

# SUPPORT MEASURES FOR ADOLESCENTS' SCHOOL ANXIETY MITIGATION

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## **Abstract**

School anxiety is one of the situational anxiety types. The feeling of anxiety in school is unavoidable, yet the intensity of this feeling should not exceed each student's individual "critical point", as exceeding causes disorientation instead of mobilisation. School anxiety can be expressed in behaviour in the most various forms: from passivity in classes, unsure answers, to "super-diligence", a wish to do everything perfectly. It is necessary to help students find effective techniques to regulate anxiety, overcome diffidence and other expressions of emotional imbalance. A set of preventive measures must be established, which will help students develop necessary skills for anxiety mitigation and gain successful anxiety overcoming experience. Educational measures regarding this issue are necessary for teachers and parents as well.

***Keywords:** support groups, support staff, educational activities, skills training, preventive measures, an adolescent, a student, school anxiety, anxiety.*

## **Introduction**

There are significant differences regarding interpretation of anxiety in psychology, as studies on anxiety cover different issues. For instance, in psychoanalytical theory, anxiety is defined as a cause – a proactive reaction which occurs as a result of an unconsciousness conflict, while in learning theory, anxiety is understood as consequences – a consequent, acquired emotional state (or emotion) that occurs as a result of certain events. Considering anxiety regarding school setting and students, it is often defined as situational anxiety. It can occur to anyone in situations when the surrounding environment poses potential threat to individual's well-being.

School setting – teachers and schoolmates – create for a student a new social structure which differs from the familiar family setting. Diverse relationships are established in this school setting structure: teacher – student, schoolmates – student and vice versa. A student observes the relationships between a teacher and schoolmates, schoolmates and teachers, mutual relationships of other students. It is practically impossible for a student not to experience disappointment, anxiety, frustration, thus, certain difficulties in some of these interactions of relations. Many school psychologists acknowledge that school, where a student's personality is

formed, is the place where a student faces various difficulties which may cause deep emotional traumas. It can be expressed in behaviour in different ways: as closing oneself off or an open aggressive behaviour. According to Thorpe (1984), the psychological pressure of adults aimed at improvements in student's school results is particularly unfavourable. One such strategy is stimulation of competition among students. Each student has his/ her own individual learning potential, and, due to that, competition is not a fair method. In such competitions, some part of students who already have a negative experience the fear of failure, consider themselves losers, and that hinders their development. While those students who win develop certain personality traits: domination over others, continuous desire for self-affirmation. Each situation is perceived as a challenge, the level of anxiety rises.

Adolescence is a complicated transitional period from a child to an adult. The further life path of an adolescent to a certain extent depends on how he/ she overcomes the difficulties of this period of age. Awareness of causes and expressions of anxiety can help pedagogues and parents develop the cooperation process with adolescents to provide them with support in understanding of their own personality, in acceptance, awareness of their resources and encouragement of successful inclusion in society.

**Problem definition:** the increased anxiety level affects adolescents' personality development and the process of further socialisation. A modern school setting (in particular psychological) is not always organised to ensure anxiety mitigation.

**Research object:** the adolescents' socialisation process is school.

**Research subject:** support measures in school for anxiety level reduction.

**Research aim:** study of organisation of support measures for anxiety level reduction in school.

### Theoretical Concept of Anxiety

In the Dictionary of Psychology (1999), anxiety is defined as an emotional state which occurs under the effect of unclear, uncertain real or imaginary threats. Anxiety is usually distinguished from fear which is related to a certain object or a person (Psiholoģijas vārdnīca, 1999, p. 144). It is a caused, vague, uncertain or objectless fear. Anxiety is most often related to expectation of failure and unawareness of threat sources.

Anxiety is an integral part of human nature and one of the most universal conditions. It is concomitant with any homeostasis disorder of a person. Anxiety serves as a signal that allows a person to regulate himself/ herself, change his/ her actions or accept the situation and anxiety. It becomes a neurotic symptom only when it is continuous, persistent, prevents a person from doing what he/ she wants or is a part of more complicated emotional experiences, for instance, depression, phobias, panic attacks, etc. A worrisome, agitating situation causes mobilisation at a primary physiological level (palpitation, pain in the chest area, internal tremor, dry mouth, etc.). A habit of controlling or regulating the level of agitation is already a characteristic trait of a person or a neurotic pattern. Severe physical or psychological symptoms (muscular tremor, voice alteration, fear, doubts, uncertainty, feelings of failure, etc.) may occur, and they are commonly known as anxiety (Lebedeva & Ivanova, 2004).

