



2. THE FEAR OF BEING AFRAID... WHEN ANXIETY TAKES OVER!

Dealing with anxiety

Targeted competencies (based on ÉKIP and the WHO)	Managing emotions, stress and anxiety Self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-worth
Content for the development of personal and social competencies (MEQ) ¹	Sheet 13 : Making friends and social network Sheet 14 : Inclusion and getting along
Cross-cutting competencies (QEP)	Achieving their potential Cooperating with others
General objectives of the workshop	By the end of the workshop, students will be able to: • Distinguish between stress and anxiety; • Understand the concepts of comfort zone, avoidance and exposure; • Recognize situations that cause them more anxiety (their intolerances) and recognize their signs of stress and anxiety;

Total duration

60-MINUTE version: follow ALL steps, including the ones marked with the icon



40-MINUTE version: DO NOT do activities marked with the icon



Materials and preparation

- Print the 3 worksheets (1 per student): [Sacha's situation](#), [My level of intolerance](#), [Strategies for exposure to intolerances](#).
- Print the *Comfort zone* and *Intolerances* posters, available on the [website](#) in the section: First cycle / Workshops and tools for students / Classroom posters to support your explanations and reinvest learning in class.
- Read the [Breathing exercise](#) companion worksheet.
- Have a chalkboard or interactive whiteboard (IWB) available.

¹ Please note that this workshop also introduces content corresponding to [Sheet 18](#), for grade 9 students, to anticipate future learning.

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A. Stress... anxiety... what's the difference? (10 minutes)

1. Tell the students they will be playing a quiz game on stress and anxiety. Explain that for each question you ask, they have to answer TRUE (raising an open hand) or FALSE (raising a closed fist).
2. Start the game with the following questions, which appear in the slideshow. If you prefer, you can generate an interactive quiz from the same content using a web platform (e.g., Genially, Kahoot!, Wooclap).
3. After each question, give the correct answer using the explanations provided (Lupien, 2019; Marchand et al., 2018; Shih & Lin, 2017; Strack et al., 2017; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

True or false quiz

- **Stress is always negative**

False. Stress gives your body the energy it needs to deal with a perceived threat. In controlled amounts, stress boosts performance.

- **There is no difference between stress and anxiety**

False. Stress is an alarm reaction to a real, concrete situation, like when you come face-to-face with a bear while walking in the forest. Anxiety is an emotion that shows up when you worry about a situation that hasn't necessarily happened yet. Just thinking about what might happen can make you feel anxious.

- **Anxiety is a fear of being afraid**

True. Anxiety is the tendency to imagine worst-case scenarios and worry about things that haven't happened yet. For example, if you stop taking walks in the forest because you're afraid you might get eaten by a bear, that's anxiety.

- **Anxiety is normal.**

True. Everyone experiences anxiety at one time or another; it's completely normal. It becomes a problem if it prevents you from functioning properly, causes you to avoid certain situations, makes you feel upset or persists over time.

- **If you're living with anxiety today, you're going to live with it your entire life**

False. You can learn to manage anxiety. The more tools you have to cope with anxiety, the more resilience you will develop to anxiety-provoking situations, and the less likely you are to avoid suffering from it over the long term.

B. Educational clip - Part 1 (5 minutes)

1. Play the video clip *When anxiety takes over – Part 1* for your students.

[Video clip – Part 1](#)

C. My comfort zone (15 minutes)

1. Move the desks to make a big, open space in the middle of the classroom, and then hand out the *Sacha's situation* printable worksheet to the students.



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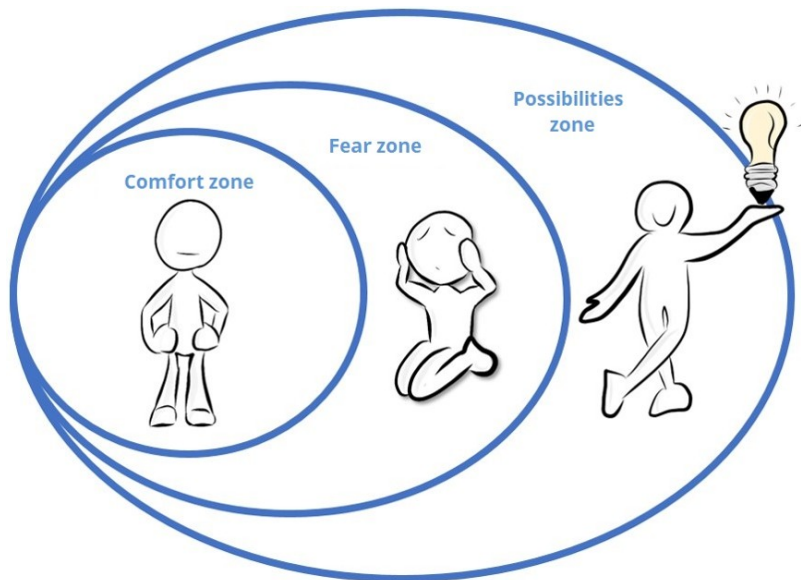


