

SMALL GROUP COUNSELING

Anxiety Support

Grades 4–8 • 8 Sessions

Psychoeducation	Cognitive Strategies
Relaxation Skills	Data Tracking Forms
Student Workbook (16 pp)	Group Agreement Template

A Comprehensive School Counseling Resource

UM Printables

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Introduction

Welcome to **Small Group Counseling: Anxiety Support**, a comprehensive 8-session curriculum designed for students in grades 4–8 who experience mild to moderate anxiety. This resource provides everything you need to facilitate an effective, evidence-informed small group that helps students understand their anxiety, develop coping strategies, and build confidence in managing worried thoughts and physical symptoms.

Design Philosophy: This curriculum integrates cognitive-behavioral techniques, mindfulness practices, and psychoeducation in a developmentally appropriate format. Sessions balance structured activities with opportunities for peer connection and personal reflection, honoring the unique needs of upper elementary and middle school students.

How to Use This Resource

Group Size and Composition

Ideal group size is 4–8 students. Consider developmental level when forming groups — grades 4–5 and grades 6–8 may benefit from separate groups. Aim for a mix of students who can serve as positive peer models while maintaining a safe, non-competitive environment.

Session Structure

Each 40–50 minute session follows a consistent structure to provide predictability and safety for anxious students:

- **Check-In (5 min):** Brief mood check and review of between-session practice
- **Warm-Up Activity (5–8 min):** Engaging intro activity connected to session theme
- **Core Activity (15–20 min):** Main psychoeducational or skill-building content
- **Practice/Application (8–10 min):** Guided practice of new skill or strategy
- **Closing and Preview (5 min):** Review, preview next session, and brief closing ritual

General Materials

Each session lists specific materials. The following are recommended throughout:

- Student workbooks (one per student — print from Section 3)
- Pencils, colored pencils, or markers
- Chart paper and markers for group activities
- A comfortable, private meeting space
- Timer (phone or visual timer)
- Tissue box and fidget tools (optional but recommended)

Facilitator Tips

- **Normalize anxiety:** Emphasize that everyone experiences worry sometimes — it is a normal human emotion that can be managed.
- **Model vulnerability:** Share age-appropriate examples of times you felt nervous and how you coped.
- **Pace yourself:** If students need more time on a concept, it is okay to extend an activity across two sessions.
- **Monitor emotional safety:** Watch for signs of distress. Allow students to pass on sharing and offer private check-ins.
- **Celebrate progress:** Acknowledge even small steps. Avoid comparing students to one another.
- **Maintain confidentiality:** Reinforce the group agreement at the start of every session.
- **Communicate with families:** Send brief updates after Sessions 1, 4, and 8.

Theoretical Framework

This curriculum is grounded in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles, which are among the most well-researched and effective approaches for treating anxiety in children and adolescents. Key theoretical components include:

- **Psychoeducation:** Helping students understand what anxiety is, why it happens, and that it is a normal, manageable experience.
- **Cognitive Restructuring:** Teaching students to identify, evaluate, and challenge anxious or distorted thinking patterns.
- **Somatic Awareness:** Building students' ability to recognize the physical signs of anxiety in their bodies.
- **Relaxation Training:** Equipping students with evidence-based breathing and relaxation techniques.
- **Gradual Exposure:** Supporting students in gradually facing feared situations using their coping toolkit.
- **Social Support:** Leveraging the group format to reduce isolation and build peer encouragement.

Important Note: This curriculum is a psychoeducational support resource, not a substitute for therapeutic intervention. Students presenting with severe anxiety, self-harm ideation, or significant functional impairment should be referred to a licensed mental health professional. Always follow your district's referral protocols.