All psychology subfields have set certain objectives in anxiety studies and each of these fields proposes its own definition of anxiety. Considering that anxiety is one of universal conditions, it has to be studied from different aspects in order to obtain a more complete insight into anxiety.

The founder of individual psychology, A. Adler, includes anxiety in his concept of the inferiority complex. Adler believed that neurosis (including anxiety) is based on the human internal psychological conflict caused by the inferiority complex. A human being is born in a state of biological uncertainty, accompanied by anxiety, and it becomes a driving force for neurotic development. An individual tries to overcome this feeling of inferiority by raising himself/ herself above others, striving for power, which can lead to isolation as well. The fear of failure, which increases diligence, can occur in these attempts. It is especially difficult to find a psychological balance in this conflict in childhood and adolescence (May, 2001a).

There is no common position among the psychoanalysts regarding frustration as a cause of neurotic anxiety. C. Horn claims that stronger focus must be placed on the existing personality conflicts and social and cultural factors in the development of human neurosis. C. Horn, just like A. Adler, believes that neurosis is related to a very strong feeling of dependence and helplessness. Anxiety can be caused by anything that threatens individual's safety and his/ her forms of protection (cited in Škuškovića, 2004).

H. S. Sullivan (cited in May, 2001a) has developed one of the most significant anxiety theories which is based on his personality theory. She considers that the personality develops only in conjunction with other significant personality. Close relationships are formed between a person and his/ her mother and are a base for all relationships with other significant people in future. If there is no motherly support, there is no safety. That causes anxiety. Child's activity is limited by anxiety, and motherly support must be provided. Not always one can receive support when doing what is desirable. Anxiety is present in interpersonal relationships, as there are doubts – will they support and accept or condemn and reject (May, 2001 a).

C. Rogers (cited in May, 2001 a) believes that self-actualisation is a primary goal of an individual's life. Realisations of personal abilities throughout life are related to adequacy of self-appraisal and I-concept. The goal of an individual – successful self-realisation – is possible by finding balance between subjective experience and I-concept. Experience, not compliant with I-concept, is rejected, regardless of its social nature. Difficulties in self-actualisation cause strong anxiety (May, 2001, a).

The authors of the social learning theory claim that initial neutral incentives, as a result of learning and amplification, can obtain emotional colouring and become a cause of anxiety. Bandura (1986) emphasises that, in the interpretation of human behaviour, imitation must be considered, especially studying complex social behaviour forms. Through observation and imitation, a certain emotional reaction can be acquired (Bandura, 1986).

The founders of cognitive theory focus on the appraisal process, which takes place at two levels: primary appraisal (appraisal of surrounding environment threats) and secondary appraisal (an individual appraises his/ her ability to cope with surrounding environment threats). Lazarus (1972) believes that a situation appraisal process includes 6 components which are divided into two groups: primary and secondary.

Primary level appraisals are related to an individual's motivation aspects in an anxiety situation: 1) goal relevance (an individual must determine the place of his/ her new goal among the other goals. The strength of anxiety expression will depend on the significance of the set goal and strength of motivation); 2) goal congruence (appraisal of surrounding environment threats for goal achievement); 3) the type of "I" (appraisal can concern separate or several "I - identity" aspects: I - ideal, I - real or I - in the eyes of others, as well as an individual's moral appraisal; personal perceptions and principles).

Secondary level appraisals are related to threat coping options and expectations: 1) causation (during identification of causal relations, expression of internal negative emotions (anger, shame, guilt) towards an external object in the form of anger may occur); 2) coping potential (in case of anxiety, there is an insufficient number of objects, which might provide information, and it is expressed in unconfident behaviour); 3) expectations (insecurity of expectations, doubts develop due to changes in the environment and an individual's relationships) (Lazarus, 1993).

Anxiousness (anxiety as a state) is characterised by subjective, consciously perceived danger and strain, related to actualisation or irritation of the autonomic nervous system (Lihtarnikov, 1999). Anxiousness as a personality trait (anxiety as a trait) means an inclination of an individual to feel anxiety. An individual perceives even objectively safe environment as threatening, reacts to it with the anxiousness state, the intensity of which does not conform to objective threats (Lihtarnikov, 1999).

Anxiousness is not expressed in behaviour directly. Its level is determined by the intensity and frequency. A person with clearly expressed anxiety has a tendency to perceive the surrounding environment as containing threats and threatening at a much larger extent than a person with a low anxiousness level does.

