A SMALL-GROUP COUNSELING RESOURCE

30-MINUTE GROUPS: ANXIETY MANAGEMENT FOR GIFTED MINDS

Five ASCA-Aligned Sessions for Advanced Learners, Grades 3–8

WHAT THIS IS

Five self-contained, 30-minute small-group sessions on anxiety management, written for the way worry tends to show up in gifted students: articulate, reasoned-sounding, and often tangled up with identity and perfectionism. Each includes ASCA standards alignment, a counselor note on the gifted-specific angle, a check-in, discussion hook, main activity, and closing commitment.

A Note on Scope

These sessions build general coping skills for everyday worry, perfectionism, and stress — they are psychoeducational, not clinical treatment. If a student shows signs of persistent, significant distress, please refer through your school's mental health referral pathway rather than relying on this resource alone.

Why Anxiety Groups for Gifted Students?

Anxiety in gifted students frequently hides in plain sight because it's articulate. A student who can explain, in impressively logical detail, exactly why a situation is dangerous or why a mistake will be catastrophic can look like they're reasoning calmly — when their body is actually in full alarm. Perfectionism, a heightened sense of responsibility, and identity built around achievement ("being the smart one") all compound the same underlying pattern: worry that sounds like careful analysis.

These sessions are written for that specific pattern. Each one names the gifted-specific version of the challenge — that explaining a fear well is not the same as being regulated, that overachieving can sometimes be a stress response rather than ambition, that a catastrophic thought dressed in logical language is still just a thought — so students experience the group as learning to examine their own reasoning, not being told their worries are silly or unfounded.

Suggested Format (30 minutes)

- 3–5 min — Check-in question
- 5–7 min — Discussion hook / psychoeducation
- 12–15 min — Main activity
- 5–7 min — Discussion questions and closing commitment

Facilitation Notes

- Groups of 4–6 students work best for full participation within 30 minutes.
- Read each Counselor Note before the session — it reframes the skill in gifted-specific terms and is meant to shape your language during discussion, not just inform you privately.
- Never require a student to share the specific content of a private worry or mistake aloud; several activities are designed to let students compare process (the gap between two kinds of self-talk, for instance) without disclosing personal detail.
- Run sessions in order for a five-week sequence, or select individual sessions to match a specific referral concern.
- Use the pre/post self-assessment (included) before Session 1 and after Session 5 to document growth.

At a Glance

#	Session Title	Focus	Time
1	Meet Your Brain: Upstairs and Downstairs	Understanding Anxiety & the Brain	30 min
2	The 4 F's: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn	Recognizing Stress Responses	30 min
3	Building a Coping Skills Menu	Personalized Coping Strategies	30 min
4	Is That a Thought, or a Fact?	Challenging Anxious Thoughts	30 min
5	Mending Mistakes: Self-Compassion for High Standards	Self-Compassion & Perfectionism	30 min

Pre/Post Self-Assessment (student-facing)

Rate each statement from 1 (rarely true for me) to 5 (almost always true for me). Complete once before Session 1 and again after Session 5.

Statement	Pre (1–5)	Post (1–5)
I can tell the difference between explaining a worry calmly and actually feeling calm.		
I can name what my body does when I get stressed.		
I have more than one strategy I can use to calm down.		
I can question a worried thought instead of automatically believing it.		
I can be as kind to myself after a mistake as I would be to a friend.		

Attendance Log

Student Name	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5

Session 1: Meet Your Brain: Upstairs and Downstairs

FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY & THE BRAIN • 30 MINUTES

ASCA Standards Alignment

Mindset M 1 (belief in development of whole self, including mental and social/emotional well-being); Behavior B-SMS 7 (effective coping skills)

Objective: Students will use Dr. Dan Siegel's upstairs/downstairs brain model to identify when their 'downstairs brain' has taken over, separate from what they can rationally explain about a fear.

Counselor Note — Why This Looks Different in Gifted Students

Gifted students often have sophisticated, articulate language for their worries — which can trick adults (and the student) into thinking their 'upstairs brain' is in charge just because they can explain the fear so clearly. Being able to describe a fear logically is not the same as being regulated. Naming that distinction directly is often a relief: it isn't a contradiction to know something is illogical and still feel it intensely.

Materials

Scenario cards, a simple upstairs/downstairs brain diagram or hand-model visual

Check-In (3–5 min)

Quick round: name one moment this week your body reacted before your thinking caught up.

