

Supporting your child with anxiety – some tips

What is anxiety?



Anxiety is another word for stress and it's important to remember that we all feel stressed sometimes. Stress can be a very normal emotion when we are faced with a difficult situation and it can have an important job to do. An example of this is the current Covid-19 pandemic – our stress makes us take action to keep ourselves safe. However, sometimes our stress can feel overwhelming, we might continue to feel stressed once the situation has gone, or our level of stress feels out of proportion with the actual situation. This is when we might benefit from finding ways to manage anxiety.

What happens when we get anxious?



This is how we think it works: First, we have a situation or an experience that is the trigger (for example, a dog barks). How we think about this event (we might think 'this dog is going to bite me') impacts how we feel (scared) which, in turn, influences what we do (run away). If this goes round in a cycle and the fear gets bigger and bigger (for example, we begin to think *all* dogs are dangerous) the anxiety may interfere with our behaviour (we might stop going out). Changing the original thought ('I am safe, this dog is just very noisy') could lead to a different feeling (not scared) and a different action (ignore the dog).

Can we reduce the triggers?



Some young people face lots of different stressful situations or experiences, such as discrimination, financial stress, bullying, academic pressure, domestic violence, health, housing etc. Research tells us that those of us who face greater challenges can often experience more anxiety. Try and understand what is causing your child's anxiety and whether any stressors can be removed. For example, it might be possible to reduce academic pressure or change unhealthy friendship groups. Sometimes, however, these anxiety-causing situations might be beyond our control, such as financial stresses or poor housing, but it still might be helpful to understand your child's anxiety in this context, rather than as a personal weakness.

Fight, flight or freeze



Anxiety can show itself in different ways and you might find it useful to identify the different behaviours your child displays when they are anxious. They might go into **fight** mode – so they might be aggressive, argumentative and confrontational. Or they might go into **flight** mode – they might run away, avoid school, reduce contact with friends, keep the bad thoughts away by doing repetitive things like checking, hoarding, repeating etc. Or they might **freeze** – not be able to do anything, stay in bed and not be able to concentrate or communicate. Your child might have all of these responses at different times (or even at the same time). Try to understand the anxiety behind the behaviour – what is causing the behaviour?

You are a superhero



Parents and carers make **the best** therapists, and you are often in an ideal position to support your child to manage their anxiety. Here are some ideas of things you might find useful: try to create a calm, safe and nurturing environment; discuss how normal it is to have anxiety at times; talk about and model how you manage your own anxiety; show empathy, patience and acceptance; give your valuable time to be with them; listen more than talk; catch their successes – put those positivity glasses on; understand that some things might be

very challenging for your child and give lots of praise for bravery. Remember, your role is really important and you have to look after yourself to keep your superpowers working.

Information is power



When we understand anxiety it becomes less scary, so read all about it. There are lots of useful websites with helpful information (i.e. www.youngminds.org.uk). Help your child understand their anxiety: identifying what causes it, what their negative thoughts are, where they feel it in their body, what's keeping the anxiety going. You could give your child's anxiety a silly name to make it less frightening and draw what it looks like with them.

One small step at a time



We can often avoid things that make us anxious, but avoidance allows the anxiety to grow bigger and bigger. Try to support your child to slowly and safely re-introduce what they are avoiding (they might be avoiding school, shops, public transport etc.). Break the challenge down into *very* small steps, allowing your child to stay in control of the pace and the plans. If the challenge is too great, make the steps even smaller and don't forget to praise bravery and every achievement, no matter how small.

Coping skills



It can generate anxiety to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone, so try and help your child use lots of self-soothing and relaxation strategies. Your child might find it useful to practice their self-soothing strategies often, so they really have perfected these techniques for when they need them. Remember, it is much easier to stay calm than to try to calm down after anxiety has got a grip. Different self-soothing strategies work for different people, so work out what works for you and your child – here are some ideas: bubble bath, music, colouring, puzzle book, reading, YouTube, mindfulness, fresh air and exercise, baking a cake, breathing exercises, blowing bubbles, knitting, jigsaws, going to a safe place in your head, imagining a good day, counting, tapping, writing, dancing, positive self-talk, doing your nails, reading, having cuddles. Some children like to have a self-soothe box – like an old shoebox – which they fill with items to help them stay calm, for instance, family photos, chocolate, a squishy, puzzle book, letters etc. What else helps you and your child stay calm and relaxed?

Teamwork is dreamwork



It is important for everyone to work as a team to support your child, including school, co-parents, support services, extended family etc. Remember that conflict in the team can increase your child's anxiety (and yours!). As the captain of the team, you might have some work to do to ensure that there is good communication, mutual respect, a shared understanding of your child's needs and an agreed aim and plan. Don't forget that your child is the main player in the team and try to include them as much as possible. Being captain of your child's team might be a very challenging role so don't forget to look after yourself and regularly use your own self-soothing strategies.

Always have hope



If anxiety gets a grip in your family it may feel very daunting, and finding ways to manage the anxiety might seem like a big mountain to climb. Learning how to manage anxiety might be a more achievable goal than abolishing it from your home completely. These hints and tips take a little bit of time and perseverance to get right, but change can always be made and sometimes just a little change can make a big difference. Always have hope.

