

*Perspectives on contributing factors to youth anxiety and recommendations for decreasing anxiety for youth.*

# Youth Anxiety Review

September 2020



*“Don’t try to fix us. Just listen.  
Even when you’re not talking, there’s something about being  
there and sitting with us.”*

*“Just be a presence.”*

*– High School student*

# Thank You

To the *Youth Anxiety Workgroup* and *Program Advisory Council* members for their vision and support of this project.

To the *adult key informants* who took the time to share their care and knowledge.

To the *youth* who shared their stories, perspectives, and recommendations.

We are listening.



For questions about this project, please contact:

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For a copy of this report, please visit: [www.amplifyct.org](http://www.amplifyct.org).

*“It would be nice if we took more time to establish a culture that goes beyond being measured. No one grades you on being a good friend – isn’t that an important as part of development?”*

-Youth focus group participant

### ***Review Process***

Feedback for this report was obtained via surveys (n=89), focus groups, and key informant interviews with youth and adults (8). The survey tools were designed and distributed throughout the region. In addition to the survey, focus groups and key informant interviews were convened and facilitated by Amplify staff. The focus groups and interviews served as a mechanism to capture qualitative information and viewpoints. The key informant interview and youth focus group sessions incorporated standardized questions that sought to identify 1) contributing factors to youth anxiety and 2) potential strategies and recommendations for decreasing anxiety for youth.

Focus groups and interviews included either youth or adults. All youth focus group participants were in high school and the lion’s share of youth survey participants were between the ages of 11 to 18 years old (95%) with 5% of responses coming from young adults 21 years old or older. Adult key informants included parents and grandparents, educators and school administrators, youth service bureaus, youth pastors and mentors, behavioral health providers, community-based collaborative and prevention coalition representatives, juvenile justice leads, and local elected officials. A higher proportion of survey respondents were females (adults 89%; youth 86%) with focus groups and interviews capturing the male perspective (approximately 40%). In terms of ethnic, racial, and cultural perspectives, focus groups and key informant interviews included youth and adults from different cultural and racial backgrounds. The youth survey included youth that identified as Asian/Pacific Islanders (48%), White/Caucasian (33%), Black/African American (10%), Hispanic/Latino (5%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (5%) while the interviews and focus groups reflected more diversity.



### ***Considerations due to COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique challenge and opportunity to connect with young people and adults about the topic of anxiety. Anxiety has become normalized for us more than

any other time in recent history, and the Youth Anxiety Review provided a virtual platform for people to connect about their feelings, concerns, observations, and ideas in a way that previously may have been more stigmatized. According to the Institute for Disease Modeling, over the first 58 days of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were an estimated 3.4 million total searches related to severe acute anxiety in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Other studies have started to examine the mental health implications of COVID-19, including a study recently conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that found 40% of U.S. adults reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse in late June 2020. The CDC found that nearly a third of respondents experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression in the previous 30 days. The study, which polled 5,412 people online, found that an alarming 25% of people between 18 and 24 years old reported seriously considering suicide in the 30 days before completing the survey. The worst mental health outcomes were among young people, racial and ethnic minorities, essential workers and unpaid adult caregivers, the CDC said.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the project, youth shared that the uncertainty that accompanies the pandemic has been worrisome for them. They spoke to their concern for the adults in their lives, especially grandparents and senior citizens. Youth expressed their grief from the loss of in-person school and extra-curricular activities (i.e. sports, clubs) while a smaller number of youth shared that social distancing actually helped to decrease their stress because it separated them from the social pressure that stems from feeling constantly assessed academically or socially. For parents and guardians, they shared that the pandemic “leveled the playing field for the pressure to perform.” Adults talked about being stressed about homeschooling their children and that “school performance anxiety has flip-flopped.” Visuals of the constant feed of Facebook posts from “friends” who became overnight “Rockstar parent-teachers” broadcasting their exceptional ability to schedule and teach at the drop of dime was overwhelming, thus shifting the weight of the pressure to achieve from the shoulders of school-age children to the adults in the home.