Discussion Hook (5–7 min)

Introduce Dr. Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain: fingers folded over the thumb represent the connected 'upstairs' (thinking) and 'downstairs' (feeling/safety) brain working together; fingers lifted up (thumb exposed) represent 'flipping your lid,' when the downstairs brain takes over and the upstairs brain temporarily goes offline.

Main Activity (12–15 min)

Sort the Moment: Using a set of scenario cards (a pop quiz is announced; you raise your hand and give a wrong answer; you can't find your permission slip; a friend doesn't text back), students sort each into 'upstairs brain likely in charge' or 'downstairs brain likely in charge,' then discuss what physical signs (fast heartbeat, tight chest, racing thoughts) tip them off that their own lid has flipped.

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever been able to explain calmly why something shouldn't scare you, while still feeling scared? What does that tell you?
- What are your personal early-warning signs that your downstairs brain is taking over?
- What's one thing that helps reconnect your upstairs and downstairs brain once your lid has flipped?

Closing Commitment (5–7 min)

Each student names one physical early-warning sign they'll watch for this week.

Session 2: The 4 F's: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn

FOCUS: RECOGNIZING STRESS RESPONSES • 30 MINUTES

ASCA Standards Alignment

Mindset M 1; Behavior B-SMS 7 (effective coping skills)

Objective: Students will identify their own most common stress response among fight, flight, freeze, and fawn, and distinguish a stress response from a personality trait.

Counselor Note — Why This Looks Different in Gifted Students

The 'fawn' response — becoming extra agreeable, over-explaining, or overachieving to avoid conflict or disapproval — deserves special attention with gifted students, many of whom learn early that strong performance and compliance are reliably rewarded with safety and approval. What looks like ambition, helpfulness, or eagerness to please can sometimes be anxiety wearing a productive-looking disguise, and that's worth naming gently, without pathologizing hard work itself.

Materials

Scenario vignette cards, a simple 4-F reference sheet

Check-In (3–5 min)

Quick round: when you feel nervous, what does your body usually want to do — push back, get away, freeze up, or make everyone happy?

Discussion Hook (5–7 min)

Briefly introduce all four stress responses: fight (push back, argue, get defensive), flight (avoid, leave, procrastinate), freeze (go blank, shut down), and fawn (over-agree, over-apologize, overachieve to keep the peace).

Main Activity (12–15 min)

Which F Is It?: Read short scenario vignettes aloud (a character snaps at a sibling over a small mistake; a character suddenly “forgets” their oral report is due; a character goes silent and can't answer a question they know; a character says yes to helping with three more group projects despite being overwhelmed) and have students identify which stress response each shows. Then, privately, each student identifies which response shows up most for them.

Discussion Questions

- Is there a stress response you show that people mistake for a personality strength, like 'being so responsible' or 'being easygoing'?
- What situations tend to bring out your particular response?
- Does knowing the name for your response change how you feel about it?

Closing Commitment (5–7 min)

Each student writes their most common response and one situation this week where they might notice it happening in real time.

Session 3: Building a Coping Skills Menu

FOCUS: PERSONALIZED COPING STRATEGIES • 30 MINUTES

ASCA Standards Alignment

Behavior B-SMS 7 (effective coping skills); B-LS 2 (creative approach to learning, tasks, and problem solving)

Objective: Students will sort a range of coping strategies into categories and build a personalized menu of go-to tools rather than relying on a single prescribed technique.

Counselor Note — Why This Looks Different in Gifted Students

A single mandated coping strategy often fails gifted students — not because it's wrong, but because it doesn't account for their preference for choice, novelty, and ownership over their own tools. Building a personal menu, tried and chosen by the student rather than assigned wholesale, tends to actually get used.

Materials

Coping strategy cards (physical, expressive, cognitive, distraction categories), blank menu cards

Check-In (3–5 min)

Quick round: name one thing (big or small) that has ever actually helped you calm down.

Discussion Hook (5–7 min)

Show a stack of coping-strategy cards spanning very different types: physical (box breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, a short walk), expressive (drawing, journaling, talking it out), cognitive (listing facts you know for certain, naming 5 things you can see), and distraction-based (music, a favorite fidget, counting backward by 7s).

Main Activity (12–15 min)

Menu Building: In small groups, sort the strategy cards into three categories — Calm My Body, Calm My Thoughts, Get Moving — discussing where each one belongs and why some could fit more than one category. Each student then picks their top three strategies (trying at least one they haven't used before) to build a personal coping menu card to keep.

