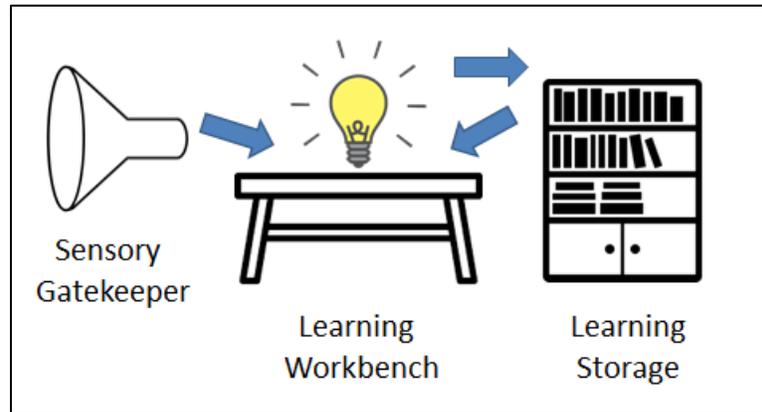


# Resources for Alleviating Anxiety

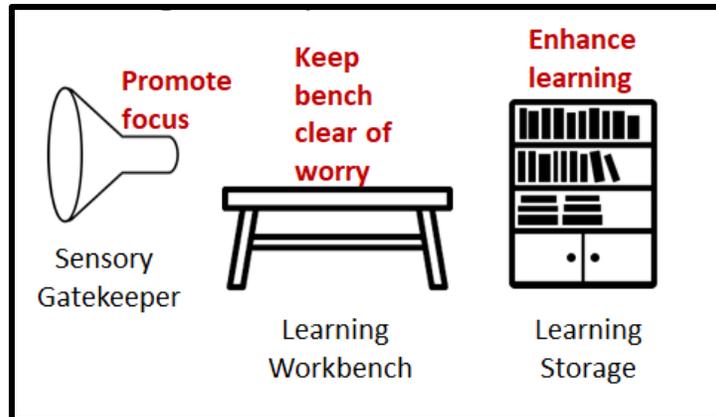
Unusual times demand some unique methods. The techniques I will describe for you here are tools for teaching children how to cope with anxiety. These activities do not get rid of anxiety. Instead, they work to help the brain to adjust. These are life-long skills worth the time it takes to teach. When your students learn how to identify, work with, and cope with their anxiety, they will be better learners over their lifetime.



Remember that we want to keep the three parts of the learning process running smoothly. If the sensory gatekeeper does its job, only the essential sensory information will flow onto the workbench. Anxiety impedes the work of the sensory gatekeeper allowing wrong information to pass through to the workbench.

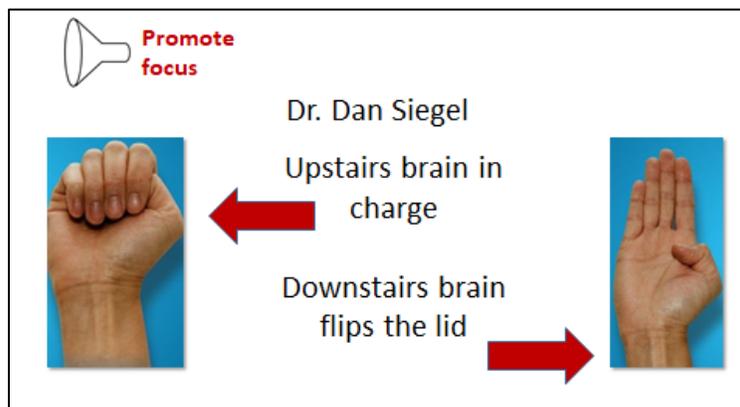
The learning workbench needs to have enough room to accommodate the new information coming in and the already learned information brought up from learning storage. With anxiety, the workbench can become crowded, which does not leave room for learning essential information.

Anxiety impacts learning storage when it reduces the workbench's effectiveness, so learning that does pass back into storage might not be properly encoded. If this happens, the brain cannot retrieve that new learning when it is needed.



