

# LESSON PLANS!

## LEARNING TO TAME PARASITIC THOUGHTS TO REDUCE ANXIETY

### PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

To help young people understand what parasitic thoughts are so that they can better tame them and find inner peace.

Why should you do this workshop with your students?

- To help them better manage their performance anxiety on a day-to-day basis, improve their self-esteem and make them more optimistic and resilient.

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 **SKILL**

Self-care

 **RECOMMENDED  
LEVEL**

All secondary levels

 **DURATION**

60 minutes

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## SECONDARY OBJECTIVES (QEP)

Constructing identity

## AREAS OF STUDY

Personal development

## SUBJECT-SPECIFIC SKILLS

Communicating orally in a variety of ways

## TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

### Intellectual

- Taking advantage of information
- Exercising critical judgement
- Using creative thinking

### Personal and social

- Realizing your potential

### Communication

- Communicating in an appropriate manner

## MATERIALS



- Image(s) for the introductory activity (bear).
- Video about the adolescent brain.
- IWB or blackboard with chalk.
- Info sheet on sorting out parasitic thoughts for all students.
- 1 pad of small sticky notes (such as Post-its).

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## WARM-UP ACTIVITY: 15 minutes

- **STEP 1:** Show students an image that portrays stress **03**
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## PREPARATION PHASE: 15 minutes

- **STEP 1:** Teach students the 4 components of the internal anxiety mechanism **05**
- **STEP 2:** Watch a video that explains how the brain develops during adolescence and how it can influence our emotions and impulses and help us manage stress (or not) **07**

## IMPLEMENTATION PHASE: 25 minutes

- **STEP 1:** Introduce the notion of school anxiety **08**
- **STEP 2:** Understand the idea of useful and parasitic thoughts and complete the worksheet to practice **09**

## EXIT TICKET TASK: 5 minutes

- Each student writes what they learned on a sticky note (Post-it) **14**

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to get students thinking about anxiety

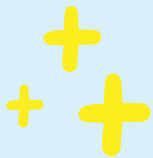
## Warm-up activity (in class): 15 minutes



### STEP 1: Initiate discussion by showing an image

**WHAT TO DO** Begin the discussion by showing the image with the following situation.

**WHAT TO SAY** “Today, we’re going to talk about anxiety, which can sometimes take up a lot of space in your head, such as during exams or before an oral presentation.



To do that, I suggest you start by taking the time to look at the situation as if it were really happening.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THIS IMAGE?



Source: National Geographic

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to get students thinking about anxiety

**WHAT TO DO** Let students explain their overall understanding of the scene.

You can then explain that this is a real-life photo of a biologist who had to repair the radio collar of a 160 kg bear that he thought was fast asleep but turned out to be wide awake.

## STEP 2: Have students think about what the biologist was feeling.

**WHAT TO SAY** Now let's try to put ourselves in the biologist's shoes.  
Can you tell me what's going on in his head or in his body?

**WHAT TO DO** When a student mentions an item, write it on the IWB or the blackboard.  
Group them in 4 separate sections of the board based **on the following categories**.

- 01 Physical sensations felt in his body.**  
Possible student responses: nervousness, muscle tension, tightness in the chest, racing heart, etc.
- 02 The emotions or feelings that arise within him.**  
Possible student responses: nervous, panicked, worried, scared, discouraged, irritated, etc.
- 03 The thoughts he has in his head, his inner speech, the phrases in the background.**  
Possible student responses: "I'm going to be attacked!" "I'll never get out of here fast enough!"
- 04 Actions or measures taken.**  
Possible student responses: escape, run, fight, scream.

Be careful not to name the terms related to the categories (see diagrams below).