Session Overview at a Glance

Sess	Title	Core Focus	Key Skill
1	Understanding Anxiety	Psychoeducation	Anxiety is normal & manageable
2	My Anxiety Signals	Somatic awareness	Body scan & signal ID
3	Thinking-Feeling Connection	Cognitive awareness	Thoughts affect feelings
4	Challenging Worried Thoughts	Cognitive restructuring	Reality testing & reframing
5	Breathing & Relaxation	Relaxation training	Deep breathing, PMR, imagery
6	Building My Coping Toolkit	Skill integration	Personalized coping plan
7	Putting It All Together	Application & practice	Role-play & problem-solving
8	Celebration & Moving Forward	Review & termination	Graduation & maintenance

Referral Criteria Guide

Use this guide to identify students who would benefit from the Anxiety Support small group. Proper screening ensures the group is composed of students whose needs align with the curriculum's scope and intensity level.

Inclusion Criteria

Students should exhibit **three or more** of the following:

- Frequent worry about school performance, social situations, or everyday events
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches) with no identified medical cause, particularly before stressful events
- Avoidance of specific activities, subjects, or social situations due to fear or worry
- Difficulty concentrating because of anxious thoughts
- Reports of nervousness, fear, or feeling overwhelmed by the student or teacher observations
- Perfectionism that interferes with task completion or willingness to try new things
- Mild to moderate anxiety that does not require individual therapy as the primary intervention
- Willingness to participate in a group setting (assessed during screening)

Exclusion Criteria

Students presenting with any of the following should be referred to more appropriate services:

- Active suicidal ideation or self-harm behavior
- Severe anxiety resulting in school refusal or complete functional impairment
- Psychotic symptoms or reality-testing difficulties
- Conduct or behavior problems that would disrupt group process
- Current individual therapy for anxiety (coordinate with therapist before including)
- Inability to function in a group setting without one-on-one support

Screening Process

Follow these steps to screen potential group members:

1. **Teacher Referral:** Teachers complete a brief referral form identifying observed anxiety symptoms and their impact on the student's daily functioning.
2. **Review Records:** Check attendance, grades, discipline, and health office visits for patterns consistent with anxiety.
3. **Individual Screening Meeting:** Meet with the student for 10–15 minutes. Use open-ended questions to assess awareness of worry, willingness to participate, and group readiness.

SESSION 1

Understanding Anxiety

Theme: What Is It & Why Does It Happen?

Grade Level:	4–8	Duration:	40–50 minutes
Objectives:	Students will define anxiety, understand the fight-flight-freeze response, and recognize that anxiety is normal and manageable.		
Materials:	Student workbooks (pp. 1–2), chart paper, markers, group agreement template, pens/pencils		

1. Check-In (5 minutes)

Welcome students and introduce yourself. Explain that this is a special group where they will learn about worry and how to handle it. Emphasize that everyone was invited because they are capable of learning these skills.

- **Activity: Feelings Check.** Go around the circle. Each student shares their name and rates how they feel today on a scale of 1 (very calm) to 5 (very anxious/worried).

2. Warm-Up Activity: Stand Up If... (5–8 minutes)

Purpose: To normalize the experience of anxiety and help students see they are not alone.

Read the following statements aloud. Ask students to stand up (or raise their hand) if the statement is true for them:

- "You have ever felt nervous before a test."
- "You have ever worried about what someone thought of you."
- "You have ever felt butterflies in your stomach before a performance or game."
- "You have ever been afraid to try something new."
- "You have ever had a bad dream that worried you."

Facilitator Note: After the activity, point out that everyone stood up for at least one. Emphasize: *"Worry is completely normal. It means our brain is working! Today we will learn why it happens and how to handle it."*

3. Core Activity: The Alarm System (15–20 minutes)

Psychoeducation: What is Anxiety?

Explain anxiety using the **alarm system metaphor**:

- "Imagine your brain has a built-in alarm system, like a fire alarm. Its job is to keep you safe by alerting you to danger."
- "When the alarm goes off, your body gets ready to protect you. This is called the **fight, flight, or freeze** response."
- **Fight:** Standing your ground, getting angry or tense.
- **Flight:** Running away or avoiding the situation.
- **Freeze:** Feeling stuck, unable to move or think clearly.

Write **FIGHT • FLIGHT • FREEZE** on chart paper. Ask students for examples of each from their own lives (e.g., wanting to run out of the room before a presentation = flight).