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<sup>1</sup> Ayers JW, Leas EC, Johnson DC, et al. Internet Searches for Acute Anxiety During the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA Intern Med.* Published online August 24, 2020. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.3305

<sup>2</sup> Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1049–1057. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>external icon

### Youth Perspective

Youth focus groups and survey responses proved to serve as an invaluable resource, revealing vital information about how youth view worry, stress, and anxiety in their own life and in the lives of their peers. Clear themes emerged about what they feel is causing increased anxiety and how this can manifest both physically and mentally. Additionally, youth reported strategies they use to alleviate their stress symptoms and spoke candidly about the mechanisms they rely on to cope with anxiety.

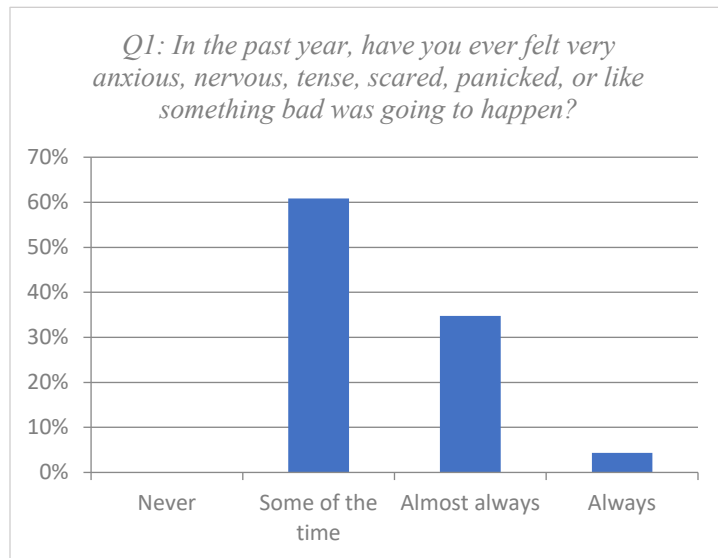
Overall, our youth are strong and resilient young people! They are resourceful and curious, and eager to share their thoughts and perspectives. They advocate for themselves and their peers. They desire to be heard and understood. Through the youth anxiety review, it was clear that youth feel they are experiencing stress often and regardless of the pandemic. According to the American



Psychological Association, “*There’s a fine line between stress and anxiety.*” Both are emotional responses, but *stress* is typically caused by an external trigger. The trigger can be short-term, such as a deadline or a fight with a loved one or long-term, such as poverty, discrimination, and chronic illness. People under stress experience mental and physical symptoms, such as irritability, anger, fatigue, muscle pain, digestive troubles and difficulty sleeping. *Anxiety*, on the other hand, is defined by persistent, excessive worries that do not go away even in the absence of a stressor.<sup>3</sup> For youth that experience, “generalized anxiety,” they can experience excessive anxiety about multiple areas of their lives (family, school, social situations, safety), resulting in insomnia, loss of interest, or irritability. According to the youth that we spoke with, they feel there is heightened anxiety among their peers because they are actively navigating stress or worry on a routine basis and it goes unresolved or perpetuates. The most common reasons that lead to youth anxiety, according to them, include uncertainty or fear of the unknown and the pressure to perform.

<sup>3</sup> (American Psychological Association. (2019, October 28). *What’s the difference between stress and anxiety?* <http://www.apa.org/topics/stress-anxiety-difference>)