RACING HEART

STIFFNESS

STRESSED

WORRIED

NERVOUS

I'M GOING TO BE  
ATTACKED

I'M GOING TO DIE

RUN

FIGHT

SCREAM

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to learn the components of the internal anxiety mechanism



## PREPARATION PHASE (IN CLASS): 15 minutes

### STEP 1: Teach students the 4 components of the internal anxiety mechanism.

#### INFO

We all have an internal psychological mechanism that works most of the time without us even realizing it. When we feel anxious, our unpleasant physical sensations are most often accompanied by emotions, thoughts and behaviours. They are our warning lights indicating the presence of one or more discomforts. Knowing about this mechanism helps us to understand that these four elements influence each other and to take positive action on them.\*

By exploring each component of this internal mechanism with your students, they will become aware of what is going on inside them. All you need to do is to get them to simply observe themselves, without judgement. With this exploration, young people will be in a better position to choose which behaviours to adopt. Because it is better for them to choose their actions freely than to let anxiety dictate how they act.

So, it is a matter of pausing to observe and name what is going on inside themselves, without making any further analysis.

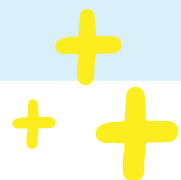
This will allow them to choose to act on their thoughts (through mindfulness, for example), to manage their emotions or to act on their body by playing sports, eating healthily or managing their sleep, which has a positive impact on their emotions.

**Caution: over-analyzing their discomforts is not only useless, but may even increase students' internal discomfort.**

It is important that they do not fall into the trap of wanting to understand what is happening to them at all costs or believing that only then will they be able to feel better.

"I have to understand what's happening or I'll keep feeling bad!" is a persistent belief that can sometimes magnify emotional discomfort.

However, we regularly experience situations where question marks and uncertainty persist. It is more sensible to put your energy into dealing with the situation that is bothering you than to try in vain to understand everything.



\*L'anxiété apprivoisée, transformer son stress en ressource positive. [Taming Anxiety: Turning Stress into a Positive Resource]. Éditions Trécarré Amélie Seidah, PhD and Isabelle Geninet, PhD, psychologists

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to learn the components of the internal anxiety mechanism

**WHAT TO DO** List the 4 components of anxiety on the board and add a circle in the centre that says, "Anxiety and the internal mechanism" (see below):



**WHAT TO SAY** You have just identified the 4 components of the internal anxiety mechanism. In fact, these 4 components are always connected: what we tell ourselves in our heads will affect our physical sensations, our emotions and our chosen actions.

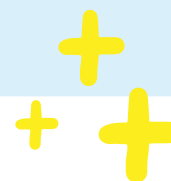
This mechanism is activated when we are in situations that make us anxious, such as a surprise exam, unexpected events or a new situation. In the following activity, we are going to see why it is important to put into words what is going on inside of us when we are experiencing anxiety.

**INFO**

**Is there such a thing as "good stress"?**

"Good stress" arises when we face a new, unknown or unexpected situation, difficulty or challenge and goes away as soon as the stressful situation ends. There is no negative, irrational, exaggerated or paralyzing anticipation of the event.

"Good stress" helps you mobilize all your resources and surpass yourself.



WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to learn the components of the internal anxiety mechanism

## STEP 2: Show the adolescent brain development video to help students better understand how to manage their emotions.

### INFO

**When we're gripped by an emotion, an area in our brain called the amygdala is activated.** This is why the amygdala is considered the centre of emotions. It sets off an almost instantaneous physiological reaction. The act of stopping to put our emotions into words has the effect of activating the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the centre of reasoning. This activation slows the activity of the amygdala and causes a slight decrease in our physiological reaction. In other words, naming what we feel not only clarifies our experience, but also provides some internal physiological relief. The emotion won't disappear, but it may fade slightly.\*

**The adolescent brain is particularly prone to emotion and anxiety because of its gradual development, and to a lesser extent, the hormonal fluctuations involved in adolescence.** Since the amygdala (the centre of emotions) is the first area of the brain to be fully developed, the emotions (positive or negative) that young people feel are very powerful. Particularly since the prefrontal cortex (the centre of reasoning) develops much later.

#### Learn more:

<https://fondationjeunesentete.org/en/family-toolkit/recognizing-psychological-distress/the-teenage-brain-explained/>

### WHAT TO DO

We invite you to show your students a video about how the brain works during adolescence so that they understand which areas of the brain create emotions and what they need to do to control them.