It is essential to differentiate anxiety and fear, anxiety and stress. Anxiety is a basic reaction, but fear is an expression of the same reaction in a certain and real form. Anxiety is related to fear in various combinations: fear – shame – guilt; fear – suffering – hate, etc. According to May (2001a), it is unreasonable to automatically substitute anxiety studies with fear studies and vice versa. Spielberg notes that there are fundamental differences between anxiety state as an emotional state and incentives that cause it, i.e. stressors. Anxiety is caused by one or another form of stress. Anxiety is understood as a consequential cognitive, affective and behavioural reaction that is actualised when different stressors affect an individual.

### **School Anxiety Understanding in Psychological Literature**

School anxiety is a broad term that encompasses various aspects of emotional discomfort in school. It is expressed as agitation, increased worries in different learning situations in class, as expectation of bad results, fear of negative assessments. A student constantly feels inferior, ineligible, unsure about his/ her actions, is afraid of making mistakes, making a wrong decision or a wrong choice.

In general, school anxiety is a result of an interaction of a personality and a situation. It is a specific type of anxiety which is related to students' interaction with different educational environment components in school. School anxiety is a type of situational anxiety.

The feeling of anxiety in school is inevitable, as cognitive activities are always related to anxiety. Cognition is the discovery of something new, but all new entails agitation and uncertainty. Here are various reasons for school anxiety, but the most frequent ones are:

- Anxiety as a result of real physical threats. In school, it can be related to fear of older schoolchildren's behaviour (bravado, aggression).
- Anxiety resulting from a lack of parental love. A student becomes anxious, painfully experiences failures at school because he/ she is afraid to lose parents' love and support. It is particularly expressed when parents are authoritative and set very high demands.
- Anxiety arising from guilt. Guilt can occur because of failures, mistakes in the learning process and relationships with schoolmates, teachers. It is expressed as inadequate self-criticism, self-denigration.

- Anxiety caused by an inability to cope with a situation. The situations when a student subjectively feels helpless, unable doing something change the situation, occur repeatedly.
- Anxiety caused by frustration. Strict rules, demands which require large efforts from a student to comply with, or inability to comply with them, prevent meeting the needs of a student. It causes frustration.

Causes of persistent school anxiety can be complications of previous or current development crises, adult authoritarianism, high demands, interaction difficulties with peers and/ or adults, as well as students' individual characteristics, i.e. character traits, inadequate self-assessment, learning difficulties and psychological traumas.

School anxiety has characteristic features which are common in all age groups:

- *deterioration of somatic health state* (anxious children often get ill, therefore often stay home. Headache or abdominal pains “without any reason” occur frequently, temperature rises rapidly);
- *unwillingness to go to school* (related to generally low learning motivation, yet, initially, it indicates that a student in school does not feel comfortable. Younger students usually talk about this issue, but older students tend to periodically have absences from school. In secondary school, it is rather common to skip examinations and tests, as well as lessons taught by “bad” teachers);
- *excessive efforts when carrying out school tasks* (excessive efforts can be characteristic both to first-graders and secondary school students. Such peculiar perfectionism can be based on the necessity to “be better than others, be the best” (“not be worse than...”), which indicates the conflict of self-appraisal);
- *refusal to carry out subjectively impossible tasks*. If a certain task is failed, a child can simply stop making any efforts, as “it won’t work out, ... I am dumb”. It is related to the conflict of self-assessment);
- *irritability and aggressive actions* (it can be only a means of reduction of emotional discomfort caused by one or another school life event. Anxious students can hide their emotional discomfort under the mask of rudeness when responding to critical remarks, are easily offended in relationships with schoolmates, are involved in fights);
- *absent-mindedness or low concentration ability during classes* (not always, but in numerous cases, frequent concentration disorders during classes, only “physical presence” in class is characteristic to students who in such a manner try to avoid school life situations which cause agitation. As a result, they constantly oust causes of anxiety from their consciousness or escape to the world of their thoughts and fantasies that do not cause agitation, and, due to that, this state is more comfortable for students);
- *loss of control over physiological processes in stress situations* (these are different vegetative reactions in stress situations: flushing, paleness, tremor of hands, knees, epigastric pain, nausea or vomiting, slight dizziness occurring at an important moment).