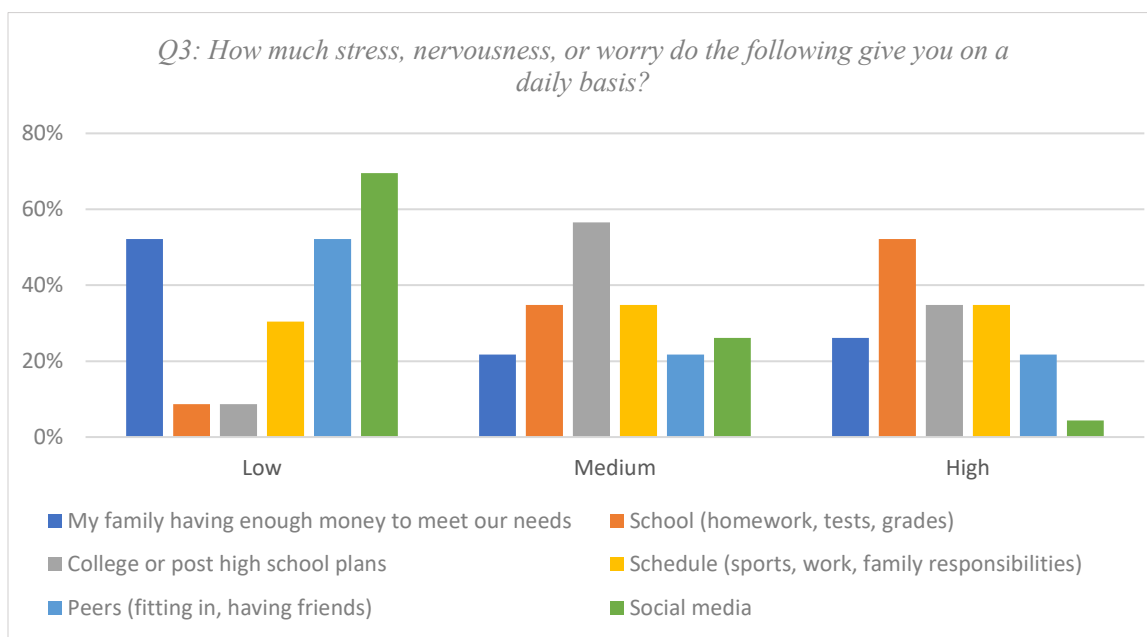
School climate, social media, and stigma were cited as contributing factors; however, school, and social media are both positive and negative influences.



Among youth surveyed, 100% indicated they experienced “feeling anxious, nervous, tense, scared, panicked, or like something bad was going to happen”. Over a third (39%) described feeling this way “almost always” or “always” with the remaining 61% saying it was at least “some of the time.” The vast majority of youth (96%) reported that “feelings of anxiety or nervousness affect or make things

difficult in school work, relationships, or in other areas of life” at least “some of the time,” with 22% feeling this way “almost always” or “always.”

Youth surveyed rank “school (homework, tests, grades, college or post high school plans)”, and “schedule (sports, work, family responsibilities)” as the prevailing contributors to daily stress, nervousness, and worry; while they ranked “social media” as a less frequent reason.



Discussions with youth aligned with the survey results and indicated that academic performance (homework, tests, and grades) is causing significant stress for youth, especially those students who are unsure of their college or post high-school plans. They shared that students feel *“too much is happening at once”* at school and that the overall pressure to perform is the leading stressor. In addition, some youth are walking into a school system every day where the pressure is high and the resources at home are low. Yet, it was also shared that school may be the safest place they know. This perspective on school safety was reflected in the survey with over 90% of youth reporting that they feel safe at school.

*“Young people are getting the message early on that their self-worth is based on achievements.”*  
-Dr. Alicia Farrell

