

What You Need to Know.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

Self-Reg and the Anxiety Epidemic

This Self-Reg Information Sheet is based on ideas and content developed by Dr. Stuart Shanker. It is intended to increase educators' and parents' understanding of anxiety and how to support children dealing with anxiety on a day-to-day basis. **It is not meant to replace clinical diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders.**

Anxiety has become an increasing problem in today's children and youth. For example, in a 2011 Toronto District School Board survey, 63% of grade 7 and 8 students and 72% of secondary students said they felt nervous or anxious "all the time." Even more worrying is the large number of children and teens who attempt to block out or deny feeling this way. Anxiety-related problems can emerge early, sometimes in very young children, tend to become more prevalent as children move into adolescence and are often persistent and resistant to treatment.

When is Anxiety a Problem?

A certain amount of anxiety, worry or nervousness related to everyday challenges and experiences is normal. In fact, it can be positively arousing.

Dr. Stuart Shanker says the kind anxiety we need to be concerned about is when children or teens rarely feel calm, and perhaps, have no real sense of what "calm" feels like. Instead, they are in a chronic, undirected state of nervousness or fearfulness, with no specific target, and which affects our mood over time, as opposed to the anxiety we experience as a fleeting emotion for a specific reason, such as having to write a test or make a speech.

Psychological symptoms include:

- excessive worries
- intrusive thoughts
- hyper-vigilance
- negative bias (children's perceptions of their abilities, self-worth and expected outcomes become negative and self-fulfilling)

Physical symptoms can include:

- trembling or palpitations
- upset stomach or stomach
- headache
- muscle tension
- pounding heart

The above physical symptoms are not always recognized as signs of anxiety.

Causes of Chronic Anxiety

While many factors can contribute to anxiety problems, Dr. Stuart Shanker's view is that the root problem is excessive stress. Some stressors that contribute to anxiety may be related to individual children's life circumstances. At the same time, a number of societal and environmental stressors that affect most children also play a key role in the

Self-Reg and the Anxiety Epidemic

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

increasing anxiety problems we are seeing today including:

- **Urbanization:** physical and social stresses such as commuting, crowds, noise and light levels, and pollution.
- **Mismatch theory:** Peter Gluckman's idea that there is a mismatch between our stress systems, which were designed to deal with stressors humans faced millions of years ago, and the types of stressors we experience modern life (fewer predators, more technological stressors etc.). We also use our bodies differently in a modern lifestyle (less movement, less exposure to nature etc).
- **The contagion effect:** In an increasingly anxious world, one person's anxiety can trigger anxiety in other individuals or groups they are part of.

Other stressors that contribute to increasing anxiety in today's school children include:

- Living in an overly competitive age
- Increased parental anxiety
- Stress related to heavy use of electronic and social media
- An absence of activities (particularly social activities) that reduce tension and restore the energy depleted when the brain/body stress systems are working overtime

The Effects of Anxiety on Students

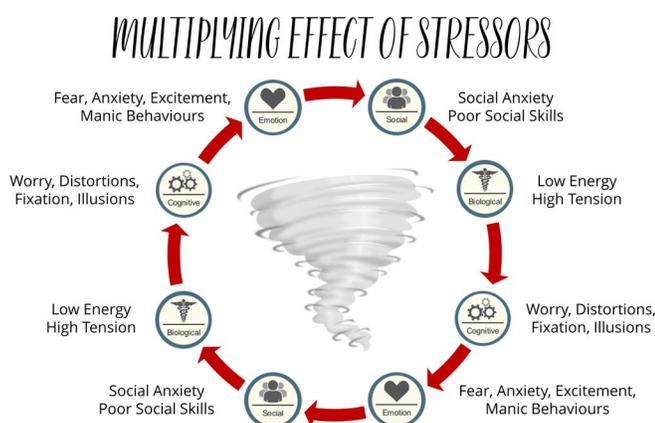
- Students shift from blue brain (learning/social brain) to red brain (survival brain). This interferes with learning, social interaction, thinking, reappraising situations, and contributes to mood and behaviour problems.
- Students have difficulty shifting back to blue brain.
- Students are in a state of chronic limbic arousal: a child's limbic system develops a "kindled" (easily triggered) amygdala alarm due to an excessive stress load.
- Excess stress in all five domains (biological, emotion, cognitive, social and prosocial).
- Stress cycles: various stressors (physical, emotional, cognitive, social) impinge on and multiply each other to keep a person in a prolonged and often escalating state of high stress. Stress cycles contribute to low energy and high tension levels, which makes children more vulnerable to the negative emotions and thoughts.