Studies of numerous scientists (Henker, Whalen, & O’Neil, 1995; Silverman & Maris 1995; Weems, Silverman & La Greca, 2000) show that the causes of students’ (children, adolescents, youth) anxiety are related to their relationships with friends, school results, worries about health, thoughts about the future. Leonhard (2000) states that adolescents’ anxiousness can be a character accentuation. Anxious adolescents are characterised by insecurity, volatility, inability to defend own interests in a conflict situation, fearfulness, obsessive thoughts that something bad will happen. Behaviour can encompass separation, distancing from others, as well as bravado, defiance, impudence.

Severe fear experienced in childhood can be the cause of anxiety. Anxious adolescents continue to be afraid of the dark, of animals, especially dogs, as well as of thunderstorms, strangers, etc. They are often subject to psychological terror from their schoolmates. These adolescents have no ability and skill to protect themselves, oppose and fight back. In this situation, fear becomes so strong that it causes helplessness and that, in turn, provokes students who have an expressed need for power, superiority, to act aggressively, creating an even stronger feeling of insecurity for anxious students (Prihožan, 2000).

### School Anxiety Research

Both theoretical and experimental studies view anxiety as one phenomenon, although it is formed of several components which are not inter-dependable (Pļaveniece & Škuškoviņa, 2002).

The Philips's school anxiety test and specifically developed questionnaires are usually applied in school anxiety studies. These research methods ensure that a student provides a self-assessment of his/ her feelings, emotions and states in certain school situations. This assessment is subjective. Objectivity is obtained comparing studies of different authors with similar age groups of respondents and the same method.

From 2003 to 2005, in Rēzekne city and district schools, the level of stress of 7–12 graders in eight anxiety factors was identified applying the Philips's school anxiety scale (Orska, 2006). In 2007, psychologists of Jelgava district schools, using the same scale, carried out a similar research involving 11–15 years old adolescents (Āna, 2007). The results of both studies showed that 7–9 graders had an increased or a high anxiety level related to the school setting. The study of Jelgava district psychologists revealed that there were no distinct differences in anxiety level showings between the students with high and low academic results. The results are closely related to psychological peculiarities of adolescence. In this age, relationships with peers, self-fulfilment among them are the most important, but the self-assessment is still inadequate, there is a lack of internal confidence, no skill of self-presenting. Adjustment and matching of personal results, actions, thoughts, assessments to the opinions of others is characteristic of adolescents. Anxiety occurs due to perception of adolescents by others, their assessments, waiting for negative judgements (Orska, 2006).

In 2009, a social pedagogue Stankeviča (2010) conducted a survey on school anxiety of 13–14 years old adolescents and their parents in one of the secondary schools of Olaine. Based on the adolescents' experience in the survey, the underlying causes of anxiety were identified:

- an expectation of a complicated, crucial situation;
- an expectation of a failure, ill success;
- criticism or unjust accusation;
- ignoring, lack of attention;
- a failure, things going wrong;
- laughs at you behind your back;
- answering in front of the entire class;
- comparison;
- you are treated as a child.

Anxiety causing situations is related to assessment and relationships with other people. Parents, in turn, mention the following reasons in the questionnaires:

- changes in body and psyche;
- a wish to feel grown-up;

- problems in mutual relationships at school;
- dissatisfaction with oneself, own appearance;
- worries about one's place in group.

Many parents believe that anxiety in adolescence is more common than in other stages of age.

The results of the survey show that approximately half of the participating adolescents believe that it is complicated to overcome anxiety. It indicates that anxiety is a serious problem for adolescents and there are no productive methods for mitigation of anxiety (Stankeviča, 2010).

A Russian psychologist Litvinenko (2014) highlights the same issues among the adolescents as well. A high level of anxiety is observed among younger adolescents, which is related to transition from the first to the second stage of basic school (from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade) and older adolescents (14–16 years of age). Situations which cause such level of anxiety are similar for all adolescents: problematic situations of interaction and relationships with both peers and adults. Criticism, scolding, slander, non-recognition of opinion, speaking in front of audience, valuation – these are the most common situations mentioned in students' surveys. Adolescents' anxiety has additional factors: physiological reformation of the organism, a process of acquiring independence and self-dependence, adolescent idealism.

Similar findings are reported by other foreign authors: Thorpe, Freedman, & McGalliard, 1984; Prihozan, 2000, 2005. In adolescence, girls worry about relationships with peers more often than boys, and a thought that peers will appraise them negatively cause stronger anxiety for girls rather than for boys. Pasinkova (1996) found that increased anxiety (as a personality trait) caused disorganisation of cognitive activity, which is expressed in a longer information perception and processing time, deterioration of educational and intellectual achievements (Škuškovnika, 2004).

