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Exceptional Students/Special Education Impact

What is anxiety? At some point in time, everyone experiences anxiety. Some experience it more than others. It is a common and useful part of our biology. Anxiety can protect us from potential dangers by our brain signaling us to be ready to fight, flight, or freeze. Anxiety is an intense or excessive state of worry and fear regarding everyday situations (Duvall, 2020). There is physical as well as psychological symptoms. The physical symptoms of anxiety include: feeling shaky, fast breathing, feeling sick, lack of appetite, butterflies in the stomach, etc. Examples of psychological symptoms include: having a sense of dread, fearing or expecting the worst, ruminating on things that could occur, pondering ways to escape sticky situations, feelings of worry and thoughts that others are judging and so forth.

How does anxiety impact students in an educational setting? Left untreated, anxiety disorders may make it difficult for students to study or focus on getting their schoolwork accomplished (Hunter, 2019). It can also impact their relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Often times, students living with anxiety may miss a lot of school days or be frequently late to school. Mental health issues such as anxiety, may affect a student by poor concentration, and low or high energy levels, which can greatly impact academic performance. Students suffering from anxiety often have difficulties with processing and absorbing information. The student's worry can interfere with their ability to concentrate and perform basic tasks. If the student is anxious and overly stimulated thinking about an upcoming exam, they may end up scoring low on it due to the excessive and racing thoughts which overpower the brain. This does not mean that the student isn't bright or lacks comprehension, but rather the anxiety overpowers their thoughts and concentration. Elementary aged students may have excessive worry or fear

about a divorce or single parent household they are living in. Covid-19 brought about an array of anxiety in the world, not just in the school setting (Duvall, 2020). Children ranging from elementary upward, were impacted by the harsh effects and fears surrounding the virus. This excessive worry, triggers anxiety and makes it difficult to focus in the classroom while worried about being sick or catching a deadly bug. The lack of understanding and racing thoughts may hinder their ability to follow basic rules and tasks which are expected of them at school. There are also social and behavioral impacts surrounding anxiety. Some students suffering from excessive anxiety may perform just as well as non-anxious peers, however it will take a higher level of effort accompanied with an added level of stress. It is imperative that teachers and school administration observe learning behaviors and patterns when it comes to learning disabilities for this very reason. Students that are battling anxiety often display certain behaviors such as frequent headaches/stomach aches, getting agitated easily, asking repetitive questions, appearing zoned out, tired in class, incomplete assignments, as well as appearing as though they have ADHD when it may be solely anxiety as the symptoms tend to overlap (Hunter, 2019).

Evidence-based interventions are necessary in assisting those who suffer from anxiety. Anxiety can be in the form of a condition or merely due to environmental factors. It is important to get to the root cause in order for the child to receive proper care and successful outcomes. Behavior therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy strategies may provide utility as it assists students in identifying repetitive behaviors and reoccurring thoughts (Franklin,2012). Play therapy, family therapy, as well as psychotherapy strategies are all forms of practice -based interventions which may assist children in need. Children can learn ways to control their thoughts and worries by reframing their thoughts and using self-talk strategies in order to feel more empowered and in control of themselves. Older students may benefit from anti test anxiety

strategies and the importance of adequate sleep, healthy nutrition, as well as providing plenty of time to get to school in order to alleviate some of the stress before an exam. Some therapists and psychiatrists suggest a treatment plan which consists of medication as well as CBT combined, in an effort to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and help students who find themselves academically impaired due to the symptoms of anxiety.

There are many key elements to remember while working with this population. It is important as school social workers that we create strong bonds with students, encourage them to practice mindfulness activities, encourage exercise, take deep breaths, as well empower them to feel comfortable to speak freely about anxiety. It is important that they understand that there are many others just like them that do not understand or even recognize that they suffer from anxiety and that they are not alone. There are multiple routes that can be taken in order to alleviate anxiety and improve academic performance.

References:

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