

Anxiety, Stress and Fears

How can I help my child?

All children and young people get anxious, stressed and scared at times, and this is a normal part of their development as they grow up and develop their 'survival skills', so they can face challenges in the wider world. We all have different levels of stress we can cope with. This is called our window of tolerance. Some people are just naturally more anxious than others and are therefore quicker to get stressed or worried.

There is a link to a video describing our window of tolerance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcm-1FBrDvU>

Here are some pointers to help your child to manage their anxieties:

1. Talking about feelings and sensations.

Talk to your child about anxiety, stress and fear, what happens in their bodies, the sensations they are experiencing and why it happens. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, stressed or scared, and it can be frightening and overwhelming.

Help them to recognise anxious, stress and fear sensations so they can tell when they are becoming anxious and can ask for help.

Sharing story books can help children to explore and understand their feelings. Here are three books that all focus around the theme of anxiety and are helpful way of opening a conversation.

The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside

Ruby's Worry by Tom Percival

The Very Hungry Worry Monsters by Lara Ede

2. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, stress or fear, but to help a child manage it.

None of us want to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help children and young people to overcome anxiety, stress or fear isn't to try to remove the stressor that triggers it. It is to help them learn to tolerate their anxieties, stresses or fears and function as well as they can, even when feeling big emotions. It can be helpful to describe emotions as a wave to ride or surf that gets smaller after its peak.

3. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious, stressed or scared.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety, stress or fear over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry because that's how they feel and their parent whisks them out of there, or removes the thing they are afraid of, they have learned that coping mechanism. This cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

4. Express positive - but realistic - expectations.

You can't promise a child that their fears are unrealistic - that they will have fun playing with their friends or that someone won't laugh at them during a lesson. But you can express confidence that they will be OK, they will manage it and that, as they face their fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives children and young people the confidence that your expectations are realistic, and adults are not going to ask them to do something they can't handle.

5. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. You want to listen and be empathetic, help them understand what they are anxious about and encourage them that they can face their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you are scared/worried/anxious, and that's OK. I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

6. Lend your thinking brain.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true - how would they handle it? Talk about the possibilities that a fear can come true and the possible solutions to handling the different situations. For some children and young people having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way. Our thoughts affect our feelings. Therefore, negative thought will produce negative feelings. Lend your thinking brain to your child to help them think of the positives - if something negative happened, you can find a solution if it happens through positive thinking.

7. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are many ways you can help children handle anxiety, stress or fears by letting them see how you cope with the feeling yourself. Children are perceptive, and they are going to take in the information they hear around them. Let children hear or see you managing stress calmly, tolerating it and feeling good about getting through it.

8. Work through strategies to help cope with anxiety, stress and fear together.

There are many strategies that can help manage your child's anxiety, worries and fears.

- Get your child to breathe deeply and slowly, in through their nose and out through their mouths until no air is left in their lungs (like blowing out a candle or a dragon breathing out fire)
- Distract them by focusing on something else.
- Give them a cuddle or hold their hand - touch can be soothing.
- It can help to talk to you child about finding a safe place in their minds - somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be in their bedroom, or a holiday beside the sea which they can picture when negative thoughts come into their heads or they are feeling anxious. Some children like to have a transition object to hold - something that reminds them of their safe place or safe person.
- Counting to 10, 20, 100, reciting the alphabet or singing a song.
- Writing their thoughts and feelings down in a diary or journal.
- Make a worry box. Your child can write each worry down and post it in the box out of sight. They can leave their worries in there and see if they were worth worrying about. Have a special 'worry time' around 10 to 20 minutes (but not before bedtime mor when your child is in bed) so you can talk about the worries. If they were not worth it tear the worries up. This gives the message that we are in control of our worries and not vice versa.
- Help maintain a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones, good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen or computer time and a healthy diet.
- Blow bubbles - deep breathing can be really helpful when trying to reduce anxiety. Bubbles are a fun way to help children learn about deep breathing techniques. Enjoy the time blowing bubbles - how big and long can you make them? This is a good distraction and it is fun so it will help to reduce the levels of the stress chemical, cortisol, in the body. They can even blow imaginary bubbles!
- Breathing Exercises - We breathe gently through our nose, filling our lungs with air (inflating a balloon) and breathe out slowly through our mouths until we feel like we have no air in our lungs. You can do this up to 5 times and this slows everything down the more you practise this, the more they will be able to use it as regular skill.
- Painting, drawing or colouring - these activities can help children to clam as they switch their focus to the creative task.