## Promoting Focus

I will discuss three types of techniques to use to reduce the impact of anxiety. The first is promoting focus. Stress can interfere with the brain's ability to identify the most important sensory information needed for learning. Some techniques promote focus by resetting the sensory gatekeeper when it is not working well. These techniques will help to prevent distraction and make the learning process more effective. Other strategies help to move a student into his or her analytical brain. Activating the analytical brain will help to regulate strong emotions such as anxiety.



## Upstairs brain/downstairs brain

This strategy has three purposes: explaining how the brain processes emotion, helping children to be aware of their anxiety levels, and to share that information with classmates and teachers.

In the illustration, the bent thumb represents the downstairs brain, which works primarily with strong emotions. The fingers represent the analytical brain, which regulates emotions and uses them to learn. When the finger surrounds the thumb, the child is in his upstairs brain, and things are working as they should. When the fingers are straight up, then the child feels he is

slipping into his downstairs brain, and an intervention is needed. This child might need time alone, time to talk with someone, or a sensory strategy to help him calm down.

## Mental games

Mental games can work well with children who are slipping into their downstairs brain. A mental game redirects the brain to the upstairs brain by requiring memory or cognitive activity. It can be as simple as asking a child to identify five things in the room that are yellow, or more complex such as reciting the alphabet backward. When I taught kindergarten, I kept a mental list of things we could practice or repeat as a group to move us into our upstairs brains. Reciting the months of the year was one of them. Taking a break to recite a memory verse or sing a song can work also.



An effective sensory activity will combine the tactile sense with information from the joints (sometimes called *hard work*). If the activity requires analytical thinking, it is even more useful. The items pictured above focus on sensory information, but some find calm in auditory or visual information. The idea is it is a quick activity that resets the sensory gatekeeper by concentrating on a particular sense.

## Balloon Stress Balls

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lp7-6qFIFMI>

Squeezing these balls filled with flour provides tactile stimulation and sensory information from the joints in the arm and fingers. You can fill them with other things such as beans or rice, are washable, and easy to make. However, this is not a good option if you have a student with a latex allergy.

## Fabric Marble Maze

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvA8\\_Sls1Dw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvA8_Sls1Dw)

This activity involves the tactile sense but adds in the analytical brain's use, giving it double the power to move a student back into the upstairs brain. They are washable, easy to make, and can be made more challenging with a tougher maze or by substituting a button for a marble.

## Squeeze and Marble Toys

You can purchase toys for squeezing or moving marbles in bulk. The key to an effective sensory activity is the combination of tactile and muscle work. For this reason, a fidget spinner is not a good sensory activity.

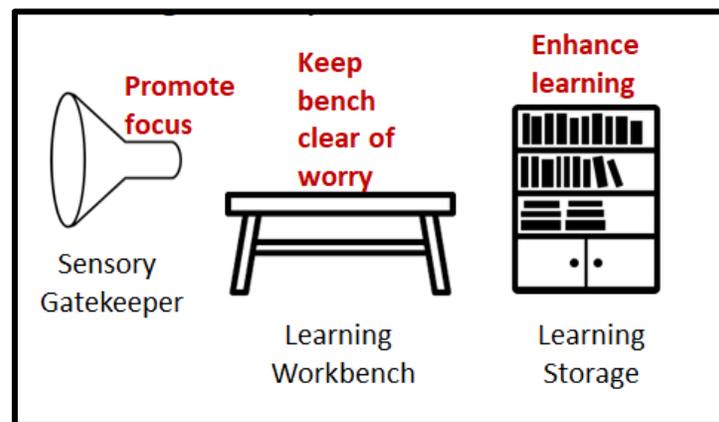
## Sensory Path

<https://www.pinkoatmeal.com/diy-sensory-path-and-motor-path/>

A sensory path stimulates the sensory gatekeeper with vestibular and proprioceptive information. Besides, it requires the “hard work” that sends to the brain information from the joints. Because the activities require thinking, it also activates the analytical brain, moving a student into the upstairs brain.

## Art and Music

Art and music activities that stimulate more than one sense at a time or require movement are excellent ways to keep kids calm. Take more time for art and music and look for ways to sneak it in when students have been sitting for a more extended period.



## Clear the Workbench

The second set of techniques work primarily to help clear the workbench of worry. This opens up more space for useful sensory information and stored information on the workbench. Most of these techniques work because they are strategies that teach a child how to cope and remind them of the help they have available.



