

SUPPORTING CAMPERS WITH ANXIETY

Recognizing Signs of Anxiety

Definition of Anxiety: Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat. (Source: American Psychological Association)

Someone does not need to qualify for generalized anxiety disorder or any anxiety related diagnosis to experience symptoms of anxiety. There are many other ways of diagnosing and assessing anxiety, the criteria below just provided a framework and understanding.

Diagnostic Criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Source: DSM-5)

- A. **Excessive anxiety and worry** (apprehensive expectation), **occurring more days than not** for at least six months, about a number of events or activities (such as work or school performance).
- B. The individual finds it **difficult to control the worry**.
- C. The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms (with at least some symptoms having been present for more days than not for the past six months).
Note: Only one item is required for children.
 - 1. **Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge.**
 - 2. Being **easily fatigued**.
 - 3. Difficulty **concentrating or mind going blank**.
 - 4. **Irritability**.
 - 5. **Muscle tension**.
 - 6. **Sleep disturbance** (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep).
- D. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause **clinically significant distress or impairment** in social, occupational, or other important areas of **functioning**.
- E. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.
- F. The disturbance is not better explained by another mental disorder.

*Note this information is provided to help recognize signs and not to make a diagnosis.

Common Misconceptions of Other Emotions with Anxiety:

- nervousness
- attention challenges
- strong reactions

- general fear
- general worry
- stress

Tips and Tools for Supporting Campers with Anxiety

Below are tools that staff can use and are appropriate ways to support campers with anxiety:

Support Campers

- As a staff member, your appropriate role is to support your campers who experience anxiety by being there for them and having accessible tools to help them day to day. Your job is not to fix or try to analyze your camper's anxiety - that should be dealt with by a mental health professional or your camper care team.
- Support often means getting them.

Discussion with Leadership/Camper Care Teams

- Work with your leadership team to find out about camper's history at camp and how they've been successful (or not) in the past. Additionally, if their parent provided info.
- Use your camper care team when the amount of support needed is beyond your scope. Talk to your camper care team about how they can support you and the camper.

Preventative support

- Sometimes campers identify they're worried about something before it happens, in that case, this is a great opportunity to ask the camper what their needs are to be supported.
- Get an idea about what they're anxious about and help provide all of the facts (anxiety can often cause catastrophizing and facts and expectations can help reduce that).
- Keep in mind, anticipation is sometimes much worse than the actual experience.

Back Up Plan

- When providing support for a camper to prepare for something they're anxious or worried about, coming up with a backup plan in case they feel too uncomfortable to continue with an activity can greatly help reduce anxiety. Knowing that they have an "out" or a "plan b" can bring tremendous ease.

Follow their lead

- If you notice the camper is showing signs of anxiety, then it's time to check in with them or to bring in your camper care team.
- If the camper seems to be doing okay, follow that and let them continue with the activity (reminding them during an activity about anxiety, may activate symptoms)

Breathing techniques

- **4 by 4 by 4 breathing:** When a camper is showing signs of anxiety, breathing exercises can help slow down their heart rate and therefore help them better manage anxiety levels. If you do this with them, that helps as well! Breathing in for 4 seconds, pause for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds. You can count with your hand if you join them in the exercise.
- **Belly breathing:** This is also a great way to slow down breathing. Have the camper put one hand on their stomach and take slow deep breaths. They'll know they're taking deep enough breaths as they look and watch their hand rise and fall with each breath.

Checking in Later

- Check in with the camper after an experience that they identified caused anxiety for them to see 1. What went right? 2. What could go better next time?
- Help them celebrate victories – if a camper was anxious about swimming in the lake and they swam in the lake, celebrating that will help positively reinforce their comfort for going in the lake again.
- If a camper didn't successfully push past an anxiety, providing support that it's okay, helps them not to build shame around the experience.