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2. Ask for a volunteer to stand in the middle of the classroom and a few other people to stand in a circle around them. Explain that the person in the centre of the circle represents Sacha.
3. Start by reading the description at the top of the worksheet.
4. Then explain the concept of comfort zone:

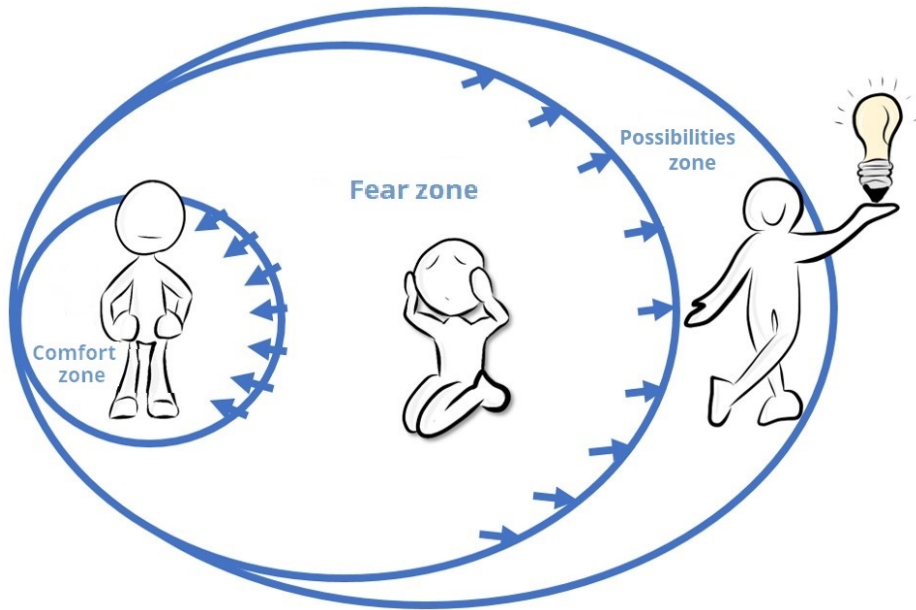
Your comfort zone is that place where you feel good in life; it's your familiar territory. It's the relationships, events and environments where you know how to react, where you don't ask too many questions. In other words, where you feel comfortable. At least, that's what you think (White, 2009)!

5. Show them the following image on the slideshow. Explain that the students surrounding the volunteer represent Sacha's comfort zone.

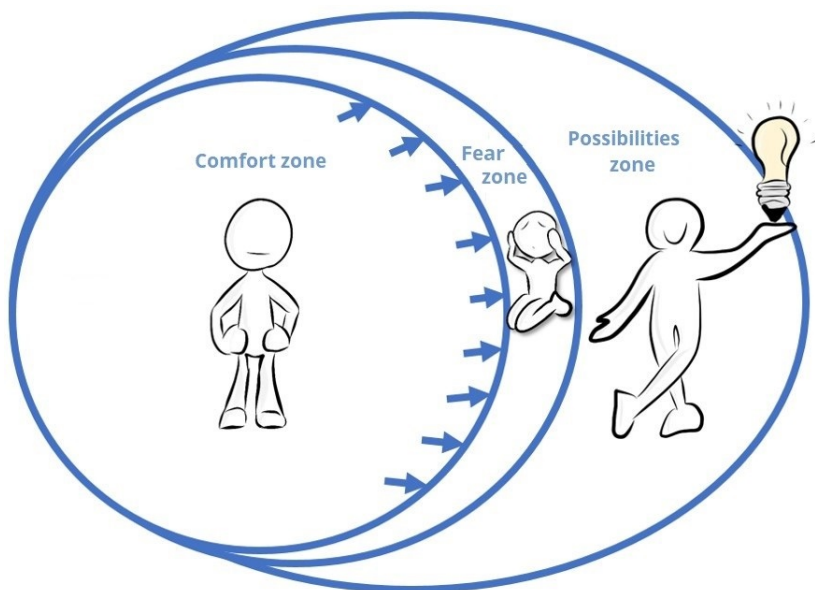


6. Then read the first part of *Scenario 1*, and ask the students surrounding Sacha to take a big step toward Sacha, shrinking the circle.
7. Then read the other three parts of *Scenario 1*, asking the students to take a big step toward Sacha at the end of each part, again shrinking the circle, until they are standing next to the volunteer at the very end.
8. Using the image in the slideshow, explain that anxiety can happen when you experience situations that cause you to leave your comfort zone.