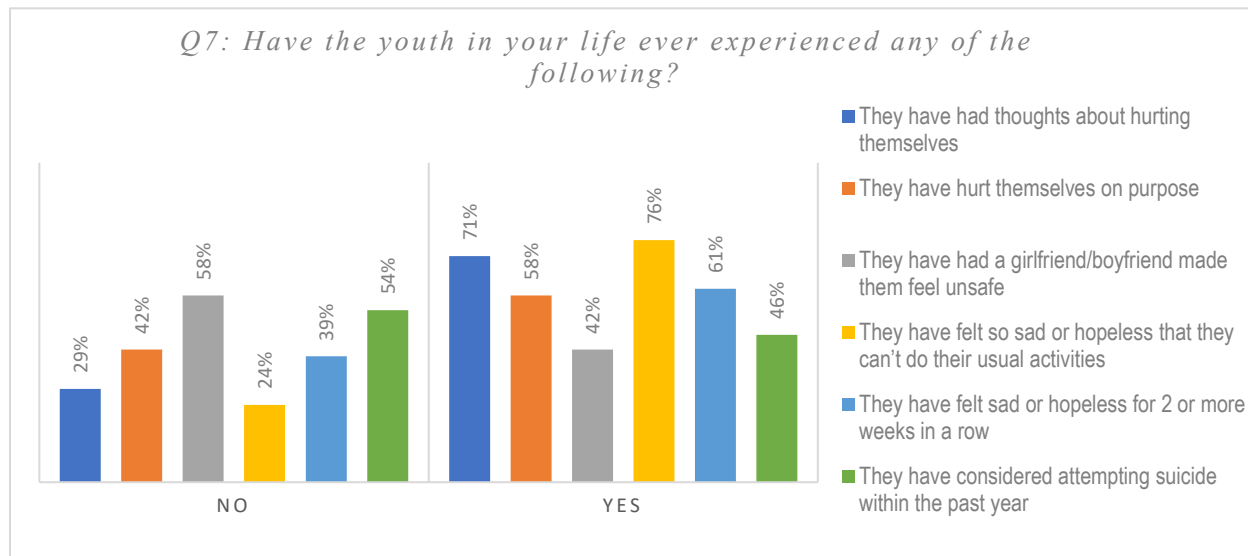
Overall, the prevailing attitude among youth was that school climate matters to their health and well-being. It is a place for connecting with their friends, participating in extra-curricular activities, and building healthy relationships with trusted adults. However, the problem they encounter is that many of the things that bring them joy, are the very things they feel are becoming increasingly measured and promoted as competition rather than celebrated as part of their adolescent journey. As one youth told us, *“Things that are supposed to be fun are now all performance-based.”* And another youth revealed, *“School and social activities aren’t the problem. The problem is that many of the things that make us happy are constantly compared or graded.”*

In terms of supports, youth indicate that they seek support from their *“friends, parents/guardians, schools, and/or other trusted adults.”* A little more than half of youth surveyed responded that they *“have spoken to a trusted adult about stress, nervousness, or worry”* (56%) yet when asked specifically about who they would seek support from if they *“had a problem in your life,”* they would more likely seek support from friends. This was also clear in focus groups, that even though they may turn to their parents or another trusted adult when they are stressed, they are also likely to turn to a friend or the internet for guidance. And for some of our most vulnerable youth, they avoided support from an adult altogether out of fear that seeking help will disrupt their foster care placement or *“get their family in trouble.”*

Youth also referenced animals and the pets in their lives as important supports to them, serving as both an emotional support and offering *“judge-free”* comfort during times of need. This is timely feedback as some school systems are incorporating animals into their school climate as a routine







**Adult Perspective:**

Feedback from adults reveal they are concerned for the youth in their lives and they are actively seeking resources to support them. 98% of adults reported that the youth in their life, in the past year, showed signs of *“being very anxious, nervous, tense, scared, panicked, or like something bad was going to happen”* with 44% reporting that youth exhibited these signs *“Almost Always”* or *“Always.”*

Pertaining to thoughts and behaviors, three quarters (76%) of adults surveyed indicated that the youth in their lives *“have felt so sad or hopeless that they could not participate in usual activities”* with 61% adults reporting youth *“have felt sad or hopeless for more than 2 weeks in a row.”* What’s more, 71% of adults reported that youth *“had thoughts of hurting themselves,”* more than half (58%) reported that *“youth hurt themselves on purpose,”* and just under half (47%) reported that the youth in their life *“have considered suicide within the past year.”* Again, given the sample size and timing of the survey occurring during a pandemic, further investigation of these topics including the impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health should be considered.

