

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

---

DR *jodi*  
RICHARDSON



2025 Government Schools Principals Conference

# EMPOWERING ANXIOUS STUDENTS FOR CLASSROOM EXCELLENCE

# Table of Contents

<b>A note from me to you</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>Regulation Strategies</b>	<b>09</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>	
<b>Anxiety is holding students back</b>	<b>04</b>	<b>Respond &amp; Redirect</b>	<b>10</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>	
<b>What is anxiety?</b>	<b>05</b>	<b>Helping Anxious Students Move Forward</b>	<b>11</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>	
<b>What does anxiety look like?</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>The Accidental Counsellor</b>	<b>13</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>	
<b>Types of anxiety</b>	<b>07</b>	<b>Other Ways I Can Help</b>	<b>14</b>
<hr/>		<hr/>	
<b>Connection &amp; Regulation</b>	<b>08</b>		
<hr/>			

# Thank you

I was once the anxious student where no-one understood what I was going through – least of all, me.

That's why I know just how powerful it is when the educators in a student's day truly understand anxiety and know how to respond with care. Through noticing, listening, validating, co-regulating, and gently redirecting, you and your staff can become the steady, supportive presence that changes everything.



Thank you for sharing some of your precious time with me at the Victorian Government Schools Principals Conference to strengthen your understanding of anxiety and learn powerful ways you and your staff can help.

*jodi x*

*Connect with me here...*



[LinkedIn](#)



[Instagram](#)



[Facebook](#)

# Anxiety is holding students back



58% of children will experience clinically significant anxiety between the ages of 10 and 18<sup>^</sup>



Anxiety can compromise performance on cognitively demanding tasks\*



High levels of test anxiety are linked to poor academic performance and lower marks in school\*



Students with excessive anxiety may have difficulty paying attention to what needs to be learned<sup>#</sup>



Anxious students struggle to use previously learned information as they take in new facts<sup>#</sup>



Anxious students can have trouble accessing information from long-term memory<sup>#</sup>

<sup>^</sup> Robson, Ellie May et al. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 44 – 53

\*WIREs Cogn Sci 2014, 5:403–411. doi: 10.1002/wcs.1299

<sup>#</sup> [anxietyintheclassroom.org/school-system/i-want-to-learn-more/anxiety-impact-school/](http://anxietyintheclassroom.org/school-system/i-want-to-learn-more/anxiety-impact-school/)

# What is anxiety?



## Anxiety

Anxiety is the name we give to the body's built-in warning system; it helps us notice possible dangers and protect ourselves from them.



## The Brain's Alarm

Problematic anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. It involves the brain's alarm system triggering a fight, flight, or freeze response, even when there's no real threat. In anxious kids and teens, the brain and body remain on high alert. They can see everyday situations as more dangerous than they are and doubt their ability to handle them.



## Understanding Anxiety

When a 'threat' is detected by the brain, the body is powered up for fast, life-saving action. This causes physiological changes including increased heart rate and breathing rate to bring more oxygen to working muscles for running and fighting, sweating, trembling, nausea, and other changes.



## When anxiety is becoming a problem

It's normal for anxiety to rise before a stressful event, like sitting an exam, and settle once it's over. But when anxiety is intense, frequent, and starts to get in the way of daily life, it may be a sign that extra support is needed.

# What does anxiety look like?

## Thoughts

Worried  
Can't concentrate  
Disengaged  
Can't remember  
Can't draw on previous knowledge  
'I can't do this'  
'Where do I start?'

## Emotions

Nervousness  
Emotional  
Overwhelm  
Teary  
Angry  
Frustrated  
Sad  
Irritable

---

## Sensations

Racing heart  
Tummy aches  
Shaky hands  
Headaches  
Tight chest  
Sweaty palms  
Feeling dizzy  
Trouble breathing

## Behaviours

Avoidance  
Fidget and wriggle  
Withdrawal  
Disruptive  
Perfectionistic  
Seek reassurance  
Ask a lot of questions  
Frequent visits to the nurse



# Types of Anxiety

## **Generalised Anxiety:**

Worrying about lots of different things.

## **Separation Anxiety:**

Fear of being apart from a parent or carer.

## **Social Anxiety:**

Fear of being socially judged, embarrassed, or rejected.

## **Specific Phobias:**

Intense fear of a specific object or situation; like dogs, needles, vomit, or the dark.

## **Panic Disorder:**

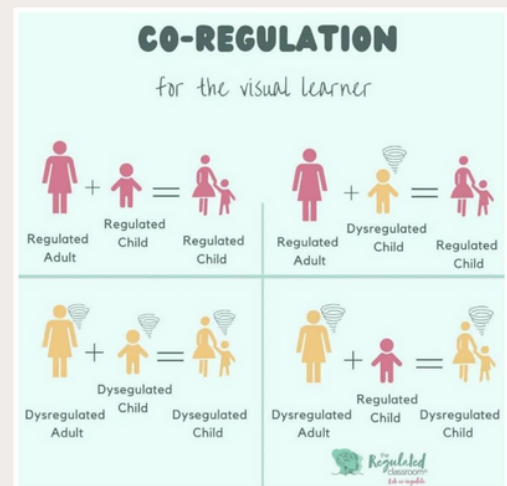
Sudden, intense episodes of fear (panic attacks) with physical symptoms like a racing heart, breathlessness, or dizziness.