Self-soothing

Give yourself a hug - physical touch releases oxytocin, a feel-good hormone, and reduce the stress hormone, cortisol in the bloodstream. The next time your child feels anxious, encourage them to stop and give themselves a warm hug. They can hug

themselves discreetly by folding their arms and squeezing their body in a comforting way.

Rub your ears - encourage them to begin by lightly tracing the outline of the outer ears several times. Then using gentle pressure, ask them to place their thumbs on the back of their ears and their forefingers on the front. Ask them to count to 5 and then move their finger and thumb downward to a point just below where they started. Ask them to repeat the process until they have squeezed both earlobes for five seconds.

Hold your own hand - handholding has both psychological and physiological benefits. Researchers found that handholding during surgery helped patients control their physical and mental symptoms of anxiety. Ask your child to clasp their hands together, fingers intertwined, until the feelings of anxiety begin to fade.

Quick ways to calm

Sometimes you need a quick way to help to calm down. These tips will hopefully come in handy.

- Imagine your favourite place - it's like taking a mini holiday wherever you are
- Think of your favourite things - food, colours, people, places, animals etc.
- Name animals alphabetically (alligator, bear, cow, dog, etc...)
- Squeeze something (play dough, clay, slime, silly putty, stress ball, fists)
- Use the 5,4,3,2,1 Grounding Techniques.

5 - Look: Look around for 5 things that you can see and say them out loud.

4 - Feel: Pay attention to your body and think of 4 things that you can feel, and say them out loud.

3 - Listen: Listen for 3 sounds.

2 - Smell: Say two things you can smell.

1 - Taste: Say one thing you can taste.

Take a deep belly breath to end.

- Remember the words to a song you love
- Do a hook up
 1. Put your arms straight out in front of you, palms facing out.

2. Put one hand over the other at the wrists and interlace your fingers.
3. Swoop your hands and arms toward your body and then place your interlaced hands on your chest.
4. Cross your feet at the ankles and put your tongue on the roof of your mouth.
5. Stay still for one minute.

Breathing techniques

- **Use a stuffed animal to practice deep breathing**

Lie on your back and put a stuffed animal onto your stomach. Breathe in and move the stuffed toy up, then breathe out, bringing the stuffed animal back down.

- **Use a pinwheel**

You can practice breathing out slowly and quickly, watching the speed of the pinwheel. As you control the speed of the pinwheel, you are controlling your breathing.

- **Use a feather**

Pick a coloured feather. It could be your favourite colour or a colour that makes you calm. Breathe in and hold for the count of 3. Then breathe out going up on one side of the feather and down the other side.

- **Hoberman sphere**

Breathe in and expand the sphere, breathe out and push the sphere back in - this mirrors what should be happening to your stomach. Watch the clip by clicking on the link below.

<https://youtu.be/YnNATiWYyx0>

- **Triangle breathing**

With your finger in the air, breathe in for 3 counts as you trace the first side of the triangle. Hold your breathe for 3 counts as you trace the second side of the triangle. Breathe out for 3 counts as you trace the third side of the triangle. That is one complete deep breath.

You can try this breathing technique with different shapes - square breathing, star breathing or hexagon breathing.

- **Lazy eight breathing**

With your finger in the air, start with your finger in the middle of the eight on its side. Go up to the left and trace the left part of the 8 while you breathe in. When you get to the middle of the eight again, breathe out while tracing the right part of the eight with your finger.

- **4 -7-8 breathing**

Watch the clip below.

<https://youtu.be/UxbdX-5eOOo>

- **Using your imagination**

- Breathe in like smelling a flower, breathe out like you are blowing out birthday candles.
- Pretend your diaphragm is a balloon. Breathe in and make the balloon bigger, then breathe out, making the balloon shrink.
- Smell the delicious hot pizza, cool the pizza down.
- **Ocean breathing** - breathe in and imagine the waves rolling in, breathe out and image the wave rolling out.
- **Colour breathing** - breathe in and imagine a calm, happy, positive colour. Breathe a colour representing stress, anxiety, fear leaving your body.

- **Rainbow breathing**

<https://youtu.be/O29e4rRMrV4>

- **Volcano breaths**

Pretend your hands and arms are like lava flowing from a volcano. Start with your hands in front of your chest, with your palms touching. Keeping your hands together, reach straight up and breathe in. Separate your hands and move your arms down to your side and breathe out.

- **Explosion breaths**

Start in a standing position. Breathe in as you crouch down. Then, jump up, spreading your arms and legs as you breathe out.

- **Wood chopper breathing**

Standing tall with legs hip distance apart. Clasp hands together and raise your arms above your head. Breathe in through your nose. Exhale and pull your hands down towards your legs as you say "HA" to 'chop' wood.