Relevant to seeking support, most adults reported (91%) that youth have talked to a trusted adult about their *stress, nervousness, or worry*. Parents expressed that the youth in their life may come to them for support, but they worry youth are seeking support from others or the internet. Most adults felt that youth are most likely to seek support from their friends before a parent/guardian. On a positive note, interviews with school and youth services staff indicated that they hear from students friends *“coming down the hall to tell us about their friend who needs help,”* meaning peers are serving as a key resource, looking out for one another’s well-being. School and youth

services staff also spoke about the value of the time it takes to become a trusted adult to the youth around them. One school administrator spoke to the importance of connection with youth, *“The biggest thing for them is consistent and ongoing follow-up and check-in. Because they will remember if you’re just a ‘drive-through’ support. Take the time to invest in them because kids go to who they have a connection with.”*

### *Social media and technology*

Adults are concerned about social media and its impact on the youth in their lives. More than two-thirds of adults surveyed felt that youth spend “a lot” of time on social media (71%) and/or playing electronic games (68%) with mixed responses about the extent to which they feel these are helpful.

Youth shared that social media serves as a resource and a stressor that the adults in their lives do



not understand: *“Adults don’t understand that things are different for us than it was for them. We have everything going on and social media to deal with.”*

The youth we spoke with cited multiple examples illustrating the pros and cons of social media:

*“I feel like the stress of friend groups...it’s all online and so different than how they grew up.”*

*“Social media gives power to everyone. Cyberbullying is a big thing.”*

*“We’re supposed to be able to do more with technology, but it just turned into more workload.”*

*“There are more social standards that people put on each other based on how many ‘likes’ you get. Everyone wants to put out the best version of themselves like they’re living this extraordinary life.”*

*“They show what they think other people want to see. How do you determine what’s real versus what isn’t?”*

*“Social media can be used for good. Look at all the doctors posting all the education about the coronavirus!”*

*“I’ve seen good apps that help me with meditation and calming activities that I find helpful and interesting.”*

*“I find that the kids that ride their bikes around town and mess around in the woods, I don’t see those kids in my office. Bad things might happen, and it rolls right off them. It’s the kids who are more sheltered that I see. You can’t really know how you stand with your peers when you’re only communicating via snapchat.”*

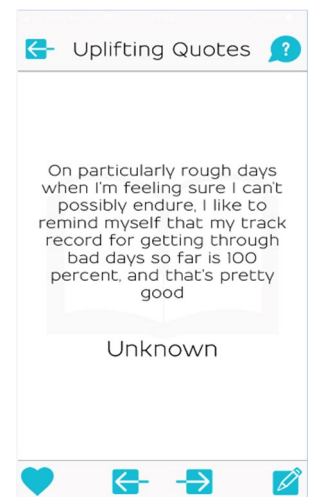
– Middle School administrator

### Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented circumstance for us to feel anxiety collectively in ways that many people face alone on any “normal” day. It will be important to embrace this as an opportunity to inform positive change for those who battle anxiety regardless of the pandemic. For many of us, the feelings of panic will resolve with the defeat of the virus, leaving us with the lived experience of dealing with a mental health challenge. This lived experience awards us with a responsibility to remember how this pandemic made people feel, and to better support others, including young people, in their battle to conquer anxiety.

*The following recommendations came from the youth and adults we spoke with during this project in addition to expert resources that informed the review:*

1. Increase school mental health resources including those that are trauma-informed and/or that incorporate less traditional approaches to stress relief such as yoga, art/music, and animal-assisted therapy. School staff can become better informed about who their local supports can be.
2. Improve collaboration with local youth services or behavioral health providers and pediatricians to provide more training and support to schools (e.g. Gizmo curriculum, Second Steps, Strong Start, etc.)
3. Improve school climate by offering staffed spaces that can serve as calming areas or “judge-free” zones to connect and regroup. Make this a priority as part of School Climate (safe space) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)/Wellbeing plans and activities.
4. Increase family engagement and prevention strategies for schools, families, and pediatricians to help inform parents/guardians about the signs and symptoms of anxiety and to promote self-care practices. Given the current fiscal climate, focus on low-cost/no-cost strategies.
5. Maintain or increase access to telehealth services for youth to eliminate barriers to accessing care (i.e. can occur during the school day, decreases no-show rate, does not require transportation). Schools can offer a safe space and include this as part of School Climate (safe space) and/or Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)/Wellbeing efforts.
6. Continue youth focus groups/surveys and start the conversation with youth sooner! Do not wait until Middle or High School to talk about mental wellness (i.e. Gizmo).
7. Connect with behavioral health providers trained in evidence-based practices such as Modular Approach to Therapy for Children (MATCH), Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Cognitive Behavioral



Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which can help youth and adults to quickly identify and cope with anxiety.

