

Attack of the Nerves

By Kirsten Weir

Butterflies in your stomach? Worries keeping you awake? Here's how to deal.

Kara C. is usually cool, calm, and collected. But like everyone, her nerves sometimes get the better of her. "In seventh grade, we had to do a play," says the 14-year-old from New York. "Sometimes I'd get nervous and start to forget my lines." Michigan teen Kevin P. has been through the same thing. "I had to do a speech in front of [the] class. It feels like a thousand beady eyes staring at you!" says Kevin, 15. "I couldn't concentrate enough to read my notes."

Have you ever felt as if you have butterflies fluttering in your stomach? That uneasy feeling is *anxiety*, and it happens to everyone. It is when you feel worried or uneasy. A little anxiety is a normal human reaction to stress. But sometimes anxiety can spin out of control. Luckily, you can learn to calm those feelings and move on.

Internal Alarm

Anxiety is similar to fear. When you are facing danger, your brain gets ready to make a quick decision: fight or run away. That is called the fight-or-flight reaction. The brain tells the body to release *adrenaline*, a chemical that triggers certain changes in the body. Your heart beats faster. You breathe more quickly. Your muscles tense, and you start to sweat. You might feel a little dizzy or sick to your stomach.

There are good reasons for the body's fight-or-flight reaction, explains William Shryer, a social worker in Danville, Calif. Anxiety is like an internal alarm that helps you stay safe. Fear of heights can keep you from falling off a cliff. Feeling nervous before a test can inspire you to study. "Anxiety is a good thing," he says.

Still, you can have too much of a good thing. "Normal anxiety decreases when the danger is gone," Shryer says. But when worry sticks around, it can get in the way of life. About 13 of every 100 kids ages 9 to 17 have what are known as *anxiety disorders*. For those kids, Shryer says, anxiety "is like a haunting monster."

In Control

Why are some people more anxious than others? Scientists aren't sure. Some kids might learn nervous behavior from anxious parents. Genetics and brain chemistry might also play a role.

Anxiety can affect your appetite and make it hard to concentrate. It can also keep you from getting a good night's sleep. Over time, constant stress from anxiety can damage your health, says Elizabeth Carll, a psychologist in Huntington, N.Y. Uncontrolled anxiety can lead to heart problems, stomach disorders, weight gain, and depression.

Luckily, there are ways to keep nervousness in check. Next time you feel anxious, try these stay-calm strategies.

Think positive. "More things go right than wrong, but we tend to remember the negative," Carll says. Focusing on good things can help keep nervous thoughts away.

Take a deep breath. Learn yoga or other stress-management tools, such as deep breathing or relaxation exercises. Turn to those techniques to calm yourself when you feel worry creeping in.

Find a shoulder to lean on. When you feel anxiety coming on, turn to a trusted friend or family member. Before tough tests or tryouts, try talking with friends or teammates.

Move your muscles. Exercise releases brain chemicals that can boost your mood and calm you down. "Exercise is great for an anxious person," Carll says.

Plan ahead. Being prepared can help. "If I procrastinate studying for a test, that ends up making me worry more, since I'm not prepared," says Kevin. Planning ahead works outside of school too. Kara was nervous about going to a birthday party where she would know only a few people. She made plans to have a friend introduce her to everyone right away. That way, she would get to meet everyone and wouldn't feel like an outsider. "They'll know who I am, and I'll know who they are," Kara says.

Get your Z's. Kids and teens need at least nine hours of sleep a night. Too little shut-eye can have an effect on brain function and emotions, which can make anxiety worse. "Sleep is so critical," Carll says.

With practice, you can learn to keep anxiety from taking over. But if worry is affecting your performance at school or in social situations, look to a trusted adult for some help. You may have an anxiety disorder that can be treated with therapy or medication.

The good news, Carll shares, is that you can learn to control anxiety. With practice, she says, you can become better at dealing with anxiety—and even learn ways to keep yourself from getting overly stressed in the first place.

Extreme Anxiety

Sometimes feelings of worry take over a person's life. When that happens, it is often because of an *anxiety disorder*. There are several kinds of anxiety disorders.

Generalized anxiety disorder causes extreme worry and dread for no obvious reason.

Phobias are intense fears of specific things, such as spiders (*arachnophobia*) and open spaces (*agoraphobia*). One of the most common anxiety disorders among teens is social phobia, which causes extreme anxiety in social situations.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) causes near-constant anxious thoughts, such as fear of germs. OCD sufferers try to relieve those thoughts with rituals such as frequent hand washing.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety that develops after experiencing a terrifying event. Soldiers can return from war with PTSD, for instance.

Panic disorder causes sudden attacks of terror and fear of losing control. People having a panic attack may feel tingling in the arms, shortness of breath, and a racing heart.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which of the following phrases was NOT used to describe anxiety?

- A like butterflies fluttering in your stomach
- B a similar feeling to fear
- C something that happens to everyone
- D a calm and relaxed mood

2. The author *lists* some anxiety disorders in the passage. Which of the following correctly matches the disorder with its description?

- A Post-traumatic stress disorder - a type of anxiety that develops after experiencing a terrifying event
- B Generalized anxiety disorder – causes near-constant anxious thoughts, such as fear of germs
- C Panic disorder – an intense fear of specific things such as spiders
- D Obsessive-compulsive disorder – causes sudden attacks of terror and fear of losing control

3. How might a person know if their anxiety was actually a disorder?

- A Some nights the person has trouble sleeping.
- B All the times that the person has to speak in public they get really nervous.
- C Every time the person goes to a party, they feel uneasy.
- D None of the calming strategies seem to stop the anxiety.