The reviewed studies indicate that the level of school anxiety among adolescents is increased. It is related to both psychophysiological changes in adolescents' body and self-assessment and formation of relationships with others. Not always an adolescent knows how to regulate his/ her own anxiety, as he/ she has not learned himself/ herself yet and has an insignificant set of stress coping strategies. May (2001 b) claims that the aim and values of individual's personality existence are defined by the culture. If the culture is a system of certain norms, then an individual is able to orient in it (both accepting and not accepting the norms set by the culture) and the expressions of anxiety will not be so pronounced. If the system of norms in the culture is unstable (for instance, in a family in which a child is growing up the norms are vague, uncertain), an individual when finding himself/ herself in environment (for instance, school) where the norms are set and specific will experience a high level of anxiety.

School's internal regulations are cultural norms in school. They are clearly defined, stable, changes are not frequent. Non-compliance with school regulations is common among students. It is related to students' different levels of socialisation.

### **Supporters – School Support Staff**

Theoretical concepts and empirical studies show that adolescents need support for school anxiety mitigation. School support staff is a team that realises preventive measures at school. A team can attract other professionals for the achievement of specific objectives. An inter-professional team is created, involving representatives of different professions and organisations, where each member has his/ her own professional competence, but all members work towards a common goal.

Members of the team have to carry out certain tasks for resolution of problematic issues. They have to focus on an effective solution of the problem. Cooperation and communication of the team members should be organised with an aim to solve the problem as successfully as possible. Teamwork can be organised at different levels (Gorlova, 2000, 82). Each team member carries out tasks corresponding to his/ her professional qualification and job description and uses his/ her own specific work methods, knowledge.

Proposed composition of a team for adolescents' school anxiety mitigation may include: social pedagogue, school nurse (medical professional), psychologist, class teacher, special subject teachers, school administration, special pedagogue, if necessary. The team works at an interdisciplinary and inter-professional team level, where each specialist maximally contributes to the achievement of the objectives set. The client and his/ her family are also involved at this team level (see Fig. 1).

Each team member has his/ her own tasks:

1. Social pedagogue
  - studies the feelings of a student in school;
  - establishes and coordinates inter-professional team work;
  - carries out educational work with parents on adolescents' school anxiety;
  - organises involvement of parents in adolescents' school anxiety mitigation activities;
  - together with psychologist organises support groups for adolescents' anxiety mitigation.
2. Psychologist
  - conducts studies on identification of school anxiety among adolescents;
  - participates in inter-professional team work;
  - organises individual consultations, discussions with students, their parents, if necessary;
  - together with social pedagogue organises support groups for adolescents' anxiety mitigation.

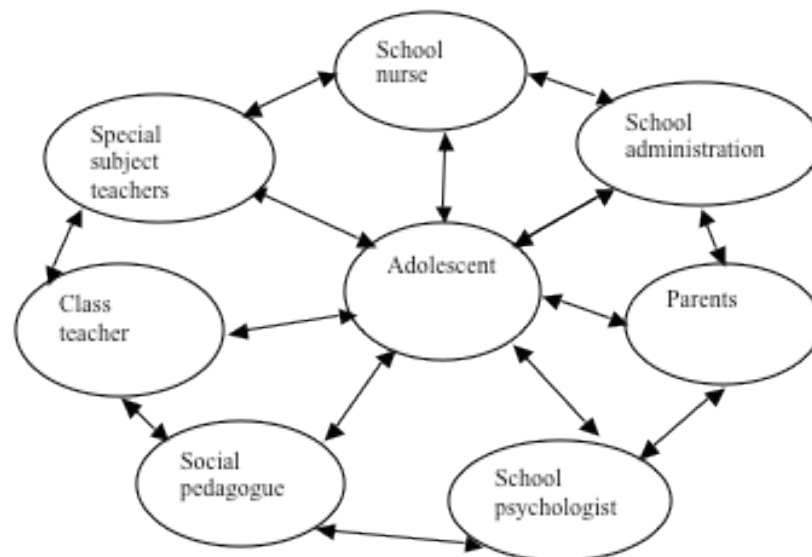


Fig. 1. Inter-professional team model



3. Class teacher
  - organises events aiming to unite the class and develop mutual trust, create a safe psychological environment;
  - observes students in different school life situations;
  - participates in inter-professional team work;
  - informs team professionals and parents about the observations made.
4. Special subject teachers
  - determine students' knowledge level and learning skill level;
  - explain new material using different types of methods;
  - analyse students' achievements based on determined and explained assessment criteria;
  - develop students' learning skills;
  - participate in inter-professional team work.
5. School administration
  - creates physically and psychologically safe school setting for students;
  - introduces changes to school's internal regulations;
  - develops instructions for students and teachers in case of unforeseen situations;
  - participates in inter-professional team work.
6. School nurse
  - observes students' health and well-being;
  - participates in inter-professional team work;
  - informs team professionals about students' health state observations.
7. Parents
  - observe their child's emotional state and behaviour at home;
  - cooperate with the child's class teacher, special subject teachers;
  - participate in inter-professional team work.