8. Increase peer-leadership opportunities with high school and middle school students geared toward mental health and substance use (i.e. plan events, community education). For example, allow peer leaders to select, introduce and discuss a mental health issue for a brief PA announcement in High Schools or an after school club that offers 20-30 min. of education on specific topics (e.g. anxiety, depression, trauma, eating disorder, substance use).
9. Increase access to non-clinical support and care services to all youth regardless of system involvement, such as Therapeutic Support Services (currently must be DCF-involved).
10. Promote and incorporate times of silence and mindfulness exercises in school/home.
11. Normalize stressful situations for youth so that they understand that their feelings make sense given the situations they encounter. And remain sensitive to the fact that traumatic situations may be normalized (i.e. divorce, exposure to violence in person or media).
12. Set specific times during the day and in the evening/bedtime to turn technology off and unplug from social media and negative messaging. Model/practice this at school.
13. Weave in positive ways for youth to use social media (i.e. wellness, mental health, mediation apps). See resources below to get started.
14. Get outside! Incorporate more outdoor learning in schools, walk more, and find more opportunities to breathe fresh air throughout the day.
15. Increase mental health screening in schools and during pediatric primary care provider (PCP) appointments and help schools/PCPs become familiar with referral sources.
16. Shift and increase the focus to positive messaging and celebration of youths' efforts and successes rather than their shortfalls or failures.
17. Survey youth on what brings them joy, confidence, and what makes them feel most successful. Shift the focus from the negative to the positive.

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*“It’s comforting that you’re asking about this. Thank you for asking us about this and listening to our points of view. And knowing that you’re going to use it to help.”*  
*-High School student*

## Resources

- ✚ Connecticut Children's - Health Information Library for Kids, Teens and Parents: <https://www.connecticutchildrens.org/health-library/>
- ✚ Child Health Development Institute: <https://www.chdi.org/>
- ✚ Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/>
- ✚ Facts for Families, Anxiety and Children, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: [https://www.aacap.org//AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Anxious-Child-047.aspx](https://www.aacap.org//AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Anxious-Child-047.aspx)
- ✚ FREE online learning experience to bring Trauma-Informed Care into the post-COVID-19 school environment: <https://sptsusa.org/>
- ✚ UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health: <https://csch.uconn.edu/#>

### Mobile Apps:

- ✚ **Abide** - faith-based mobile app that provides meditations for stress, anxiety, sleep, and many other wellness topics. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))
- ✚ **What's Up**: Uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) methods to help cope with depression, anxiety, stress, and anger. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))
- ✚ **MindShift** - Designed specifically for teens and young adults with anxiety. Stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

### Videos:

- ✚ Fight, Flight, or Freeze – *Anxiety Explained for Kids* [https://youtu.be/FfSbWc3O\\_5M](https://youtu.be/FfSbWc3O_5M)
- ✚ Fight, Flight, or Freeze – *Anxiety Explained for Teens* <https://youtu.be/rpolpKTWrp4>
- ✚ When Anxious Children Become Anxious Adolescents: [https://youtu.be/DyhA6\\_wCWqQ](https://youtu.be/DyhA6_wCWqQ)
- ✚ How Hanna Got Happy: <https://childmind.org/story/how-hannah-got-happy-dbt/>

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Date:	
Name of Contact Person or Coordinator:	
Email:	
Location:	
Names / Organization of Facilitators:	
Ages or grades of Youth Participating:	
Description of Youth Group Participating or Recruitment Methods: (Example: SADD youth plus other engaged for community service hours by Youth Serving Staff)	

