Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

A supportive conversation between a clinician and a patient

24-7 Shalom Psychiatry PLLC | Sample educational dialogue for children, teens, and families

1. Beginning the conversation

Clinician: I am glad you told me how you have been feeling. What happens in your body when you get worried?

Patient: Sometimes my heart beats fast, my tummy hurts, and my hands shake. I worry that something is wrong with me.

Clinician: Those sensations can feel scary. They are real physical feelings, not something you are making up. Anxiety is one possible cause, but we also pay attention to other medical explanations. Can you tell me when the symptoms started, how long they last, and what you are doing when they happen?

Patient: It often happens before school or when I have to talk in front of people.

Clinician: That gives us a helpful clue. Our brains have a safety alarm that sometimes becomes extra sensitive. It can switch on even when we are facing a challenge rather than an actual danger.

2. Why the body reacts

Patient: How can worrying make my heart beat so fast?

Clinician: Your brain and body are connected. When your brain notices a possible threat, it sends messages through nerves and stress hormones, including adrenaline. Your heart may beat faster, your muscles tighten, and your breathing speed up. This is called the fight-or-flight response. It is designed to help protect you.

Patient: So my brain thinks a class presentation is dangerous?

Clinician: It can react as though you need extra protection. Think of a smoke alarm that rings when toast gets a little too brown. The alarm works, but sometimes it is more sensitive than it needs to be.

3. The stomach, head, and muscles

Patient: Why does my stomach hurt when I feel nervous?

Clinician: Your brain and digestive system send messages back and forth. Anxiety can change how quickly the stomach and intestines move and how sensitive they feel. That can cause butterflies, nausea, cramps, or needing the bathroom. But ongoing or severe stomach pain should be medically evaluated.

Patient: My shoulders also feel tight, and I get headaches.

Clinician: When the body is on alert, muscles can tighten without you noticing. That tension may contribute to discomfort or headaches. We can practice noticing when your jaw, shoulders, or hands are clenched, then gently relaxing them.

4. Breathing, dizziness, and panic

Patient: Sometimes I breathe quickly and feel dizzy. Am I going to faint?

Clinician: Breathing too quickly can change the balance of carbon dioxide in your blood and make you feel lightheaded or tingly. But dizziness has many possible causes. If you faint, have severe trouble breathing, or experience new or significant chest pain, seek urgent medical care rather than assuming it is anxiety.

Patient: What is a panic attack?

Clinician: A panic attack is a sudden wave of intense fear or discomfort. It can include a pounding heart, sweating, shaking, breathlessness, and a feeling that something terrible is happening. The symptoms often peak within minutes. They can be frightening, but there are effective ways to help, and new or concerning symptoms still need proper evaluation.

5. A calming skill we can practice

Clinician: Would you like to try a gentle breathing exercise with me?

Patient: Yes. What do I do?

Clinician: Sit comfortably with your feet supported. Breathe in gently through your nose, then let the air out slowly and easily. Do not force a huge breath or hold your breath if that feels uncomfortable. Notice your shoulders softening. We can repeat a few times and see how you feel.

Patient: I feel a little calmer. What if it happens again?

Clinician: You can also try grounding: name five things you see, four you feel, three you hear, two you smell, and one you taste. If you cannot identify something in a category, that is fine. The goal is to reconnect with the present moment.

6. Sleep, school, and daily life

Patient: Sometimes I cannot sleep because I keep thinking about tomorrow.

Clinician: That is common with anxiety. A regular bedtime, a relaxing wind-down routine, and reducing caffeine can help. If worries keep you awake or make you avoid school, friends, or activities, that is important to discuss so we can offer more support.

Patient: Does having anxiety mean I am weak?

Clinician: Not at all. Anxiety is a human response. When it becomes frequent or overwhelming, learning coping skills and getting support can make a real difference. Asking for help is a strength.

7. How treatment can help

Patient: Can anxiety get better?

Clinician: Yes. Cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, can help you notice worried thoughts, gradually face fears, and practice helpful responses. For children, caregivers may join in learning these skills. Sometimes medication is considered when symptoms are more severe or persistent; the choice depends on a careful evaluation and shared discussion.

Patient: What should I tell a grown-up or clinician?

Clinician: Tell them what your body feels like, when it happens, how long it lasts, what makes it better or worse, and whether it keeps you from things you want or need to do. You deserve to be listened to.

8. A simple take-home message

Clinician: Your body has an alarm system. Sometimes it sounds when there is no immediate danger. We can learn what triggers it, practice ways to settle it, and check for medical problems when symptoms need evaluation. You do not have to figure it out alone.

Patient: So the feelings are real, but I can learn what to do when they happen?

Clinician: Exactly. And we will take your concerns seriously every time.

Safety reminder

Seek emergency evaluation for severe or new chest pain, major breathing difficulty, fainting with concerning symptoms, or other potentially dangerous physical changes. Do not assume every physical symptom is caused by anxiety. This fictional dialogue is educational and does not document an actual assessment or intervention.

Authoritative references and further reading

1. **National Institute of Mental Health.** Anxiety Disorders. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders

2. **National Institute of Mental Health.** Panic Disorder: When Fear Overwhelms. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/panic-disorder-when-fear-overwhelms

3. **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** Anxiety and Depression in Children. https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/about/anxiety-and-depression-in-children.html

4. **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.** Anxiety Disorders Resource Center. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

5. **World Health Organization.** Anxiety Disorders. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/anxiety-disorders

6. **National Health Service.** Generalised Anxiety Disorder. https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/