### **Organisation of Support Activities**

Organisers of support activities for adolescents' school anxiety mitigation must be guided by the preventive work organisation principles (Zmanovskaja, 2003):

1. Complexity – requires setting preventive work tasks by including the following functions: instructional function, educational function, developing function, ensuring their unified implementation. This principle makes the preventive work process more targeted.
2. Gradualness – requires acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences in a system, certain order, from simple to complicated, when the next step is based on the previous and a student is prepared for acquisition of new ones.
3. Differentiation – requires organisation of preventive work measures and activities at an appropriate level of complexity. The content should be scholastic yet understandable for certain student's age and development level.
4. Timeliness – reveals the significance of preventive work to students in their life and raise interest in content acquired during activities and events. Provided information should be appropriate to the real situation in society, it should be closely related to students' personal experience.
5. Consideration of recipient's characteristics – requires forming an individual approach to every student in order to develop positive skills of each student. A pedagogue should be

aware of intellectual development and education level and monitor students' development and improvement dynamics.

6. Priority given to group work forms – a group work form is the most suitable for acquisition of new knowledge, its strengthening and creative application in cognitive activities.
7. Positivity of information – provided information should be positive, so it can be remembered easier and develop a wish to acquire it practically and use in life.
8. Personal interest and responsibility of participants – preventive work measures and activities should be organised in a way that each student is maximally interested in participation and is responsible for both himself/ herself and his/ her peers during these activities.
9. Maximum personal activity – in the preventive work process students themselves must be maximally involved, so each one of them could show positive characteristic traits of their personality, and it will stimulate the wish to participate in preventive work activities and measures more actively.
10. Future perspective – students' newly acquired and strengthened knowledge in a preventive work process should be useful and practically applicable in further student's life (Zmanovskaja, 2003).

In work with adolescents, preference should be given to group work forms. Adolescence is an exceptionally favourable age for the organisation of such activities. A group is the most appropriate setting for an adolescent to acquire necessary skills and competences, obtain new positive experience. In active interaction with their peers, adolescents have an opportunity to acquire adaptive behaviour models. Such group activities become a testing ground where adolescents in physically and psychologically safe environment can try, acquire new knowledge and improve existing skills and receive necessary group support.

The group organiser must have the necessary knowledge about the group processes and personal experience. Skills to emphatically perceive, react to adolescents' behaviour, detect verbal and non-verbal reactions, provide support and encourage in case of necessity, skills to set clear requirements, rules and structure are required. A valuable achievement might be a cohesive team, mutual trust and motivation to work actively, wish to analyse one's own actions, solve problems (Liders, 2001).

Provision of equal opportunities for all participants is an essential requirement in group activity. As mentioned above, group internal rules, compliance with them is an important component for the achievement of group activity goals. Rules are developed in the group, the organiser makes only separate proposals. A few ideas of rules suggested by the adolescents:

- Participation. In order to make the process interesting, to have benefit from the activities, it is necessary to be active, participate in activities.
- Honesty. There is no right or wrong answer. True thoughts and feelings of participants are important.
- No assessment. One should not express his/ her assessment of the actions, opinions of others, if it is not requested.
- Confidentiality. All that happens in a group is jointly owned and it should not be revealed to others. One cannot tell other people outside the group what he/ she has heard about group members, what happened in the group. One also should not discuss with group members any of the issues outside the group activities.
- One should speak in "I" form, or speak for himself/ herself. The word "we" should not be used, as they can only know their personal opinions.

- One should not interrupt other group members, should wait until the speech is finished and only then provide personal commentaries.

Positive, trustful atmosphere must be established in the group in mutual interaction, as it is important for adolescents to feel complete safety and trust in the organiser. In mutual relationships, the organiser sets an example of behaviour (Kostina, 2001).

