



My child is really anxious – how can I help them?

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is your body and mind's response to a perceived threat or danger, whether emotional or physical, true or not. Anxiety is normal - we all have anxiety and it helps us to keep safe in the world. It helps us to make decisions in the moment when we need to, but some of us can struggle with unnecessary or overactive anxiety.

This can look like withdrawal, controlling behaviour, defensive or anger outbursts; exhaustion; avoidance of certain situations, places, people or things; feeling sick, nauseous, tightness in the chest; loss of appetite; not being able to stop or control worrying; trouble relaxing; being so restless they can't be still; feeling afraid as if something awful is going to happen but you don't quite know why; headaches; body pains; change in behaviours to mitigate these feelings; changes in sleep routine; inability to concentrate; sleeplessness or insomnia or the opposite.

Anxiety is not a behavioural issue and we need to look for the meaning behind the words and action we see.

You might hear these terms referred to when anxiety is mentioned:

- ✓ GAD
- ✓ Panic attacks
- ✓ Anxiety attacks
- ✓ Social Anxiety Disorder
- ✓ OCD
- ✓ Phobias
- ✓ PTSD (extreme anxiety following a traumatic event)

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW AS A PARENT?

Anxiety is normal and we all experience it at some point in our lives, to a greater or lesser extent. Anxiety is a temporary state but when it is prolonged, it can become a clinical disorder like Generalised Anxiety Disorder or Social Anxiety Disorder.

For example, your child might feel worried about an exam - a finite situation that will pass - or they may be experiencing long term anxiety around infinite questions - how do we deal with climate change, how will I support myself as an adult, or something closer to home, like a family member's health.



HOW WE RESPOND TO YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ANXIETY HAS A DEEP IMPACT.

- ✓ Listen to them.
- ✓ Support your child from their perspective - this is their experience, however 'bad' or not you perceive their anxiety.
- ✓ Try not to offer advice in the moment or 'fix' this.
- ✓ Help them to name what they're feeling in their physical body - is it a headache, is their heart pumping fast, are they feeling sick?
- ✓ Remind them its normal to have anxiety and that it will pass.
- ✓ Help them to slow down their breathing.
- ✓ Move the body as this reduces anxiety. Take a walk, dance around the kitchen or kick a ball around.
- ✓ Find interests that offer a moment of distraction from the anxiety - listen to or make music, cook together or watch a movie of their choice.
- ✓ Follow your child's lead - offer plenty of hugs if they want them, or space if they need space.
- ✓ Don't try to make your child talk when they don't want to. You might

think it will help, but this is their experience and forcing them will reinforce their anxiety.

- ✓ Your anxiety levels - recognised, diagnosed or neither - can have an impact on your child's anxiety so being open to working on your own mental health is a gift to you both.
- ✓ Help your child to find their solutions to their problems. Listen to your child's needs, not what you think will solve things.
- ✓ Be compassionate - normalise anxiety - share that we all have it and that's ok - be mindful of your child's needs.

MANY PARENTS CAN SHARE THAT THEY FEEL...

- ✓ Helpless
- ✓ Frustrated
- ✓ Annoyed
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Impatient
- ✓ On edge
- ✓ Impotent to effect change
- ✓ Unsure that this is worthy of exploration
- ✓ Unsure if this is behavioural
- ✓ Judged by family and friends



HOW MIGHT YOUR CHILD BE FEELING ASIDE FROM ANXIOUS?

- ✓ Alone and afraid
- ✓ They're the only one in the world that has this
- ✓ There's something wrong with them
- ✓ Everyone else is fine
- ✓ Concerned about sharing how they feel with you
- ✓ I don't want to worry my parents as they're really busy
- ✓ Afraid of the reaction or judgement
- ✓ Not wanting to disappoint
- ✓ Guilty for their behaviours and lack of control over them
- ✓ Struggle to put into words how they're feeling
- ✓ Anxiety is who they are - it's not.
- ✓ Weak - that they can't 'fix' this or change it.
- ✓ Worried about what people think of them.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

- ✓ Explain what anxiety is and how can manifest and that it's something most of us feel to some extent.
- ✓ Understand how your child experiences anxiety so you can be aware of potential triggers and make sense of responses and keep the safe when they become flooded with anxiety
- ✓ Encourage physical hobbies, especially confidence building ones - for example, martial arts that allow them to feel safe in the world can help
- ✓ Don't be afraid to speak to your doctor about this - there are ways to treat this including therapies, medication and supplements - ask for a blood test to check for iron, vitamin B12 and vitamin D levels
- ✓ Encourage enough sleep
- ✓ Encourage a healthy diet - there is a link between the gut and anxiety and a healthy diet can reduce anxiety
- ✓ Encourage being active and exercising
- ✓ Reduce the amount of caffeine your child has, including in energy drinks