You then have to push through your fear zone. You don't know how to react, you're afraid of the unknown, and you don't feel well. You're tempted to avoid these situations and retreat back into the cozy familiarity of your comfort zone, like Sacha did in the scenario. This is called **avoidance**. Avoidance feels good in the short term because it instantly lowers your anxiety levels. The problem is, the more you avoid a situation, the more frightening it becomes. Your comfort zone shrinks and you start to feel trapped inside it, or feel increasingly uncomfortable each time you step outside it.



9. Now ask the student in the centre of the circle to briefly share how they are feeling at that moment: "How are you feeling now?"
10. Suggest that the students act out Sacha's scenario again, this time changing how he reacts to anxiety-provoking situations.
11. Read the first part of *Scenario 2* and then ask the students to all take a big step away from Sacha, expanding the circle.



12. You then read the other three parts of *Scenario 2*, asking the students to take another big step away from Sacha at the end of each part, making the circle bigger and bigger.

13. Using the image in the slideshow, explain that the more you face your fears, the less scary they become—and they might even disappear. This is called **exposure**. Exposure can be very uncomfortable in the short term because facing the scary situation can cause your anxiety level to rise. Remember that anxiety isn't dangerous; it's temporary and it eventually goes away.
14. Now ask the student in the middle of the circle to briefly share how they are feeling at that moment: "How are you feeling now?"
15. Finally, you explain: "The more you expose yourself to a situation, the less anxious you'll feel about it. You'll feel more comfortable, more confident, and freer—just like Sacha, whose comfort zone is becoming less cramped. Stepping outside your comfort zone is also a great learning opportunity. You can then discover your 'possibilities' zone, with a sense of pride" (Forsyth & Eifert, 2007, 2025; Gosselin et al., 2019; Harvey & Ilic, 2014).



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D. Intolerances that distort reality (15 minutes)

1. Ask the students why they think the same situation can be very stressful for one person, whereas for someone else, it won't be at all.
2. Complete their answers by explaining that we all have different tolerance levels depending on the type of situation. It's a bit like food intolerances: some people are more sensitive, or less tolerant, to certain foods, which causes them physical discomfort. This discomfort generally leads them to avoid the food in question. Similarly, in everyday life, some (real or imagined) situations more than others cause us to feel unpleasant sensations, e.g., worry, revulsion or feeling unwell. And this often makes us want to avoid them!

For example, Naomi is "intolerant" to situations where she feels judged. When she bumps into friends who are laughing together, she immediately thinks they're laughing at her. So, she prefers to keep her distance. Youssef, who is not particularly sensitive to being judged by others, bumps into the same group of friends laughing and thinks he'd like to hear their joke, which seems hilarious.

3. You explain that when it comes to anxiety, our intolerances are like lenses that distort reality. When you're aware of them, you can make an effort to remove these distorting glasses and look at the situation differently.
4. Using the titles, definitions and images in the slideshow, briefly explain **the 5 main types of intolerances**.



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Title: Intolerance to uncertainty



Definition: Intolerance to potential danger, change and anything new.

Example: "I struggle to function in new situations (e.g., moving, starting high school, beginning a new activity), ambiguous situations (e.g., unclear instructions or rules, unclear expectations for an exam, etc.), or unpredictable situations (e.g., change of teacher, separation of parents, death of a loved one, etc.)."



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Title: Perfectionism

Definition: Intolerance to the risk of making a mistake, to imperfection, and to guilt. Tendency to criticize one's own achievements.

Example: "I'm not satisfied unless it's perfect."



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Title: Excessive responsibility

Definition: Intolerance to consequences that might happen to or affect others; you think it's your fault because you didn't do anything to prevent them.

Example: "I feel guilty all the time."

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Title: Fear of being judged by others

Definition: Intolerance to other people's judgment and potential criticism, to ridicule and to being laughed at.

Example: "I often feel that others are judging me."



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Title: Intolerance to psychological and physical discomfort

Definition: The tendency to worry excessively about negative emotions, unpleasant physical sensations, and symptoms caused by anxiety.

Example: "Something's wrong with my body!"