The structure of activities is usually traditional and consists of an introduction, basic part and conclusion. Members can agree on introductory ritual performed before each new activity. It helps to reduce tension, as everyone will know how the activity will begin. At least one additional warm-up exercise is preferable, which will release the tension, mobilise, unify the group and prepare for the main topic of the activity. Then the organiser can announce the topic of the activity or ask participants questions about the topic to be discussed. The basic part usually includes a discussion of or play-out of the proposed situation on the topic, exchange of thoughts, feelings, feedback information, the group organiser's conclusions and summary of opinions, if necessary. The conclusive part is devoted to analysis, self-testing and reflection. A certain conclusive ritual is also important at the end of the activity.

The first activity must begin with introductions, even if the adolescents know each other. There is a chance to discover something new about oneself, as introduction can be organised as provision of information both from the participant himself/ herself and from others who know him/ her. The introduction can be organised more originally, for instance, with made-up names, using movie or literary characters. It is advised to involve different grade students in the group, less known to each other, as previously established interaction experience with the known person and roles can hinder the establishment of new cooperation model options, see oneself in a new perspective. It is preferable to conclude an agreement with an adolescent and his/her parents about participation in group work. Conclusion of an agreement increases the responsibility of participants, significance of activities.

Group activity is planned in advance. The programme should be drawn-up with an aim to develop school anxiety mitigation strategies and approaches. Activities are planned, including certain exercises. However, a more flexible activity structure can be established, which will allow to choose exercises depending on the current emotions, moods of adolescents during a certain activity. Preferably, the group activities shall be organised once a week for approximately 2 academic hours.

A group may include 8–12 people. It is advised to include students with a low anxiety level as well to balance the group. Heterogeneity of a group creates consistency with the real setting in school and promotes discovery of new resources of a participant. A formed heterogeneous group can be more unified, but the opportunity to comprehend, obtain new experience in cooperation with the different, diverse can be reduced. In this case, the group can intensify students' problems. When setting up a group, individual peculiarities of students must be taken into account, in order to ensure that each member of the group has grown during the group activities (Kostina, 2001).

Activities are oriented towards the adjustment of a child's emotional cognitive sphere, developing adequate interaction skills with peers and adults. Activities will promote harmonisation of children's relationships with the surrounding environment, their socialisation.

Activities for school anxiety mitigation can be organised in thematic blocks:

- Self-actualisation block. Determination and strengthening of students' individual resources.
- Actualisation of one's own anxiety.
- Approaches, techniques of anxiety mitigation.

In these activities, cognitive behavioural, art, game therapy elements can be successfully applied. Among cognitive behavioural therapy techniques and methods, exposure to fear, anxiety, obsessive thoughts and actions in a safe environment is recommended for anxiety mitigation. One can accustom himself/ herself in two ways: gradual adaptation in a real environment and adaptation using imagination. For instance, during group activities, different exercises are performed in order to announce something important to the group, provide information about some issue, etc. Situations in which students feel anxious are played out. Another option is delayed or refraining from reaction. Initially, it is taught to postpone the action which is taken in case of facing the unknown. It helps to gain experience that not always actions must be taken to mitigate anxiety, control obsessive thoughts. Usually a person is sure that negative thoughts must be controlled so they do not hinder usual activities, therefore, these thoughts add particular importance. It leads to a vicious circle: wishes to suppress the thoughts cause more thoughts, and the more is thought about, the more obsessive are the thoughts, a wish to take actions occurs and an ability to consciously regulate thoughts reduces. In order to stop it, one must try to change his/ her negative thoughts, for instance, “I don’t understand anything, I will make mistakes...” might be reframed into “I have read all the paragraph and I remember...”.

By using art therapy elements, a student can reflect his/ her thoughts, feelings and needs with crayons or pencils, paint with gouache colours or watercolours, form of clay or modelling clay, make a collage of images or find another form of suitable artistic expression. After the creative processes, a discussion takes place in order to jointly comprehend the created art works and find answers to topical questions. It allows to both creatively express in a safe and supportive environment and analyse experienced personal feelings; and, therefore, to mitigate anxiety and form a deeper understanding of one’s own state, change the attitude towards one’s own state.

When playing games, a student can express himself/ herself, learn something new and overcome fear, doubts and psychological traumas. Games can be not only developing or entertaining, but also healing in a way. These games: develop physical coordination and agility, reduce nervous tension, ensure positivity and optimism, reduce fear of expected punishment, attacks, loneliness, fear of being in enclosed spaces, and help establish successful relationships between an adult and a child (Rutka, 2016). A book “Lielā spēļu grāmata” (*Big Book of Games*) edited by Jerinaite (2015) and published by Zvaigzne ABC can be used for ideas. Adolescents can make their own game suggestions.