This also lowers the threshold for them to have a stress response to something they would otherwise respond to in a positive manner.

It can be very hard for students to break out of a stress cycle on their own.

Self-Reg Approach to Anxiety Problems

When supporting children with anxiety issues, we need to focus on what the anxiety is telling us and then ameliorate the conditions that have led to the child's anxiety. In terms of Self-Reg, that primarily means reducing the child's stress load. That's as opposed to trying to suppress or discourage the behaviours the anxiety is causing.



Self-Reg and the Anxiety Epidemic

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

We also need to detect and break stress cycles that often feed anxiety. The five steps of Self-Reg can help us to:

- Identify and reduce the stressors affecting the student.
- Promote greater stress awareness.
- Help the student be an active agent in this process. We need to help students understand why they are having problems with anxiety and what they can do about it.
- Help students find and engage in activities that reduce tension and restore the energy burned by excessive stress and anxiety.

5 Steps of Self-Reg

1 Reframe

2 Recognize the stressors

3 Reduce the stress

4 Reflect

5 Restore

Hidden Stressors and Anxiety

According to Dr. Shanker, hidden stressors-stimuli we don't generally think of as stressors are key contributors to the stress and stress cycles underlying chronic anxiety. Hidden stressors affecting today's children include:

- **Insufficient or poor quality sleep.** The hypothalamus, a part of the limbic system that triggers our metabolic responses to stress, responds to fatigue very much as it

would respond to something startling. It raises limbic arousal, which means that the amygdala will trigger the alarm more easily. As a result, the child starts to see threats everywhere and feels anxious much of the time.

- **Lack of exercise.** Physical activity is a powerful antidote to anxiety. Research has shown that exercise reduces anxiety because it reduces tension, removes stress hormones from our system and stimulates the production of chemicals that help to calm our stress response system.
- **Urbanization.** Urban living has heightened our exposure to a number of physiological stressors including noise, crowds, increased visual stimulation, lack of privacy, pollution from automobiles and decreased exposure to the calming influence of nature.

We must be careful to build in calming and restorative activities.

- **Superstimulants** (Stimuli that trigger the release of opioids and provide a quick but short-lived burst of energy). High exposure to super stimulants such as junk foods, video games, computer screens and social media are stressors to a child's system, even though children are drawn to them. Kids with chronic anxiety tend to be drawn to superstimulants, because of the quick burst of energy and numbing effects they experience. However, superstimulants can exacerbate stress cycles. For example, the processing of excess sugar and salt from junk food is a metabolic stressor. Prolonged playing of violent video games can keep a child in a state of fight or flight, which interferes with sleep and blunts the child's ability to shift from red brain back to blue brain.