Discussion Questions

- Which strategy sounds most like 'you'?
- Is there a difference between the strategy you'd use in the middle of class versus at home at night? Why might you need more than one option?
- What's a coping strategy you've been told to use that has never actually worked for you — and why do you think that is?

Closing Commitment (5–7 min)

Each student keeps their personal coping menu card and commits to trying one new strategy from it this week.

Session 4: Is That a Thought, or a Fact?

FOCUS: CHALLENGING ANXIOUS THOUGHTS • 30 MINUTES

ASCA Standards Alignment

Behavior B-LS 1 (critical thinking skills to make informed decisions); Mindset M 1

Objective: Students will practice evidence-checking an anxious thought the way they would examine any other claim, and generate a more balanced alternative thought.

Counselor Note — Why This Looks Different in Gifted Students

Anxious thoughts in gifted students often arrive dressed in careful, logical-sounding language — 'if X happens, then Y, and that means Z' — which can make catastrophic thinking sound like rigorous analysis rather than what it actually is: an unproven thought, not a fact. Teaching students to evidence-check their own reasoning the way they'd evaluate anyone else's argument respects their analytical strength instead of dismissing the worry as 'silly.'

Materials

Four-column evidence-check handout, sample anxious-thought cards

Check-In (3–5 min)

Quick round (no need to share details): on a scale of 1–5, how convincing did your worries feel this week?

Discussion Hook (5–7 min)

Present a sample anxious thought: 'I got one question wrong on the quiz, so I'm going to fail the whole class.' Ask: is this a fact, or a thought that feels like a fact?

Main Activity (12–15 min)

Evidence Check: Using a simple four-column chart — The Thought / Evidence For It / Evidence Against It / A More Balanced Thought — walk through two or three sample anxious thoughts as a group. Then, privately (writing only, no requirement to share), each student runs one of their own real worries through the same four columns.

Discussion Questions

- What's the difference between genuinely useful worst-case planning and catastrophizing? How could you tell them apart in your own thinking?
- Did writing out the evidence change how convincing the original thought felt?
- Is it possible for a thought to feel 100% true and still not be a fact?

Closing Commitment (5–7 min)

Each student keeps their private evidence-check sheet and commits to using the four-column method the next time a worry feels overwhelming.

Session 5: Mending Mistakes: Self-Compassion for High Standards

FOCUS: SELF-COMPASSION & PERFECTIONISM • 30 MINUTES

ASCA Standards Alignment

Mindset M 3 (positive attitude toward work and learning); Behavior B-SMS 7 (effective coping skills)

Objective: Students will compare their self-talk after a mistake to how they would comfort a friend after the same mistake, and practice separating 'I made a mistake' from 'I am a mistake.'

Counselor Note — Why This Looks Different in Gifted Students

For many gifted students, identity is closely tied to being 'the smart one' or 'the one who gets it,' which means a mistake doesn't just feel like a performance blip — it can feel like a threat to who they are. Self-compassion work here needs to explicitly separate the action from the identity: a mistake is information about one moment, not a verdict on someone's ability or worth.

Materials

Index cards

Check-In (3–5 min)

Quick round: think of a mistake from this week (big or small) — no need to share it aloud yet.

Discussion Hook (5–7 min)

Ask: if your best friend made this exact same mistake, what would you say to them? Give students a moment to think before writing anything down.

Main Activity (12–15 min)

Repair, Don't Erase: On an index card, students write their real (or a comfortable-to-share invented) mistake on one side. On the other side, they write what they would say to comfort a friend who made that same mistake. Compare the two sides in pairs or small groups, without needing to disclose the specific mistake if they'd rather keep it private — just the gap between the two tones.

Discussion Questions

- Why is it so much easier to be kind to a friend who made this mistake than to be kind to yourself?
- What's the difference between 'I made a mistake' and 'I am a mistake'? Which one is actually true?
- What would change if you talked to yourself the way you talk to a friend, just for one week?

Closing Commitment (5–7 min)

Each student writes one 'friend-voice' phrase they'll try using on themselves this week.

Certificate of Completion

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

Anxiety Management Skills for Gifted Minds

This certifies that

_____

has completed all five sessions of small-group work on understanding anxiety, recognizing stress responses, coping strategies, challenging anxious thoughts, and self-compassion.

Facilitator: _____ Date: _____