Klassens Tid and Morning Meeting are two ways to encourage students to interact with discussion. This kind of interaction (along with recess play and collaborative learning) are great brain developing exercises because students are developing language, social, and cognitive skills in a way that the brain was designed to develop. This kind of discussion interaction also reduces anxiety because it builds relationships and allows children to see they are not alone. The teacher can also gently guide the discussion toward positive topics such as gratitude, further reducing anxiety.

### **Klassens Tid**

Klassens Tid comes to us from Denmark. Elementary schools set aside an hour each week for snacks and discussion. The children might discuss problems from the week, things that are worrying them, things that went well, etc. If the class runs out of things to discuss, the remaining time is used for small groups to visit. In this activity, children are banking social capital. They experience good discussion with classmates and make note of helpful friends. This information creates a “brain account” that dispenses resilience later when problems arise. Keep in mind that Denmark has some of the lowest rates of depression in the world. In Denmark, this time usually includes a snack brought by one of the students. However, that may not be necessary.

### **Morning Meeting**

Morning meeting is a similar activity that is more appropriate for younger children or for schedules that do not allow for a full hour. Morning Meeting can be for 5-10 minutes every day, with the same kind of discussion and relationship building.

### **Collaborative Learning**

Discussion and working out problems together is a great way to build social capital and reduce anxiety by experiencing how people work together. Look for activities that promote

cooperation and minimize individual competition (competition will increase anxiety.) There are cooperative board games for children of all ages, and BreakoutEDU has kits and digital group problem-solving activities.

<https://www.todaysparent.com/family/activities/6-board-games-for-kids-who-hate-to-lose/>  
(pay attention to game content – not all games are appropriate for a school setting)

<https://www.breakoutedu.com/> BreakoutEDU can be used to teach content material.

	<b>Clear the bench</b>	<b>Empathy/ Reframe</b>
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Empathize</li><li>• Identify appropriate emotion</li></ul>	<b>2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reframe</li><li>• Provide a new perspective</li></ul>
1 It is frustrating when we must do things in a new way.		
2 God keeps us safe with these new rules.		
[Find the reassuring truth]		

## Empathy/Reframe

This is a technique that works to train the brain to expand thinking beyond the problem. It is the kind of response that will often not fix the situation in the short term but will eventually become a coping skills habit. If you use it, the students will start using it with each other and then will learn to use it on themselves. This activity also encouraged emotional regulation by giving students feedback on their emotional responses.

Emotional ER is a two-step process. When a child reacts strongly to a negative situation, the first response is to empathize while stepping down the emotion. For example, if a student is angry about a new rule, you can empathize by relabeling the anger as frustration and acknowledging the difficulty. Here is a sample response:

"It is frustrating when we have new rules to follow because they can be hard to remember, or they can stop us from doing what we want."

In this first step, you are giving words to their emotions, which encourages self-awareness. When you substitute "frustrated" for "angry," you give feedback that suggests the way to self-regulate.

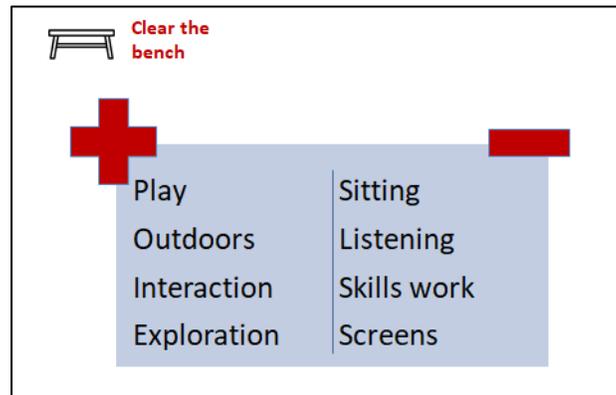
The second step is to reframe the situation to offer some measure of comfort and to help the student to see the good. Here are some possible reframing responses:

"This is how God keeps us safe." (Pointing out a reassuring truth)

"I'm having trouble with this too, but I will keep trying." (You have company)

"What do you think would help you to remember the rule?" (Find the positive action response)