Self-Reg and the Anxiety Epidemic

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

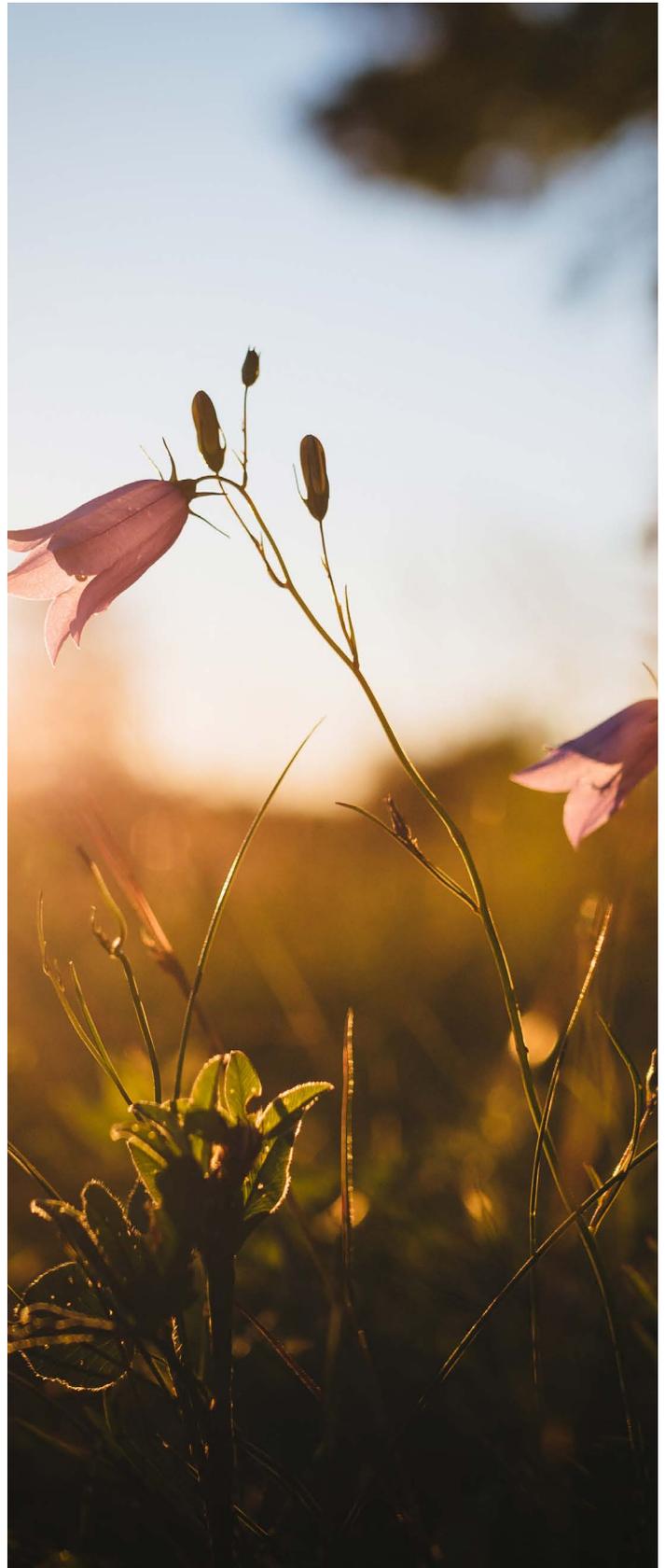
Do's and Don'ts of Supporting Students with Anxiety Problems

Don't

- Don't rely solely on metacognitive strategies. Well-researched practices that have been shown to be effective—such as cognitive-behaviour therapy, other cognitive-based approaches, and mindfulness—are all enhanced when embedded in a Self-Reg framework. In fact, if the stress system has not been calmed, metacognitive and mindfulness activities can actually add to the stress load in certain children.
- Don't pick on just one thing to work on such as the overt cause of anxiety or reducing intrusive thoughts, negative emotions or worries.

Do

- Remember that anxiety problems are caused by excess stress, therefore understanding and addressing a child's stressors is the key to addressing chronic anxiety.
- Start by lowering the child's overall stress levels and soothing the child's stress alarm.
- Help the child become more calm, as opposed to telling the child to relax or saying, "This is what you need to do to calm down."
- Help the child learn what calm feels like and how to get back to feeling calm.
- Look for stressors in all five domains, not just one.
- Seek professional help if a child's anxiety problems are persistent and debilitating.



[Learn More Here](#)