#### Watch the video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i\\_CtCy6pwSE&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_CtCy6pwSE&t=1s)

**Ask your students about their impressions and understanding of the video.**



### WHAT TO SAY

**In a nutshell, the neurons in the prefrontal cortex finish connecting as you grow up.**

This will allow you to measure the consequences of your actions, to better plan your actions and to judge what is good or bad for you. While this area of our brain is developing, we can give it a little help.

#### How?

By taking the time to name what we feel, we can reduce the intensity of our emotions and take a step back from them.

\* L'anxiété apprivoisée, transformer son stress en ressource positive. [Taming Anxiety: Turning Stress into a Positive Resource] Éditions Trécarré Amélie Seidah, PhD and Isabelle Geninet, PhD, psychologists



WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to give your students tools to deal with anxiety

## IMPLEMENTATION PHASE (IN CLASS): 25 minutes



### STEP 1: Transpose the biologist's situation into the daily life of young people with school anxiety.

#### INFO

##### Distinguishing between useful and parasitic thoughts

When we are facing a problem, useful thoughts draw our attention to a need in the "here and now" and prompt us to act. They lead us to find solutions.

**For example:** "I need to start studying for my history exam that is coming up in a few days" or "I miss my friend Léa; I'm going to text her tonight."

**On the other hand, parasitic thoughts only cause suffering:** they take over our mind and drain our energy. These thoughts are unhelpful because they are either based on a past action or a future situation that hasn't yet occurred. They don't help us find solutions to problems. On the contrary! They tend to drag us down and paralyze us.

**For example:** "I'm really stupid to have made such a mistake" or "There's no point in trying, I'll never manage it."

**WHAT TO SAY** **Do you remember when we tried to figure out what the biologist might be saying to himself in the image?** Let's transpose that exercise to our thoughts in a stressful situation. Does anyone have an example of a stressful situation for you at school? Or in your relationships with others? Or in the sports that you play?

**WHAT TO DO** **Write student responses on the board.** For example: unexpected exams, late work, bad grades, arguing with friends, anxiety about not doing well in a competition.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Now,** can you give me examples of thoughts a student might have in these situations?

**WHAT TO DO** **Write some of their examples on the board.**  
Caution: It is important to keep responses general and not to focus on any one student.

**For example:** If a student says that they are experiencing stress, you can say, "It's true that someone can feel that way in that situation," instead of, "Really? Is that how you feel?"

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to give your students tools to deal with anxiety

**WHAT TO SAY** Now let's focus on the thoughts you've identified.

- Do they seem true?
- Do they seem and useful or helpful in reducing stress?
- Is it motivating to talk to yourself that way?
- What is the impact of having such high standards?
- Of thinking that the world will end if you don't pass a test?

**WHAT TO DO** Give students time for brief responses.

**“We often have “useful” thoughts in our everyday lives.**

Thinking “I need to bring lunch money today” or “I need to finish my geography homework for tomorrow” are examples of this.

They're useful because they lead to a “resolution” of the situation.

We don't always have to have useful thoughts!

We can also have other kinds of thoughts, like dreaming or envisioning the future.

But in an anxious situation, parasitic thoughts often take over.

## STEP 2: Define the concept of parasitic thoughts with your students.

**WHAT TO SAY** Can you explain what a parasite is?

**WHAT TO DO** Let the students answer and then give the correct definition of the word.

**WHAT TO SAY** **In biology,** In biology, a parasite is defined as a living organism that benefits from its host, another living organism. Unlike a predator that kills its prey, the parasite doesn't kill it: it siphons it to survive. We sometimes have thoughts that act as true parasites in our mind. The problem with these thoughts is that we attach too much importance to them. We perceive them as true, valid and useful, as if they represented reality, without reservation. This is why they make us suffer so much.

To help you understand, here are examples of parasitic thoughts.

**Examples of parasitic thoughts:** “I'm really stupid to have made such a mistake” or “There's no point in trying, I'll never do it.”

**WHAT TO DO** Pass the worksheet out to students and tell them it's an activity they can do when they are stressed or anxious.