**Behavioral Health Disparity Status of Participating Youth:** (check all that apply)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low or limited economic opportunities       | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a history of ACEs or trauma              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> English as second language                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Are experiencing a mental health problem      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are recent immigrants or refugees           | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a history of anxiety                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are members of a religious minority         | <input type="checkbox"/> Are homeless or have experienced homelessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are LGBTQ                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Have physical limitations                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are involved in the juvenile justice system |  |

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

**Introduction:** Thank you all for joining us today my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am here with Amplify, Inc. Today we are hoping to learn more about youth feelings as they relate to stress, worry or nervousness. The information you provide us will **help us create plans to better support youth** in the prevention or management of these feelings.

As we ask questions today, you do not need to provide information about yourself or your own experience unless you feel comfortable doing so. You may choose to comment on what you see with your peers, without naming names, of course. Your answers will not be traced back to you, what you say in this room will be noted but not connected with your name. If you say something that indicates you may hurt yourself or others, we will have to share that information in order to keep you safe.

1. Do you or your peers experience worry or nervousness?
2. What causes you or your peers to worry or be nervous?
3. Have you been in or observed situations with peers where feelings of worry or nervousness got in the way of being happy, doing things you/they want to do or things you/they have to do, such as spending time with friends or family, getting to or staying at school or being part of sports or other activities? Can you describe these situations?
4. What are things youth do when they are very worried or stressed to feel better?
5. Where or with whom do youth seek help from when they are very stressed or worried? Why or why not?
6. What is something you want adults to know about youth worries?
7. Is there anything else related to youth worries that you wish to share today?
8. Is there anything that you hope happens in your school or community based on the information that was collected today?
9. What is one thing you will do today or in the next few days to care for yourself?

**Conclusion:** Thank you so much for your time and feedback! We will be drafting a report with the information that you shared, and we can share the results of this report with you if you give us your email address.

YOUTH ANXIETY PROJECT – ADULT KEY INFORMANT QUESTIONS

Date:	
Name of Contact Person or Coordinator:	
Email:	
Location:	
Names / Organization of Facilitators:	
Brief Description of Key Informants Participating:	

What issues are facing the youth in your life? (examples)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low or limited economic opportunities       | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a history of ACEs or trauma              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> English as second language                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Are experiencing a mental health problem      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are recent immigrants or refugees           | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a history of anxiety                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are members of a religious minority         | <input type="checkbox"/> Are homeless or have experienced homelessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are LGBTQ                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Have physical limitation                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are involved in the juvenile justice system |  |

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Introduction:**

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As we ask questions today, you **do not need to provide information about yourself** or your own experience unless you feel comfortable doing so. You may choose to comment on what you see with your peers, without naming names, of course.

Your answers will not be traced back to you, what you say in this room will be noted but not connected with your name. If you say something that indicates you may hurt yourself or others, we will have to share that information in order to keep you safe.

1. How can you tell when something is bothering your youth? In what ways do you see anxiety in youth?
  - a. How does this manifest physically/mentally?
  - b. Does this worry ever look or feel like anger or irritation? (i.e. What does this look like? etc.)
2. What do you believe are the top contributors to youth anxiety? What causes youth in your life to worry or be nervous? (i.e. school/grades, home life/social life, online/social media, community?)
3. Have you been in or observed situations with youth where feelings of worry or nervousness got in the way of being happy, doing things you/they want to do? (i.e. spending time with friends or family, getting to school or sports, etc.)
4. When youth are very worried or stressed, what do they do to feel better?
5. How do you help your youth when they feel anxious? Who else do they go to for help? Why? (i.e. parents, teachers, etc.)
6. What do you think would help alleviate youth anxiety?
7. Do you have ideas or suggestions on how to address youth anxiety?
8. What is something YOU would like to know about youth worries?
9. Is there anything else related to youth worries that you wish to share today?
10. Is there anything that you hope happens in your school or community based on the information that was collected today?

**Conclusion:** Thank you so much for your time and feedback! We will be drafting a report with the information that you shared, and we can share the results of this report with you if you give us your email address.