bodies often express and react to anxiety in a variety of ways. Model this by providing an example of a time that you felt anxious and explain how your body reacted. For example, "When I interviewed for my first teaching job, I remember that my hands were shaking, and I couldn't sleep the night before."

Begin a group discussion by presenting a poster with a simple outline of a person. Using your modeled example, label the outline in the places indicated (i.e. write 'shaky hands' on one of the hands and 'no sleep' near the eyes). Ask students to think of a time they were anxious and how their body reacted. They don't need to share the experience, just what it felt like. Continue adding student responses to the outline, perhaps 'headache' near the head, or 'stomachache' on the stomach. Refer to the lesson information provided above to guide the discussion to include various responses.

Next, ask students to think specifically about their reactions to anxiety. Have students write in a private journal about a few times they were anxious and to list how their body reacted each time. The purpose of the exercise is for students to understand the individual ways in which they react to anxiety to recognize the feelings later. Assure students that you will not be reading their journals and that they should be honest about their feelings.

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## **Lesson 3: Overcoming Fear and Anxiety**

### **What to Know Before You Begin**

There is no guaranteed way to completely get rid of anxiety, but there are ways to overcome and manage it. If you feel like anxiety is affecting you too often or is unbearable in certain situations, then it might be helpful to try and find effective ways to better manage your anxiety. Identifying when you feel anxious and what situations cause your anxiety can help you deal with your feelings better than not knowing or being unprepared. If you can recognize your



anxiety, then you will know in the future what that feeling is and what you need to do to turn it into positive energy or manage it in a way that will help you deal with it, without letting it control you.

### **How to Positively Manage Anxiety**

Understand how anxiety affects you. Ask yourself various questions.

- Does anxiety motivate you to change your situation?
- Does it make you feel uncomfortable or stressed?
- When you are stressed, how does that make your mind feel?
- How does it make your body feel?

Once you understand your anxiety more, you are better equipped to respond proactively. For example, if you know that anxiety causes your heart to beat faster, you can practice breathing and meditation techniques. Likewise, if you

Remember that anxiety is connected to situations that our mind perceives as unknown or threatening, and therefore sometimes our imagination of what might happen is worse than what will most likely happen. Imagine your first day of school. How did you feel? Were you worried about making friends? Did you wonder if you would like your teacher? How did those thoughts compare to what happened on your first day? It is important to remind yourself that your anxiety over the first day ended up being different from what happened on your first day.

There are situations in life that will require you to keep going, even if you're worried or anxious. Once you learn how to effectively manage your anxiety, you will discover that you can do whatever you put your mind to. It's okay to be afraid, but it isn't okay for fear or anxiety to get in the way of living a happy and fulfilling life. Consequently, positively managing anxiety can help us to make plans, reach goals and be productive. For example, if you are worried about making the basketball team, you might set a goal to practice for 30 minutes each day. Or, if you are worried about forgetting something at a sleepover, you might make a list of what to pack ahead of time.

### **Activity**

Prepare for the lesson by creating one set of sample statements that describe situations students might feel anxious about, and another set of matching statements that provide a way for students to help manage their anxiety in that situation. For example, students in your class might feel anxious about an upcoming state exam. On one piece of paper or post-it note, write, "The state exam is next week." On another piece of paper or post-it note write, "Ask a parent to help you study and go to bed early the night before." You could also have students prepare the scenarios ahead of time by sharing situations in which they have felt anxious.



Create enough scenarios so that each student will have a piece of paper, either a scenario or management technique. Be sure not to call these 'solutions,' as anxiety can't be solved, but rather effectively managed.

For the activity, explain to students that they will each get one piece of paper. The paper will have either a scenario or a technique. Their job is to walk around the room and find the partner that has the matching statement. In other words, the scenarios should find the student that has the best technique for helping to manage anxiety in that situation. Students will have to think critically about which statements the best support of each scenario.

For younger students that are unable to read, use pictures to help guide students. Include management techniques that are age-appropriate and can be depicted visually, such as drawing a picture, taking a break, talking to a friend, or trying again. If needed, focus on 3-5 techniques that can be matched with various scenarios. For example, 'draw a picture' could be matched with 'the first day of school' and 'getting a new baby brother.'

After students have finished sorting themselves, have each pair share the scenario and technique to the class.

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## Lesson 4: Exercises and Practicing at Home

Share the following exercises with your students and encourage them to continue practicing and using these strategies outside of school. Take time to introduce each activity in class and allow students to practice their skills.

### **Start a "Feeling Journal"**

Ask students to write about how they are feeling right at that moment. Is there something you are worried about? Is that fear real or are you making that fear worse by thinking about it? How are some ways you can overcome that fear? Next, have students practice telling someone, "I am feeling overwhelmed." Students don't need to share their anxiety at that moment but explain that they should share this with someone they trust. Simply practicing verbalizing the statement, "I am feeling overwhelmed," may give students the confidence to confide in someone later.

### **Take a Time Out**

Explain to students that another way to combat anxiety is to take a break with you feel overwhelmed. Have students practice taking a deep breath. Have students practice standing up, stretching or walking around. Explain that when students are feeling overwhelmed at home, they could do a mindless task like cleaning their room. Getting something done will make you



feel accomplished. If you feel overwhelmed by a large assignment, break it down into smaller steps. Take that new sense of accomplishment and put it towards your overwhelming situation.

### **Tell Someone**

Discuss with students the importance of telling family, teachers, or guidance counselors if they are feeling overwhelmed. Ask students to plan and decide which adult they would go to if they were feeling overwhelmed. Remind students that these people are here to help them succeed, but they can't help if they don't know how you feel. You are important and how you feel is important too!

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## **Quick Quiz**

1. What emotion is anxiety closely related to?

- A.) Joy
- B.) Anger
- C.) Fear
- D.) Happiness

2. Who experiences fear and anxiety?

- A.) Just students
- B.) Everyone
- C.) Only some people
- D.) Older children

3. What can you do if you start to feel anxious before a presentation in front of your class?

- A.) Think about messing up and embarrassing yourself.
- B.) Tell your teacher you feel sick and go home.
- C.) Do the presentation as quickly as you can because you're anxious.
- D.) Take a deep breath and tell yourself that everyone feels anxious at some point, but you're not going to let it stop you from presenting.





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**Teacher Feedback**

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