## **Selective Mutism:**

A child who speaks confidently in some places (like home) but is unable to speak in others (like school), due to anxiety.

# Connection & Regulation

*When anxiety shows up, students need a regulated, connected adult so they can co-regulate and calm their own nervous system.*



*\*The Regulated Classroom*

## TEACHERS, TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF FIRST:

A calm nervous system is the foundation of connection and learning in the classroom, and is vital for your mental health and wellbeing as an educator. While there's always a LOT happening in and out of the classroom in our busy schools, it's genuinely helpful if you find a variety of different ways that work to help you ground your own nervous system. Here are some ideas to try for 'in-the-moment' nervous system dysregulation:

- Sip of icy cold water
- Fisherman's Friend lozenge
- Looking at a photo of your pet
- 3 breaths with a long exhale
- Roll a smooth stone in your hands
- Shake out your arms and hands
- Hand massage with scented lotion
- Roll a pen in the palm of your hands



# Regulation strategies

These body-based regulation strategies help to settle an overactive nervous system, restoring calm and enabling both teachers and students to re-engage with what's happening in the classroom.

Trying different strategies over time, with an attitude of curiosity, helps each person discover which ones most effectively calm physical symptoms and regulate their nervous system.

## BREATH

Slowing the breath and extending the exhale helps calm the nervous system.

## SENSES

Mindful attention to sights, sounds, and other sensations anchors awareness in the present moment.

## BODY

Grounding through movement or posture helps settle anxiety and restore a sense of safety.

### Physiological Sigh

Hot chocolate breath

Use your sense of smell

Cold on cheekbones

30s intense exercise

Physiological sigh

Name colours around you

Listen and name all you can hear

Whack a balloon

Lengthen your exhale

Press your feet into the floor

Mindfully move a fidget

Shoot hoops

# Respond & Redirect

## RECOGNISE AND UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HAPPENING

Look beneath the behaviour and draw on your understanding of the anxious brain. A threat has been detected, and the student's brain is now fully focused on that threat—their uncomfortable physical sensations, racing thoughts, and how to stay safe.