A student spends a significant amount of time in school; therefore, the school setting affects his/ her development, establishment of mutual relationships. Providing support for anxiety mitigation, opportunities to improve physical and psychological environment at school must be considered as well. Some recommendations for improvement of physical environment at school:

- secure areas;
- establishment of recreation or relaxation facilities;
- organisation of games and activities during lesson breaks, the so-called “active breaks”;
- establishment of sand therapy, art therapy or social painting classes in one of school rooms where students can draw, play with sand even during lesson breaks;
- organisation of sport activities in separate premises – for reduction of emotional and bodily tension, where there will be special inventory, including media players.

Suggestions for improvement of psychological environment:

- discussions on tolerance, anxiety, stress, interaction;
- group activities;
- activities stimulating cooperation for creation of less competitive environment.

A positive school setting is stimulating and interesting; it requires gradual and time-consuming work for its establishment, definitely involving students in this process.

### Conclusions

1. Anxiety is concomitant with any homeostasis disorder of a person. A high anxiety level occurs in situations when the values significant for an individual are under a threat. The way an individual perceives a situation which threatens his/ her values is acquired by learning from others.
2. School anxiety causes are related to relationships with friends, educational attainment, worries about health and thoughts about the future.
3. The results of the studies show that 7–9 graders have an increased or a high anxiety level which is related to school setting. The results are closely related to psychological peculiarities of adolescence. Support is necessary, as adolescents recognise that it is difficult to cope with anxiety.
4. School support staff is a team that can deliver preventive work at school for adolescents' anxiety mitigation. Inter-professional team must be created, involving representatives of different professions and organisations, where each member possesses his/ her own professional competence, but all members work towards a common goal.
5. Support measures should preferably be organised using the group work form. In an active interaction with peers, adolescents are able to acquire adaptive behaviour models. It is important to create conditions for equal opportunities for all participants.
6. Cognitive behavioural, art and game therapy elements can be successfully applied in support group activities. During activities, an individual should acknowledge his/ her anxiety and its causes. School anxiety mitigation can occur with the change of setting and change of an individual's attitude towards unchangeable setting.
7. Planning of the school setting is an integral part of school anxiety mitigation measures. Students must be definitely involved in the creation of a positive school setting.

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## SUPPORT MEASURES FOR ADOLESCENTS' SCHOOL ANXIETY MITIGATION

### *Summary*

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In general, school anxiety is a result of interaction between personality and situation. It is a specific type of anxiety which is characteristic of certain situations, i.e. student's interaction with different educational environment components in school. The feeling of anxiety is unavoidable for a student, as cognition is always connected with anxiety. Cognition is a discovery of something new, unknown, but all unknown includes uncertainty, which causes worries to a person. A person strives for stability and clarity. At an optimal level, which is very individual, anxiety is necessary, as it mobilises for work, i.e. acquisition of knowledge. If the optimal level is exceeded, disorganisation of behaviour is observed.

It is emphasised in scientific literature that occurrence of school anxiety is related to socially psychological factors. These would be educational overload, students' inability to acquire the curriculum, inadequate expectations of parents regarding the child's school results, negative relationships with teachers, frequent recurrence of valuation situations, conflicts in class, exclusion, etc.

The studies regarding school anxiety found out that a high and a very high level of anxiety was observed among younger adolescents, which is related to the transition from the first to the second stage of basic school (from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade) and older adolescents (14–16 years of age). Situations which cause such level of anxiety are similar for all adolescents: problematic situations in interaction and relationships with both peers and adults. Criticism, scolding, slander, non-recognition of opinion, speaking in front of audience, valuation – these are the most common situations mentioned in students' surveys. Adolescents' anxiety has some additional factors: physiological reformation of one's organism, a process of acquiring independence and self-dependence, adolescent idealism.

The results of the studies show that there is a necessity to provide support for adolescents by developing their social skills: establishment and maintenance of good relationships with their peers, self-regulation, resolution of problematic situations, self-affirmation. In the development of these skills and provision of support, different specialists must cooperate and create professional work teams. It ensures effective resolution of problems and provision of adequate, differentiated and at the same time complex help.

The support programme for adolescents' school anxiety mitigation consists of several sections: development of adolescents' social skills, work of support groups, educational measures for teachers and parents. The programme has been developed as an initiative for dealing with adolescents' school anxiety.

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