

# Anxiety

By Michelle Brode, Kirkland Middle School's YES Counselor

So many teens and their families are understandably experiencing heightened levels of anxiety these days. In this article, I give some background information on anxiety, how to spot it, and when to reach out for help. For more information, [register](#) for the Lake Washington Schools Foundation Balance in Mind Parent Chat on November 4<sup>th</sup>. You can also reach out to me. I've included my contact info at the bottom of this article. And I'll have more information about how parents can support their tweens and teens who are experiencing anxiety in future issues of the Panthergram.



## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal human response to stress and uncertainty. Given that stress and uncertainty are a significant part of our experience right now, it makes sense that both adults and children are feeling more anxious than usual.

Anxiety is an important part of our children's emotional toolkit. It is designed to let them know that a threat has been perceived, and they should get ready to act. Anxiety is adaptive and protective- it helps us respond effectively to what is happening around us. It can be very useful- anxiety over a test, a performance, a sports game can help focus attention and prepare to do our best. A healthy emotional response involves reacting proportionally to the circumstances- and this is as true for anxiety as it is for every other emotion.

## When is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety is a problem when children become overly worried or afraid, and it gets in the way of their doing what they need to do and what they want to do. Anxiety is a problem when the "alarm bell" becomes too sensitive and tells someone that safe things seem scary. Anxiety is a problem when it is too strong, goes on for too long, and gets in the way of normal life.



It is important that we distinguish between healthy anxiety and anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders need to be diagnosed by a qualified professional. The good news is that anxiety disorders are very treatable, and people can feel much better with the right help.

### **What Does Problematic Anxiety Look Like?**

Problematic Anxiety prompts these Feelings: Fear, tension, irritability, panic, worry, nervousness.

Problematic Anxiety prompts these Thoughts: Unhelpful, unrealistic, or inaccurate, untrue fears or worries. A firm belief that danger is everywhere, and that something bad is going to happen.

Problematic Anxiety can prompt these Behaviors: Avoidance, withdrawal, clinginess, refusing to separate from parents, talk of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches, regression, rituals, and self-harm.

Problematic anxiety gives us two inaccurate messages:

- 1) This situation is gravely dangerous.
- 2) I can't handle this situation.

### **Problematic Anxiety Leads to Avoidance**

It makes sense that one would want to avoid something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Avoiding it provides a sense of relief in the short term. But in the long term, avoidance makes things worse- it reinforces the inaccurate thought that we can't handle the situation, and it makes us miss out on things we want to do. What helps people learn that they can handle anxiety-provoking situations is to handle anxiety-provoking situations. Parents and mental health professionals can do a lot to help kids learn how to do this.

### **When Should I Seek Professional Help?**

When the feelings are too intense, go on too long, and get in the way of everyday life.

If your child is self-injuring. If your child is leaning on unhealthy coping mechanisms (screen time, substance use). If avoidance is getting in the way of living life.

Please know that you can reach out to me through my Zoom office hours to talk about any concerns you may have for your child. Register [here](#). Or you can leave a message for me at 425-747-4937 ext. 2793

*Michelle Brode is Kirkland Middle School's YES Counselor.*