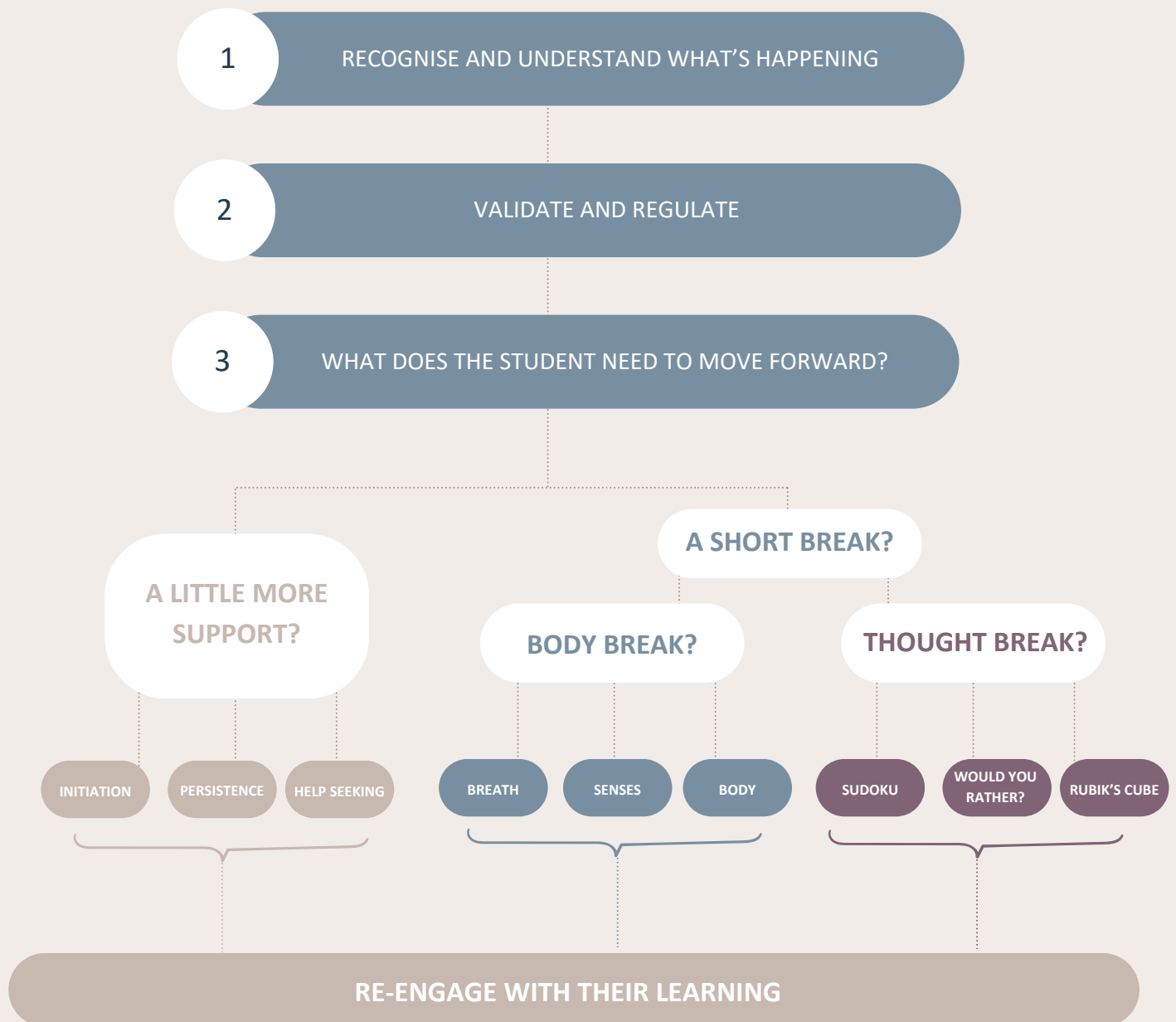
## VALIDATE AND REGULATE

Let the student know it's okay to feel how they're feeling. Validating their emotions helps them feel seen and safe, the first step to calming their nervous system. Your steady presence and co-regulation, through your tone, breath, and body language, can gently guide them back to a state of calm.

## WHAT DOES THIS STUDENT NEED TO MOVE FORWARD?

Once the student is calm, gently guide them to reflect or name what might help. This simple step builds both independence and trust. If they're unsure, use the ideas on the next page to help you explore what might support them best.

# Helping Anxious Students Move Forward



# Helping Anxious Students Move Forward

## A LITTLE MORE SUPPORT

At times, an anxious student can need help getting started or persisting with their work. Options like moving seats to a quieter part of the room, working with a classmate, or doing all of the even-numbered maths problems can help with getting going and building momentum.

## BODY BREAK

If a student is having trouble sitting still or is distracting others, they might benefit from a body-based grounding strategy like going for a short walk, doing some jumping jacks, tuning in with their sense of hearing for all they can hear around them in the classroom or a breathing technique. (See strategies p.10)

## THOUGHT BREAK

If a student is stuck in a loop of negative or anxious thinking like 'I can't do it...' or 'This is too hard...' they might benefit from a cognitive distraction like a word search, a sudoku puzzle, a game of rock paper scissors, a rubik's cube or writing out the lyrics to their favourite song.

## RE-ENGAGE STUDENTS WITH THEIR LEARNING

Once the anxiety is settling, helping the student to refocus on their learning is the next best step. The options above will likely need revisiting regularly and over time support students to list the tools that work for them so they become more independent in managing their anxiety.

# The Accidental Counsellor

If you've ever found yourself comforting a distressed student, listening to worries at recess, or trying to calm a child mid-meltdown, **you're not alone.**

As rates of mental ill-health rise among our children and teens, more and more, teachers are stepping into the role of the 'accidental counsellor'. It's a role that **can feel overwhelming** and often leaves teachers feeling ill-equipped.

I really want you to know that you don't have to do it all, and you certainly don't have to do it alone. **Reach out** to a trusted colleague, a member of your wellbeing team, or a school leader. Support is there, and it's okay to lean on it.

Supporting anxious students **isn't about fixing everything**, it's about being a steady, compassionate presence in their day. You are already doing more than you realise, simply by showing up with care.

Like any skill, learning to recognise anxiety, respond with empathy, and gently guide students forward **takes time.**

Please **start small.** One idea, one moment, one conversation. Each step will build your confidence, and help a student feel just that little bit safer, seen, and supported.

You may never know just how much your support means, but **it matters more than you realise.**



# Other Ways I Can Help

*Remember*  
↓

*At the end of the day, every anxious student is asking:  
'Am I safe?  
Am I capable?  
Am I understood?'*

You're not alone in supporting anxious students. I work with educators, parents and students in schools around the country and would love to walk alongside you and your school community too.

Use the links below to listen to my podcast 'Well, hello anxiety', explore my books or reach out and connect to say hello, ask a question, or find out how I can work with your school community.

My email address is jodi [at] drjodirichardson.com.au

Thanks for all you do for your students, you're wonderful.



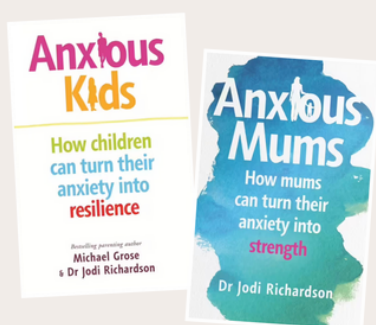
[LinkedIn](#)



[Instagram](#)



[Facebook](#)



[Books etc.](#)



[Podcast](#)