



South Carolina Family and Community Leaders

Affiliated with National Volunteer Outreach Network, Country Women's Council, U.S.A.,
Associated Country Women of the World and in partnership with Clemson University Cooperative
Extension Service

SCFCL website: <http://www.scfcl.com>

Leader Training Guide

Understanding Anxiety: Everyday Ways to Manage Mental Health

Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

1. Recognize common signs and symptoms of anxiety.
2. Understand how anxiety affects mental and physical health.
3. Practice simple techniques to manage anxiety in daily life.
4. Identify supportive resources and healthy coping strategies.

Lesson Overview/Introduction:

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges people experience. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time, and it is a normal response to stress, uncertainty, or change. However, when anxiety becomes frequent or overwhelming, it can affect daily life, relationships, physical health, and overall well-being.

Life responsibilities such as family caregiving, finances, health concerns, work demands, and unexpected changes can all contribute to feelings of worry or unease. Learning to recognize anxiety and respond with healthy coping tools can help individuals build resilience and improve emotional wellness.

In this lesson, we will discuss what anxiety is, how it affects the body and mind, and practical strategies to manage it in healthy and effective ways.

Lesson

1. Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural response to stress or perceived danger. It is often described as feelings of fear, nervousness, worry, or uneasiness.

Occasional anxiety is normal before major life events such as public speaking, medical procedures, or financial decisions. However, when anxiety becomes frequent, overwhelming, or interferes with daily life, it may need attention and support.

Common signs of anxiety include:

- Excessive worrying
- Feeling restless or on edge
- Trouble concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping

- Racing thoughts
- Muscle tension
- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Irritability
- Fatigue

2. How Anxiety Affects Mental and Physical Health

Anxiety impacts more than emotions—it affects the whole body.

Mental effects:

- Difficulty focusing
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Fear of making decisions
- Increased emotional sensitivity

Physical effects:

- Headaches
- Digestive discomfort
- Muscle tightness
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Elevated blood pressure

When anxiety becomes persistent and is not effectively managed, it may contribute to chronic stress, depression, weakened immune function, and reduced quality of life.

3. Mental and Emotional Strategies for Managing Anxiety

Deep Breathing

Slow breathing helps calm the nervous system.

Try the **4-4-4 method**:

- Inhale for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds
- Exhale for 4 seconds

Repeat for several minutes.

Mindfulness and Grounding

Focusing on the present moment can reduce anxious thoughts.

Try the **5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique**:

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you feel
- 3 things you hear
- 2 things you smell
- 1 thing you taste

Journaling

Writing down worries can help organize thoughts and reduce mental clutter.

Positive Self-Talk

Replace anxious thoughts such as: “I can’t handle this.”

With: “I can take this one step at a time.”

4. Physical Strategies for Reducing Anxiety

Movement and Exercise

Physical activity helps release endorphins that improve mood and reduce tension.

Examples include:

- Walking
- Gardening
- Dancing
- Stretching
- Chair exercises

Healthy Sleep Habits

Aim for 7–9 hours of sleep each night.

Helpful practices:

- Keep a regular bedtime
- Limit screen time before bed
- Practice calming routines

Balanced Nutrition

What we eat affects brain health.

Helpful habits include:

- Eating regular balanced meals
- Include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins to support overall brain and body health
- Drinking enough water
- Limiting caffeine and excess sugar
- Avoiding excessive alcohol

5. Building Social Support

Anxiety often feels heavier when handled alone. Supportive relationships are essential for emotional wellness.

Helpful ways to stay connected:

- Talk with trusted family or friends
- Join community activities
- Participating in SCFCL programs
- Participating in volunteer activities or community service opportunities
- Reach out to a counselor or healthcare provider when needed

Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

6. Creating a Personal Anxiety-Management Toolkit

Each person responds differently to stress and anxiety.

A personal toolkit may include:

- A calming playlist
- Journal or notebook
- Breathing exercise reminders
- Encouraging affirmations
- Favorite comforting scents
- Contact list of supportive people
- Prayer, meditation, or devotional materials

Having these tools ready can make difficult moments easier to manage.

Lesson Summary

Anxiety is a normal part of life, but it does not have to control your daily experience.

By learning to recognize signs of anxiety and practicing healthy coping skills, individuals can strengthen emotional wellness and improve overall quality of life.

Small steps—such as deep breathing, physical movement, healthy routines, and seeking support—can make a powerful difference.

Managing anxiety is an ongoing process, and each positive action builds resilience for the future.

Suggested Activities

Activity #1: Breathing Exercise Warm-Up

Practice the 4-4-4 breathing technique as a group.

Activity #2: Build Your Anxiety Toolkit

Have participants list or gather items they can use during stressful moments.

Activity #3: Group Reflection

Ask participants to share one healthy coping strategy they will practice this week.

Activity #4: Grounding Practice

Lead the group through the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise.

Suggested Materials

- Handout with breathing exercises
- Journal or notecards
- Anxiety coping checklist
- Stress ball or fidget tool
- Calming music playlist
- Resource list for mental health support

Note: This lesson provides educational information and self-care strategies for managing everyday stress and anxiety. It is not intended to diagnose, treat, or replace professional mental health care. Individuals experiencing severe anxiety or emotional distress should seek guidance from a qualified healthcare or mental health professional.

Sources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Anxiety Disorders. 2025.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Mental Health and Coping. 2025.
- American Psychological Association (APA). Managing Anxiety. 2024.
- Mayo Clinic. Anxiety Disorders: Symptoms and Causes. 2025.

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