4. Read the following sentence and answer the question below: "Generalized anxiety disorder causes extreme worry and dread for no obvious reason."

In the sentence the word **extreme** most nearly means

- A a small amount of something
- B a large amount of something
- C a normal amount of something
- D a limited amount of something

5. The primary purpose of this passage is to

- A inform the reader about anxiety and ways to help it
- B help the reader diagnose their anxiety disorder
- C show the reader that anxiety is actually good for them
- D describe how the reader can get rid of all stress from their life

6. According to paragraph 4, how can anxiety be a good thing?

7. If a parent is anxious, how might it affect their child's anxiety? Use examples in the passage to support your ideas.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

A student had an anxiety disorder, _____ she spoke to her teacher and decided to get help with therapy or medication.

- A because
- B so
- C yet
- D although

9. Answer the questions based on the sentence below.

People can plan ahead when they will be in a stressful situation, so that they will be less nervous.

Who? people

(can) What? _____

When? _____

Why? _____

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

Vocabulary Word: procrastinate (pro · cras · tin · ate): to wait to do something.

10a. Read the five sentences below and underline the word **procrastinate** in each sentence.

1. The student had procrastinated writing his report for weeks, and before he knew it, it was the night before it was due and he had nothing done.
2. She procrastinated sending her application in for camp, and was too late to get a spot, because everyone else had sent their applications in early.
3. The patient was told that because the doctor found the disease early, it would be easier to treat. He sure was glad that he didn't procrastinate making his doctor's appointment!
4. The writer didn't know what to put in her second book and procrastinated writing it until her boss called to find out what was taking so long.
5. Because the kids procrastinate packing their suitcases, they had to stay up late the night before their trip to make sure they had everything.

10b. Which image shows someone who is procrastinating when it comes to finishing their homework?



11. What types of things might a kid do when they procrastinate studying for a test?

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 830

Passage Text Structure: Enumerative – the writer includes a list, giving examples of something. This text structure is often combined with cause/effect or problem/solution.

Passage Summary: “Attack of the Nerves” focuses on the topic of anxiety. The passage describes anxiety’s impact on people, types of anxiety disorders, and ways to manage anxiety.

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- B a similar feeling to fear
- C something that happens to everyone
- D **a calm and relaxed mood**

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- A a small amount of something
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5. The primary purpose of this passage is to

- A **inform the reader about anxiety and ways to help it**
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- C show the reader that anxiety is actually good for them
- D describe how the reader can get rid of all stress from their life

6. According to paragraph 4, how can anxiety be a good thing?

Suggested answer: According to paragraph 4, anxiety can keep you safe. For example, a fear of heights could keep you from falling off a cliff, or being nervous about a test could make you study more. [paragraph 4]

7. If a parent is anxious, how might it affect their child's anxiety? Use examples in the passage to support your ideas.

Suggested answer: Kids might learn the behavior from their parents. If a child's parents don't have ways to keep themselves calm, their child might not know how to calm themselves because they never observed it from their parents. [paragraph 6, 8]

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

A student had an anxiety disorder, _____ she spoke to her teacher and decided to get help with therapy or medication.

- A because
- B so**
- C yet
- D although

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

People can plan ahead when they will be in a stressful situation, so that they will be less nervous.

Who? people

(can) What? **plan ahead**

When? **they will be in a stressful situation**

Why? **so that they will be less nervous**

10. ReadWorks recommends that you teach this vocabulary word to the whole class out loud using the four steps listed below.

Vocabulary Word: procrastinate

Step 1: Introduce the word

- a. Teacher writes the word on the board and divides it into syllables: (pro · cras · tin · ate)
- b. Teacher says: "This word is procrastinate. What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "procrastinate."]

Step 2: Provide a child-friendly definition

- a. Teacher says: "The word procrastinate means to wait to do something."
- b. Teacher says: "In the passage, a student talks about how when he procrastinates studying for a test, it makes him nervous. If he doesn't wait to study for the test, he has more time to learn, and doesn't feel as nervous."
- c. Teacher says: "What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "procrastinate."]

Step 3: Practice the word

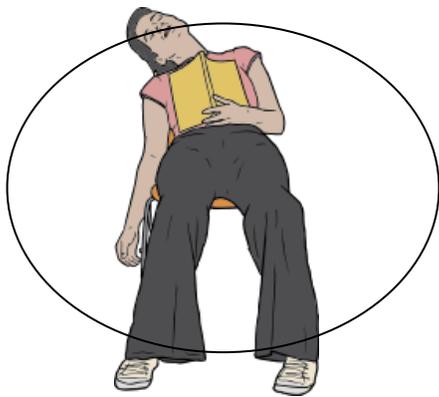
Teacher provides examples and additional opportunities to repeat the word. Read the 1st sentence out loud to your students. Begin reading it again and when you come to the vocabulary word prompt students to say the vocabulary word out loud. Then, finish reading the sentence out loud to your students.

- 10a.**
1. The student had procrastinated writing his report for weeks, and before he knew it, it was the night before it was due and he had nothing done.
 2. She procrastinated sending her application in for camp, and was too late to get a spot, because everyone else had sent their applications in early.
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 5. Because the kids procrastinate packing their suitcases, they had to stay up late the night before their trip to make sure they had everything.

Step 4: Check for student understanding

This step can be completed as a whole class activity or as an independent practice.

- 10b.** Which image shows someone who is procrastinating when it comes to finishing their homework?



- 11.** What types of things might a kid do when they procrastinate studying for a test?

Suggested answer: A kid might watch television or surf the Internet.

Suggested Additional Vocabulary: collected, inspire, constant, management, techniques, function, situations, extreme, obvious