# WORKSHEET: LEARNING TO SORT MY THOUGHTS

I GRAB HOLD OF MY THOUGHT

I TAKE THE TIME TO GIVE IT A NAME

I ACCEPT THAT IT'S THERE,  
I GIVE IT A PLACE INSIDE ME

I SORT IT APPROPRIATELY



## USEFUL THOUGHT

- Based on my senses
- Here and now
- Possible solution

✓ I TAKE ACTION



## PARASITIC THOUGHT

- Based on a story that my head is telling me
  - Past/Future
  - No solution

✗ I REJECT IT

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to give your students tools to deal with anxiety

## WHAT TO SAY <sup>66</sup> As we can see on the worksheet:

If the thought seems useful, take action! Do something to try to resolve the situation. Here, we can think of the biologist and his useful thought: I'm going to be attacked, I have to get out of here.

If you notice a parasitic thought, you have two strategies: either you question it, or you get some distance.

### Now let's practice sorting our thoughts!

When you look at the examples of thoughts on the board, what do you notice? Have you identified useful thoughts? Or are they parasitic thoughts?

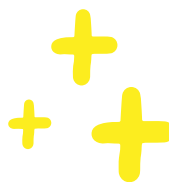
**WHAT TO DO** Allow a few minutes for the students to consider this.

## WHAT TO SAY <sup>66</sup> Now, take one of the thoughts you identified as a "parasitic thought" that you have regularly and ask yourself these questions:

- Is it based on a story my head is telling me?
- Is it about something from the past or the future?
- Is this a thought for which I have no solution?

If the answer is yes, choose to distance yourself from that thought.

Note that the goal is not to stop, eliminate or convince yourself otherwise, but to refine your thinking.



**WHEN DEALING WITH  
A PARASITIC THOUGHT,  
ask yourself these questions:**

**IS IT BASED ON A STORY MY HEAD  
IS TELLING ME?**

**IS IT ABOUT SOMETHING FROM THE PAST  
OR THE FUTURE?**

**IS THIS A THOUGHT FOR WHICH I HAVE  
NO SOLUTION?**

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to give your students tools to deal with anxiety

### STEP 3: Learn to distance yourself from your parasitic thoughts.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Go back to your parasitic thought and do this little exercise in your head.**

The first way to look at things: consider your parasitic thought.  
For example: "I won't be able to do it." Repeat this thought to yourself again and again.

**WHAT TO DO** Wait 30 seconds before continuing.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Observe the effect these words have on you.**

Second take: precede your parasitic thought with "I have the thought that..."  
For example: "I have the thought that I won't be able to do it."

**WHAT TO DO** Wait 30 seconds.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Once again, observe the effect it has on you.** Do you notice a difference?

**WHAT TO DO** Wait 30 seconds.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Now let's try a third time.** Preface your thought with "I observe that I have the thought that..." or "I observe that my head is telling me that..."

For example: "I observe that I have the thought that I won't be able to do it" or "I observe that my head is telling me that I won't be able to do it."  
Repeat this thought again and again.

**WHAT TO DO** Wait 30 seconds.

**WHAT TO SAY** **Do you observe the natural distance that is created in each instance?**

Don't you feel like you are stepping back and becoming a spectator of your thoughts?  
By doing this exercise, we realize that a thought is just a thought, a construction of our brain that scares us. It is neither a reality nor a truth.

### STEP 4: Recap and finish with the students

**WHAT TO SAY** **Anytime you are faced with a parasitic thought, don't hesitate to do this exercise to distance yourself from that thought.**

You can use the checklist I handed out to determine if it's a parasitic thought.  
It summarizes the points we have talked about today.

WARM-UP:  
15 MIN

PREPARATION:  
15 min

IMPLEMENTATION:  
25 min

EXIT:  
5 min

OBJECTIVE: to give your students tools to deal with anxiety

## EXIT TICKET TASK (IN CLASS)

5 minutes



**WHAT TO SAY** I hope this discussion will help you see the benefit of putting what you feel into words when you experience stress in your studies or elsewhere.