- ✔ Practice mindfulness to understand how your body experiences anxiety
- ✔ Speak to your child about social media, how to manage limits online and how to respond to trolls
- ✔ Use positive compliments about the things they are, not the things they do - you are strong - you are a good person - you are kind - you are thoughtful - you are funny. Send them a positive text or leave a post it note on the fridge!
- ✔ Don't collude with the anxiety - don't join in and jump on the worry train - keep a sense of perspective - but don't dismiss your child's feelings as you try to counter their anxiety
- ✔ "Don't worry" and "it's fine" is dismissive language that shuts down understanding. Not being ok to allow your child to feel all they do will isolate your child further
- ✔ Use open questions, ones that don't end with Yes or No, to explore their experience together
- ✔ Use active listening techniques to make them feel heard and be aware of your own body language.
- ✔ Follow your instincts - you know your child best - ignore those who think this is a choice or a behavioural issue

CREATE A ONE PAGE PROFILE WITH YOUR CHILD - A DAY IN THE LIFE OF YOUR CHILD

Ask them to help you and others understand how they feel by answering these kinds of questions:

What do I worry about the most?

What do I need help with?

What is important to me?

What am I worrying most about right now?

When I am anxious, how can you help me?

When I am anxious, how

When I am anxious, what doesn't help me?

When I am anxious, I might... (go and read, go to toilet lots, shout, withdraw)



COMMON TRIGGERS

- ✓ Changes in familiar structures - from new partners to moving house and school
- ✓ Exam stress
- ✓ Friendship group changes
- ✓ Social Media
- ✓ Parenting and relationships
- ✓ Illness in themselves or a family member
- ✓ Something happening to someone they know - an accident, death or divorce
- ✓ If your child has long term anxiety, their system can be overstimulated which can be triggering in itself

TOOLS AND TIPS

Encourage your child to draw and explore their anxiety.

If it had a body and a face what would it look like? If it had a colour or colours what would they be and why? What would my anxiety say? What does my anxiety need? Where in my body do I feel it? What would I like to do about it?

Create a self soothe box - for times where they're anxious - include things that can occupy and distract them - playdough (any age), Rubik's cube or puzzles, colouring, something soft to hold.

Consider simple breathing exercises

- breathing in to a count of 5 and out to a count of 3.

Distractions - moving away from the thing that is causing anxiety helps - taking a walk, talking to someone different, listening to music, going for a drive, watching a funny clip on YouTube or movie all help.

Acupressure - using pressure on certain places on the body can help temporarily reduce anxiety - for example, massage the area above the nose and in between the eyebrows in slow, circular motions for up to 5 minutes

Aromatherapy - smell a range of different oils and find what feels calming to your child. While lavender is known as a calming scent, it may not feel like that for your child. Also consider any scent that calms - from your perfume to a familiar air freshener, and spray on a handkerchief for them to use as comfort.

Antihistamines such as Promethazine can reduce anxiety - speak to your pharmacist for the most age appropriate.

When your child is keen to talk, encourage these moments.

Nominate someone to be your child's go to person to talk - it could be you, or it could be a family friend, a teacher or an online service like Kooth, 7 Cups, or Shout.



Help your child to find things that bring out more of the opposite feelings to anxiety - like joy, delight, happiness, laughter.

Keep a Pot of Positives to recognise the things that are going well. If they tend to catastrophise or overthink things, suggest they pull out a positive and relive the moment when something went well.

Keep a Worry Pot - leave an empty pot along with paper and a pen and encourage your child to write their

worries down and leave them in the pot. Ask if they want you to read them - it can give you an insight into their fears and what makes them anxious. This is a place for them to

Weighted blankets emulate Deep Pressure Stimulation, a firm but gentle squeeze, hug or hold that relaxes the nervous system. They are known to reduce autonomic arousal which is responsible for some of the symptoms of anxiety such as increased heart rate, palpitations, hyperventilation and nausea.

THINGS TO AVOID.

- ✗ Ignoring your child's reaction or their anxiety - name it. "This sounds like anxiety, and we all get anxiety at times."
- ✗ Move from the listener to the fixer. You can't fix this, but you can support and empower your child to find their own solutions, through active listening and open questioning.e.g. What do you really want to do about this? If you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to happen?
- ✗ Assuming your experience will help them - 'if I was you, I would...' or 'when I was young,....' - be present in their reality.