Key Point: Sometimes our alarm system goes off even when there is no real danger—like a false alarm. We might feel like we are in danger when we are just taking a test or talking to a new friend. That is what we call anxiety. Our goal in this group is to learn how to turn down the alarm when it is a false alarm.

4. Practice & Application: Group Agreement & Workbook (8–10 minutes)

Group Agreement: Review the Group Agreement template (from Section 1). Read each rule aloud. Ask if anyone wants to add a rule. Have every student sign the agreement.

Workbook Introduction: Distribute student workbooks. Have students write their name on the cover and complete **Page 1** ("What Does Anxiety Mean to Me?").

5. Closing & Preview (5 minutes)

- **Review:** Ask, "What is one thing you learned about the alarm system today?"
- **Preview:** "Next week, we will learn about how our bodies tell us when the alarm is going off."
- **Closing Ritual:** Group high-five or thumbs-up. Remind students of the next meeting day/time.

SESSION 3

The Thinking-Feeling Connection

Theme: How Thoughts Influence Feelings

Grade Level:	4–8	Duration:	40–50 minutes
Objectives:	Students will understand the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors using the cognitive triangle.		
Materials:	Student workbooks (pp. 5–6), chart paper, markers, scenario cards (prepared by counselor)		

1. Check-In (5 minutes)

- **Feelings Check:** Rate anxiety 1–5.
- **Review:** Ask, "Who noticed any body signals this week when they felt worried?"

2. Warm-Up Activity: The Invisible Scene (5 minutes)

Read a short scenario: *"You are walking down the hallway and see your best friend walking toward you. Instead of saying hi, your friend walks right past you without looking at you."*

Ask: "How would you feel? What would you do?"

Students will likely give different answers (e.g., sad, angry, confused; ignore them, ask what's wrong).

Point: The situation is the same, but our feelings and actions change based on what we *think* happened. That is the thinking-feeling connection!

3. Core Activity: The Cognitive Triangle (15–20 minutes)

Introduce the Triangle: Draw a large triangle on chart paper. Label the corners: **Thoughts** (top), **Feelings** (bottom left), **Behaviors** (bottom right).

Explain that these three things are always connected:

- What we **think** affects how we **feel**.
- How we **feel** affects what we **do** (behavior).
- What we **do** can reinforce what we **think**.

Scenario	Anxious Thought	Feeling	Behavior
Teacher hands out a pop quiz	"I'm going to fail!"	Panicked, scared	Mind goes blank, can't focus
Invited to a birthday party	"No one will talk to me."	Nervous, sad	Decide not to go

Hear a loud noise in the hall	"Something bad is happening!"	Terrified, alert	Freeze in place
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Key Point: Anxiety often starts with a "worried thought." If we can change the thought, we can change how we feel and what we do. That is what we will start practicing next time!

4. Practice & Application: Triangle Worksheet (8–10 minutes)

Students turn to **Pages 5–6** in their workbooks ("The Thinking-Feeling Connection").

Walk them through the first example on page 5 together. Then, ask them to fill in the triangle on page 6 with a personal example of a time they felt worried, what they thought, and what they did.

5. Closing & Preview (5 minutes)

- **Share:** Volunteers share their personal triangle.
- **Preview:** "Today we saw how thoughts affect feelings. Next week, we become Thought Detectives—learning how to investigate our worried thoughts and see if they are really true!"
- **Closing Ritual:** Group high-five.

SESSION 5

Breathing & Relaxation Techniques

Theme: Calming the Alarm System

Grade Level:	4–8	Duration:	40–50 minutes
Objectives:	Students will learn and practice three relaxation techniques: deep belly breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery.		
Materials:	Student workbooks (pp. 9–10), chart paper, markers, calm music (optional), small foam balls or stress balls (optional)		

1. Check-In (5 minutes)

- **Feelings Check:** Rate anxiety 1–5.
- **Review:** Ask, "Who used their Thought Detective skills this week? Did anyone catch a worried thought and change it?"