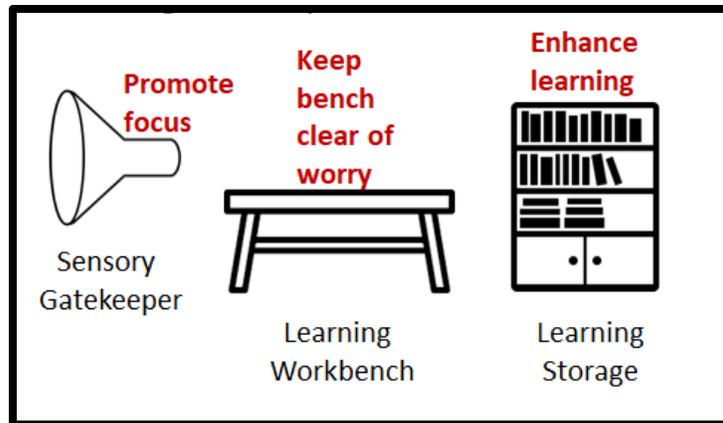
"Won't it be great when we do not have to do this anymore?" (Find the future joy)



## Pedagogy Switch-up

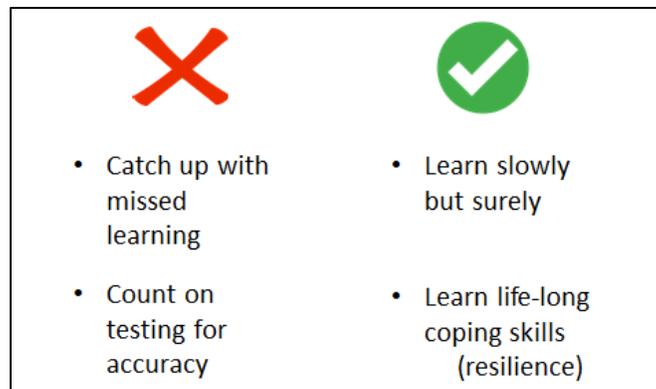
The plus side items are pedagogy methods that help expand the workbench, which will also lessen the impact of anxiety. The items on the minus side are good teaching strategies that are a burden on the workbench. Think about mixing things up a bit to keep a good balance. With high levels of anxiety, the plus column methods might be needed more often.

- Add in short playtimes between lessons.
- Increase recess time, even by five minutes
- Go outdoors for a lesson, or a few minutes of relaxation
- Look for teaching methods that promote collaboration, exploration, and problem-solving (not problem answering)
- Look for ways to make some of the screen time interactive.
- For early childhood age, children reduce or remove screen time.

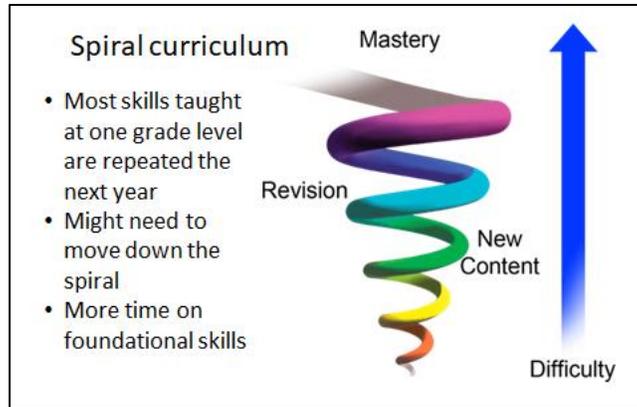


## Enhance Learning

The third set of suggestions are things for you to consider as a teacher that will help improve learning, so your efforts are more effective. Extreme situations sometimes require changes in the way we teach or in our goals for teaching.



Covid anxiety time is not a time to try to double up on skills teaching to try to hurry through things to get your students back up to grade-level. Pushing skills this way will create more anxiety and will result in less learning. Instead, it is best to look at the foundational skills and teach them more in-depth, with more repetition, and in various ways. This method of teaching will put students in an excellent place to catch up on skills for later. For instance, in early childhood, spend more time in activities that develop language learning, such as reading to them, play, and creative activities that encourage them to talk and describe. Children with strong language development will learn both reading and math skills more quickly later. In fact, this is the best way – anxiety or no – to prepare children for academic learning in school.



