

autism at-a-glance

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Autism at-a-Glance is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA).



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Anxiety in Adolescents with ASD

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support high school staff and family members in understanding and recognizing symptoms of anxiety, and how those symptoms may present in adolescents on the autism spectrum.

Anxiety is believed to be one of the most common co-occurring disorders for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) along with depression and attention deficit disorder (ADHD). A conservative estimate of the rate of anxiety in teens with ASD is at least 40%, but some studies have put that rate almost twice as high. As a comparison, the rate of anxiety in teens in the general population is around 8%. Anxiety is thought to be more prevalent during adolescence as teens with ASD become more aware of their differences from their peers. This is particularly true for teens without an intellectual disability. Because anxiety is so common in teens with ASD, it is important that parents, teachers, and health care professionals be on the lookout for signs that an adolescent may be trying to cope with anxiety.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is the presence of excessive worry or fear and can vary from mild to severe. It can be characterized as generalized anxiety disorder or more specifically as social anxiety, separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or specific phobias (e.g. spiders or loud noises). Social anxiety is perhaps most common in individuals with ASD. Social anxiety is described as fear and avoidance of new people and social situations due to feelings of concern about being viewed negatively by others.

In school, anxiety can impact a student's academic performance and lead to behavior problems. At home, it can disrupt family life. If untreated, anxiety can lead to depression.



Recognizing Anxiety in Teens with ASD

Individuals with ASD may not be able to recognize and describe how they feel which can make it difficult to diagnose anxiety. This means that parents, teachers, and other care providers need to be able to recognize the wide-ranging signs of anxiety. In particular, changes in behavior such as sleep patterns and eating habits can be clues as well as excessive worry or rumination. Other behavioral changes such as withdrawal from normal daily activities or an increase in repetitive or destructive behaviors may be symptoms. Once an anxiety response is triggered, individuals with ASD can have difficulty controlling it.

Social Situations

Withdrawal or limited social engagement

For the past week, Jonathan has stopped eating lunch with his group of friends and sits by himself in the hallway outside my classroom.

Poorer relationships with parents/teachers/peers

Han has always been a favorite of his teachers but he forgets his morning routine. Han often leaves for school without brushing his teeth, washing his face, or combing his hair, which can be off-putting for his teachers.

Separation Anxiety

Lucy has been real clingy lately, especially when we go out in public. It reminds me of when she was really little.

Behaviors and Skills

Excessive worry or rumination

Akim will not stop worrying about getting to his job on time. He asks every 5 minutes when we are leaving, even though we leave at the same time every Wednesday and are never late.

Having trouble doing normal daily activities

Vanessa used to be the first one to get started on her daily activities in the morning. Now she just sits at the table and I can't seem to get her going

Increase in self-soothing and/or repetitive behaviors such as rocking, wringing, or flapping hands

One of my students this year, Sanjay, goes to the corner and rocks whenever it's time to do a group project. It's impacting his grade and the other kids are starting to avoid him altogether.

Increase in challenging, aggressive, and/or oppositional behaviors

Joey had a meltdown in school today. It was the second one this month. I thought we were over these.

Health and Wellness

Changes in sleep and/or sleeping patterns

I've noticed Katie has dark circles under her eyes lately and is having a hard time staying awake in class.



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Resources

AFIRM Module: Cognitive Behavioral Intervention

Mussey, J., Dawkins, T., & AFIRM Team. (2017). *Cognitive behavioral intervention*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder, FPG Child Development Center, University of North Carolina. Retrieved from <http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/cognitive-behavioral-intervention>

Autism Speaks

Autism Speaks. (2012). *Autism's Associated Medical Conditions*. Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/treatment/treatment-associated-medical-conditions>

Facing Your Fears

Reaven, J. (n.d.). *Welcome to the JFK Partners Program at the University of Colorado School of Medicine on the Anschutz Medical Campus*.

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<http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/medicalschoo/program/s/JFKPartners/clinicalservices/Pages/facingfears.aspx>

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National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). *Anxiety Disorders*. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>