

Anxiety Alert

This may seem like a contradiction in terms – being **alert to anxiety** – but if we look at it more carefully 'alert' implies a **controlled** response to a situation, where 'anxiety' can become worry or alertness that gets out of hand, leading to unnecessary distress and other negative repercussions.

Anxiety is helpful in **"normal"** doses. Anxiety aids in motivating someone to study for a test, or avoid a situation that may be dangerous. The trick is that "normal" anxiety decreases once the danger is gone or once the material has been studied. If the anxiety persists once the need for it has passed, then there may be cause for concern.

You may be aware of these conditions that psychologists identify and categorise: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. These present anxiety in its extreme form. If you have any concerns that your child or anyone in your family may display signs of these it is important that you consult with a physician. However, there are times when a heightened anxiety response could be seen as normal.

Living in Tropical North Queensland (especially in the last few years) the wet season can trigger anxiety in the most stalwart of locals; parent separation; a recent illness in the family; 'shyness' or discomfort in unfamiliar social contexts; exam stress; peer pressure; bullying; all of these situations may trigger anxiety as a response. You're probably saying 'Yes' to having experienced most if not all of these situations at some time in your life, and for your children too. All of these are now considered normal stressors in our modern lives. So rather than looking at the causes, my aim in this article is to focus on the responses – what to do and say when these stressors arise.

Here are some **signs** you may notice:

- Excessive and persistent worry
- Restlessness and irritability
- Crying or losing temper easily or frequently
- Avoidance and procrastination
- Disruption to sleep and eating patterns
- Decline in academic performance
- Truancy and school refusal
- Withdrawal from social, class or school activities
- Tiredness and fatigue.

Here are some suggested **responses**:

- **Teach** relaxation strategies



- **Fun** – take time to build some into family life
- **Model and have realistic** performance expectations around school work, household chores, sport...
- **Practice relaxation** strategies at bed times and before school or other high energy activities
- **Listen** to your child's concerns without trivializing them – they may seem minimal to you but insurmountable to your child
- **Model and help** them problem solve – this **may or may not** include telling someone at school
- **Self-check** by asking "am I adding to this anxiety with my own stress levels?"
- **Follow through** on the plan you formulated. Planning without the follow up action could add to a sense of powerlessness for your child
- **Ask** for help or advice if the anxiety is not reduced or relieved within a reasonable timeframe.

By Tauba Naftal – School Counsellor