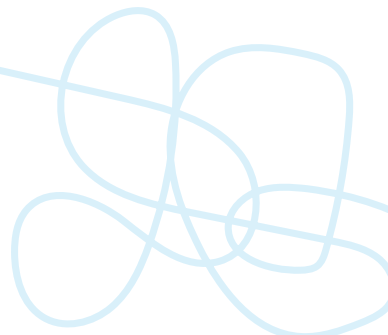
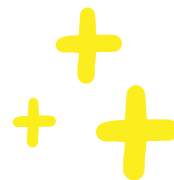
The idea isn't to eliminate your anxiety or your parasitic thoughts. That would be impossible! There are no miracle cures. It's more a matter of becoming aware of your thoughts in your daily life, of seeing them coming, of being less surprised or distressed by their presence, and of being able to temper them or to detach yourself from them a little.

There are only a few minutes left before the end of our workshop. I'm going to give you a sticky note. Please write down one thing that you learned or enjoyed in today's workshop on the sticky note. This will give me an idea of your impressions.

**Don't write more than 7 words.**

You can just write down a few key terms that are important to you. When you finish, please stick the note on my door frame, and then you can leave. You can write your name on it or not.

**WHAT TO DO** Give each student a sticky note

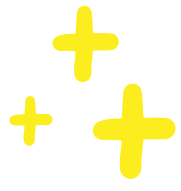
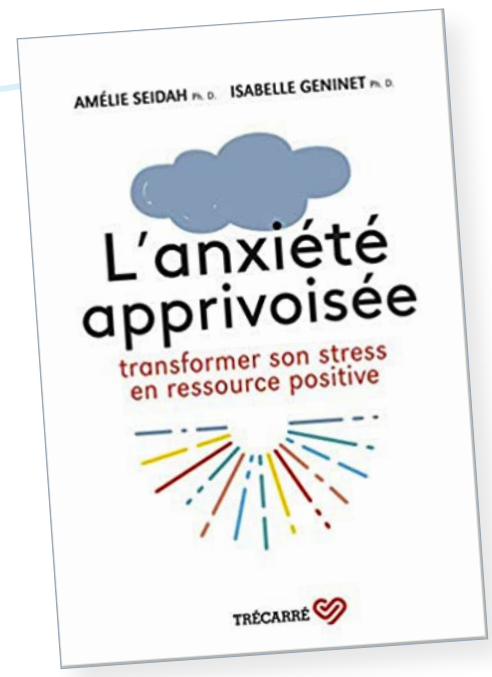


## RESOURCES

to better understand anxiety:  
*Only available in French*

**L'anxiété apprivoisée,**  
transformer son stress en ressource positive.  
Éditions Trécarré

Amélie Seidah, PhD and Isabelle Geninet, PhD, psychologists



**TOUT SAVOIR POUR COMPOSER**  
AVEC LES TURBULENCES À L'ADOLESCENCE

Amélie Seidah, PhD and Isabelle Geninet, PhD, psychologists



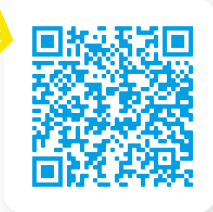


# CHECK THESE OUT

## LISTEN TO THIS PODCAST

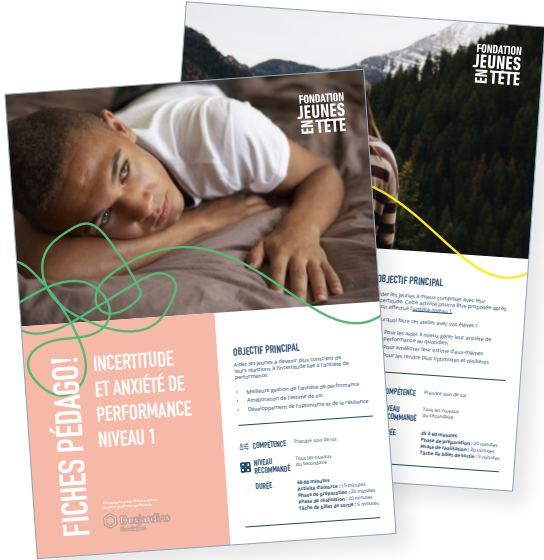
created to help you manage your stress and anxiety

Only Available in French



## EXPLORE OTHER EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

to teach your students to better manage their anxiety



## ALL OUR TOOLS AND LESSON PLANS

in our School Toolkit to help young people develop good mental health



[fondationjeunesentete.org](https://fondationjeunesentete.org)

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