2. Warm-Up Activity: The Breathing Ball (5 minutes)

If you have a Hoberman sphere (expanding ball), use it to demonstrate breathing. If not, use your hands: place them together and slowly expand them like a growing bubble as you inhale, then bring them back together as you exhale.

Have the group practice 3 slow breaths together, matching the expanding and contracting motion.

3. Core Activity: Relaxation Station (15–20 minutes)

Explain: *"Last week we learned how to change our thoughts. Today, we are going to learn how to change what our body is doing. When the alarm goes off, our body gets tense and our breathing gets fast. We can turn the alarm down by relaxing our body."*

Technique 1: Belly Breathing (Deep Breathing)

Have students sit up straight, feet on the floor. Instruct them to place one hand on their belly and one on their chest.

- Breathe in slowly through the nose for 4 counts (belly should rise like a balloon).
- Hold for 1–2 counts.
- Breathe out slowly through the mouth for 6 counts (belly should fall).
- Repeat 5 times.

Technique 2: Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Explain that anxiety makes our muscles tight. We can trick our brain into relaxing by first tightening muscles on purpose, then letting them go.

Lead the group through these exercises (hold tension for 5 seconds, release for 10 seconds):

- **Lemon Squeeze:** Squeeze hands into tight fists like squeezing a lemon. Release and let fingers float.
- **Shoulder Ears:** Shrug shoulders up to the ears. Drop them down and let them hang loose.
- **Turtle Shell:** Pull head down into shoulders like a turtle. Release and let the neck be long.
- **Board Body:** Make legs and stomach tight like a wooden board. Release and let them be soft like noodles.

Technique 3: Guided Imagery (Safe Place)

Have students close their eyes (or look at a soft spot on the floor). Read the following slowly in a calm voice:

"Imagine a place where you feel completely safe and calm. It might be a beach, a forest, your room, or a place you make up. Look around in your mind. What do you see? What colors are there? Listen carefully. What sounds do you hear? Feel the air on your skin. Is it warm or cool? Notice how relaxed your body feels in this safe place. Take one more deep breath. When you are ready, open your eyes."

Key Point: Just like Thought Detective takes practice, relaxation takes practice. The more you do it when you are calm, the easier it is to use when you are anxious.

4. Practice & Application: My Relaxation Menu (8–10 minutes)

Direct students to **Pages 9–10** in their workbooks.

- On **Page 9**, students write down the steps for Belly Breathing.
- On **Page 10** ("My Relaxation Menu"), students check off which techniques they liked best and draw or describe their Safe Place.

5. Closing & Preview (5 minutes)

- **Share:** Which relaxation technique was your favorite?
- **Between-Session Practice:** Challenge students to do Belly Breathing once every night before bed.
- **Preview:** "Next week, we will put all of our skills together into a toolkit you can carry with you anywhere!"
- **Closing Ritual:** Group deep breath in, sigh out together.

SESSION 7

Putting It All Together

Theme: Practice & Role-Play

Grade Level:	4–8	Duration:	40–50 minutes
Objectives:	Students will apply their coping toolkit to anxiety-provoking scenarios through role-play and problem-solving.		
Materials:	Student workbooks (pp. 13–14), scenario cards (prepared by counselor), props for role-play (optional)		

1. Check-In (5 minutes)

- **Feelings Check:** Rate anxiety 1–5.
- **Review:** Ask, "Who used their Coping Card this week? How did it remind you of your tools?"

2. Warm-Up Activity: "I Can" Statements (5 minutes)

Go around the circle. Each student completes the sentence: "*When I feel anxious, I can...*" (e.g., take deep breaths, challenge my worried thoughts, imagine my safe place).

Purpose: To build self-efficacy and verbally rehearse coping strategies.

3. Core Activity: Scenario Role-Play (15–20 minutes)

Explain that today is like a fire drill for our anxiety tools. We practice when the "fire" is small so we are ready if it gets bigger.

Divide students into pairs or triads. Give each group a scenario card. They will act out the scenario twice: once WITHOUT coping tools, and once WITH coping tools.