For older students, take a look at your curriculum map or your scope and sequence charts and identify the new skills for this year. Focus on the skills that should be reviewed and taught for the last time in your school year. This will prepare them to learn skills faster next year. In other words, in terms of the spiral curriculum, you will be dropping down a rung.

This is also not a good year for standardized testing. These tests increase anxiety and may result in inaccurate results. Instead of depending on these tests to tell you what a student knows, look for evidence of skills as they are used.



**Enhance learning**

- Belly breathing
- Reading
- Journal writing

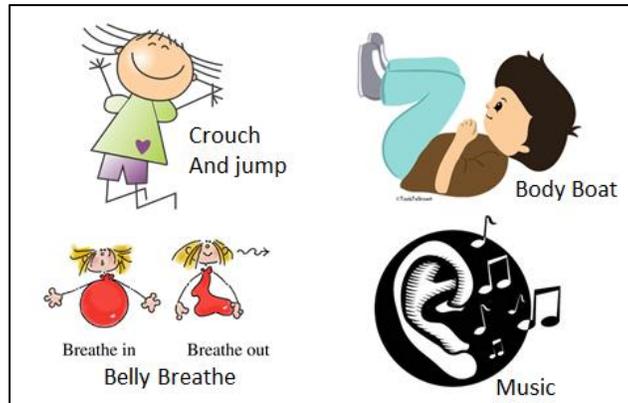


## Build in breaks

Any opportunity you can find to take a short break will enhance learning by increasing focus and clearing the workbench. With anxiety in the picture, assume your students need breaks rather than waiting for the typical signs.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQJ2O4b5TM> belly breathing is not just for children.
- Quiet activities like reading silently, being read to, journal writing, and drawing are all easily accomplished in 10 minutes.

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUZhTMZF\\_1I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUZhTMZF_1I) Sons of Korah is a group that sings the Psalms. Pick one and listen to it several times over the course of the week. It will be familiar to the students by the end of the week – a great vocabulary builder!
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMtc5PKcsls> look for simple exercises that your students can do standing. These can be a significant focus activity for older students as it gives useful vestibular and proprioceptive sensory information to the brain.



## Focus Sequence

For younger children, this is a wonderful focus activity to try before a sitting/listening lesson.

- Ask the children to crouch a jump several times.
- Ask them to make a body boat for a minute or two.
- Then do some belly breathing.
- Last, play a piece of music and slowly turn the volume down. Ask children to raise their hands when they can no longer hear it.
- Now you are ready to learn!

## Your Stress

During times of crisis, whether small or large, there are always people who bear the emotional labor. Nurses, care workers, customer service personnel, pretty much anyone in public service, and of course, teachers hold this responsibility. Emotional labor means you have to stay calm when others around you are expressing strong emotions. Emotional labor takes its toll both mentally and physically.

Even though you likely feel your days are overbooked as it is, you need to find ways to release some of the stress you feel.

1. Do not let yourself slip into bad habits regarding sleep, healthy eating, and exercise. These practices build up your reserves for coping with stress.

2. Indulge yourself in some projects or activities that allow you to refresh, relax, or be creative. If you must, limit your time spent in these activities, but do not take them off your schedule. They will not only relieve stress but will be something to look forward to.
3. Is there any way you can reduce your responsibilities outside of school? Can you hire help, or ask a family member to step up and assist? Reducing your workload by even one responsibility can help.
4. Seek God's word. I recommend meditating on the Psalms as they cover every possible emotion. Check out the music of the [Sons of Korah](#) and let their beautiful singing of the Psalms pour over you.
5. Learn to take [belly breathing breaks](#). Include some favorite stretches or yoga poses to create short breaks throughout the day.
6. Install the [Lectio 365 App](#). I use this quiet prayer time to help put myself to sleep.
7. Keep a journal. Writing down your stress and joys will help your brain to process your daily experiences.

This year's circumstances are not what we planned for our students, yet God can bring about good in any situation. These techniques will teach children healthy ways to cope with stress, anxiety, and intense emotions. Good emotional regulation is essential for learning and succeeding. Try some of these strategies and set aside your worry about missed skills. God has a plan to help your students, and you learn amazing things during a time of challenge.