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5. Ask students to think back to Sacha's situation in activity C (my comfort zone) and try to identify the intolerances he demonstrated. Take a few raised hands, then round out the answers with the following:
 - Intolerance to psychological and physical discomfort
 - Intolerance to uncertainty;
 - Fear of being judged by others.
6. You then hand out the *My intolerance level* printable worksheet and ask the students, working silently and individually, to rate how much each type of intolerance sounds like them, on a scale of 1 to 10.
7. If time permits, once they have completed their worksheets, invite a few volunteers to share their answers regarding the different intolerances. You can highlight certain intolerances that seem to be shared by several people and those that differ, in order to normalize their experiences.
8. Conclude by pointing out that this exercise allows them to notice how certain types of situations elicit a particular reaction from them, while others do not. Becoming aware of their intolerances allows them to try to adopt strategies to calm themselves and expose themselves to the situation, instead of avoiding it!



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E. Your turn! (5–10 minutes)

1.  Now ask the students what strategies Sacha uses in *Scenario 2* of activity C (my comfort zone) to calm his anxiety and expose himself to anxiety-provoking situations. You also invite them to name other strategies that could have helped Sacha in these situations.
2. Hand out the *Strategies for exposure to intolerances* printable worksheet.
3. Present the various strategies to the students by revisiting the list of *Strategies for managing stress* from Workshop 1, as well as referring to the *Strategies for exposure to intolerances* worksheet, which is also summarized in the slideshow.
4.  To conclude, suggest that the students try a breathing exercise. Use the *Breathing exercise* companion worksheet to guide this exercise.



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F. Educational clip – Part 2 (5 minutes)

1. Play the video clip *When anxiety takes over – Part 2* for your students.

[Video clip – Part 2](#)



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G. OFF-TRAIL challenge

This week, ask the students to pay attention to how they react (feelings, emotions and thoughts) to certain anxiety-provoking situations that cause them to react strongly (intolerance) and that they encounter in their daily lives (e.g., with classmates, at school, in extracurricular activities, during sports, with family, etc.). Ask them to try to apply at least two strategies to calm themselves and to expose themselves to the situation, at their own pace.



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PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

Sacha's case

Description. After moving during the summer, Sacha has to start at a new school. This change causes all kinds of anxiety-provoking situations for him... Sacha often worries about what the other students at his new school think about him. Being more introverted, he hates being in situations where he might be laughed at, and tries his best not to attract attention.



SCENARIO 1

Part one. This morning, Sacha's teacher asks all the students to tell the class what they did on their summer vacation. Sacha's heart starts racing and his palms get sweaty as his mind begins to spin: "Oh no, please, not that! I don't know what to say... the others will laugh at me." His stomach starts to ache. It's a disaster. Sacha quickly goes to see his teacher and asks to go to the bathroom immediately.

Part two. At lunch today, Sacha goes to the cafeteria but doesn't see his new friend, Nolan. Sacha doesn't know where to sit and is afraid to ask anyone, for fear of looking ridiculous and being rejected. He feels anxiety welling up inside him. He hides out in the library and skips lunch.

Part three. Later in the day, Alexia invites the entire class to her house for a party that night. Sacha doesn't want to go because he's worried about who he'll hang around with and that he won't know what to say or do. He's made up his mind: He's staying comfortably at home.

Part four. When he's back home, Sacha checks his social media and realizes that *everyone* in his class is going to be at Alexia's party, except him! His anxiety surges. He begins to worry that he will miss out on a great night if he doesn't go and that he will be excluded from the group afterwards. But the idea of going terrifies him. He doesn't know what to do anymore. Sacha feels awful and very stuck.

SCENARIO 2

Part one. In school this morning, Sacha's teacher asks all the students to tell the class what they did on their summer vacation. Sacha's heart starts racing and his palms get sweaty: "Oh no, please, anything but that! I don't know what to say... the others will laugh at me." His stomach starts to ache. Sacha takes a moment to pause internally. He gets some perspective on the situation by telling himself that the worst that can happen is he might trip over his words. When it's his turn, Sacha talks about his move over the summer, with a hint of nervous excitement. The other students ask questions and take an interest in his story. Sacha's anxiety dissipates, giving way to a feeling of pride. Sacha feels much better.

Part two. At lunch today, Sacha goes to the cafeteria but doesn't see his new friend, Nolan. Sacha doesn't know where to sit and is afraid to ask anyone, for fear of looking ridiculous and being rejected. He feels anxiety welling up inside him. Sacha takes a deep breath. He tells himself that he is entitled to take his place, just like everyone else! Sacha gathers his courage and decides to sit alone at a table. Luca quickly sits beside him, and they spend their lunch break getting to know each other better. Sacha is glad he dared to do it.