Scenario	Without Tools (Round 1)	With Tools (Round 2)
You have to give a presentation in front of the class tomorrow.	Think: "I'll mess up." Do: Avoid practicing, feel sick.	Think: "I practiced, I'll do my best." Do: Belly breathe 3 times, practice once more.
You get invited to sit at a new table at lunch, but you don't know anyone there well.	Think: "They won't talk to me." Do: Eat lunch in the bathroom or alone.	Think: "I can say hi and listen." Do: PMR under the table, walk over and sit down.
You see a big assignment on the board and it's due in two days.	Think: "I can't do this!" Do: Stare at the paper, don't start.	Think: "I'll break it into steps." Do: Write down step one, take a deep breath.

Facilitator Note: If students are shy to role-play, the counselor can play the "anxious student" and ask the group to coach them on what tools to use. This is highly effective and reduces pressure.

4. Practice & Application: My Plan (8–10 minutes)

Direct students to **Pages 13–14** in their workbooks.

- On **Page 13** ("Scenario Planner"), students write down an upcoming situation that might make them anxious and plan exactly which Thought Tool and Body Tool they will use.
- On **Page 14** ("My Support Team"), students identify trusted adults and friends they can go to for help when their toolkit is not quite enough.

5. Closing & Preview (5 minutes)

- **Share:** One tool you definitely want to use this week.
- **Preview:** "Next week is our FINAL session! We are going to celebrate everything we've learned and have a graduation ceremony!"
- **Closing Ritual:** Group high-five.

Page 6: My Cognitive Triangle

Think of a time you felt worried. Fill in your own triangle.

My Scenario:

	MY THOUGHT	
MY FEELING		MY BEHAVIOR

Page 7: Thought Detective Practice

Anxious thoughts are often opinions disguised as facts. Let's investigate them using the 3 Thought Detective questions!

My Worried Thought:

1. What is the evidence that this thought is TRUE?

2. What is the evidence that this thought might NOT be true?

3. What would I tell a friend who had this thought?

Page 8: My New Thought

After investigating, it's time to come up with a new, realistic thought. This isn't about being fake positive—it's about finding the truth!

Remember: Just because I think it, doesn't mean it's true!

My Old Worried Thought:

My New Realistic Thought:

How does the new thought make you feel compared to the old one?

SECTION 4

Data & Assessment

Tracking your group data is essential for evaluating student progress and demonstrating the effectiveness of your school counseling program. Use the following forms to collect and organize your data for the Anxiety Support group.

Session-by-Session Data Tracking Form

Use this form to track attendance, engagement, and brief session notes for each group member. This allows you to monitor patterns and identify students who may need additional support.

Tracking Key:

Attendance: P = Present, A = Absent, L = Late

Engagement: + = Highly engaged, ~ = Somewhat engaged, - = Disengaged

Anxiety Rating: Record student's self-reported 1-5 rating if collected at check-in.

Student Name	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	Notes
Group Notes									

Pre/Mid/Post Anxiety Rating Tracker

Administer a brief anxiety rating (1–5 scale) during Sessions 1 (Pre), 4 (Mid), and 8 (Post). Use this form to record and compare scores, allowing you to measure student growth and program effectiveness.

Student Name	Pre-Group Rating (S1)	Mid-Group Rating (S4)	Post-Group Rating (S8)	Progress / Observations

ASCA National Model Alignment: This data collection aligns with the ASCA National Model's focus on examining student data to demonstrate the impact of the school counseling program on student achievement and behavior. Use this data for your results reports!

CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT

This is to certify that

has successfully completed the 8-session
Anxiety Support Small Group

and has demonstrated commitment to learning
strategies to understand and manage anxiety.

Date: _____

Counselor: _____

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Thank You!

Thank you for purchasing this **Anxiety Support Small Group Curriculum**! I am dedicated to creating high-quality, evidence-based resources that make your role as a school counselor more manageable and impactful.

Your Feedback Matters!

If you found this resource helpful, I would be incredibly grateful if you would take a moment to leave a review on Teachers Pay Teachers. Your feedback not only helps me improve my resources, but it also helps other counselors find quality materials for their students.

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Warmly,

UM Printables