Part three. Later in the day, Alexia invites all her classmates to a party at her house that same night. Sacha doesn't want to go because he's worried about who he'll hang around with and that he won't know what to say or do. He decides to talk to his friend Nolan about it anyway. His friend suggests that they go to the party together. Even though *the idea* of going to the party still makes him a little anxious, Sacha is reassured to know that he won't be going alone.

Part four. When he's back home, Sacha checks his social media and realizes that *everyone* in his class is going to be at Alexia's party. Phew, that's a lot of people! His anxiety surges. Sacha questions his decision to go... At the same time, he sees it as an opportunity to build a new network of friends. He decides to honour his commitment and go with Nolan, as planned. His initial nervousness quickly gives way to laughter when Alexia's mother drops the cake on the floor! Sacha now feels empowered, freer and more confident.



PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

My level of intolerance

Here are the five main types of intolerances. For each intolerance, try to identify how much it sounds like you.

Intolerance to uncertainty: "I struggle to function in new, ambiguous and unpredictable situations."

That doesn't sound like me much or at all				That somewhat sounds like me			That very much sounds like me		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Perfectionism: "I'm not satisfied unless everything is perfect."

That doesn't sound like me much or at all				That somewhat sounds like me			That very much sounds like me		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Excessive responsibility: "I feel guilty all the time."

That doesn't sound like me much or at all				That somewhat sounds like me			That very much sounds like me		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Fear of being judged by others: "I often feel that others are judging me."

That doesn't sound like me much or at all				That somewhat sounds like me			That very much sounds like me		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Intolerance to psychological and physical discomfort: "Something is wrong inside my body!"

That doesn't sound like me much or at all				That somewhat sounds like me			That very much sounds like me		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10



PRINTABLE WORKSHEET

Strategies for exposure to intolerances

Intolerance to uncertainty

Gradually try out new activities that are not too anxiety-provoking. Accept that you can't control and anticipate everything. Put the actual risks of the situation into perspective by questioning your thoughts and perceptions (e.g., am I sure of what I'm thinking or perceiving? Is the situation really "serious" or just "unpleasant"?). Set aside time to plan and anticipate what might happen, but do so in moderation and without seeking too much certainty, etc.



Perfectionism

Set more realistic goals. Add moments of enjoyment to your routine. Strive for balance in different areas of life (family, friendships, studies, leisure, etc.). Focus on the process, efforts, and progress rather than on the results. See mistakes as opportunities to learn. Downplay the seriousness of the situation, etc.

Excessive responsibility

Refocus on yourself and your needs. Express your boundaries, learn to say "no." Accept to delegate things to others (e.g., recognize that others are capable of accomplishing things without you). Question your real responsibility in the situation (e.g., am I responsible for other people's emotions and reactions, their choices, their happiness? What do I have control over in this situation?). Let go of what is not in your control. Take your fair share of responsibility (no more, no less), etc.





Fear of being judged by others

Use positive self-talk (e.g., I am worthy of respect, I am as worthy as anyone else, I can do it, I have everything I need to succeed, I am not lacking anything, I have accomplished similar tasks in the past, etc.). Appreciate your differences, see them as assets. Challenge perceptions and fears (e.g., maybe others are looking at me because they're interested in me, maybe they are talking about me positively, maybe they aren't even looking at me!). Gradually expose yourself to situations involving multiple people. Try to take your place in your own way, etc.

Intolerance to psychological and physical discomfort

Remember that in anxiety-provoking situations, emotions and physical sensations are normal, even if they are sometimes intense or unpleasant. Remember that they are not dangerous. Put the meaning of symptoms into perspective (e.g., remember that physical sensations in stressful or anxious situations are often not a sign of serious illness, but rather a sign that informs us about what we are experiencing internally). Try to expose yourself to physical sensations in natural everyday contexts (e.g., playing a sport and feeling your heart beat fast).





COMPANION WORKSHEET

Breathing exercise

Sit in a comfortable position.

Now focus your attention on your breathing.

PAUSE

Breathe normally, without forcing or trying to change anything about your breathing.

Pay attention to the movement created by the air entering and leaving your body.

Notice your stomach and chest rising when you inhale.

PAUSE

Now shift your attention to your stomach and chest falling as you exhale.

Pay attention as you inhale and exhale a few times.

PAUSE

If you feel comfortable, you can try inhaling and exhaling for one or two seconds longer, to try to take deeper breaths and increase your sense of calm.

PAUSE

Now go back to your normal way of breathing.

Take as much time as you need to inhale and exhale, without any extra effort.

If your thoughts wander, simply refocus them on your next inhale.

Take two or three more deep, calming breaths.

PAUSE

Now open your eyes and reconnect with your surroundings.

If you feel calm, try to hold on to the feeling for as long as possible, focusing on your breath as needed.