

Helping children and young people cope when they feel anxious

Anxiety is normal

We **all** feel anxious sometimes—it's part of being human. Anxiety is a normal and healthy response to situations we find threatening or particularly stressful. Dating all the way back to the caveman days (when we had to be able to fight or flee in order to survive facing big predators in the wild) our bodies have an automatic response which is triggered when we feel in danger in some way.

This reaction continues today, and our bodies prepare us to deal with threats and challenges by releasing adrenaline into our blood system—triggering the 'fight or flight' response. Our heart rate speeds up, and our breathing becomes quicker to get oxygen and energy to the muscles to deal with the dangerous situation. This can make us feel like we have butterflies in our stomach and feel sweaty or shaky.

This physical reaction to stress can be healthy and help us to perform better at tasks (think about athletes having a burst of speed to win the race) and can help to protect us from danger (jump out of the way of a speeding car). But if our physical stress response is triggered over and over and in ways that don't require a physical response, the body finds it hard to return to its normal state and stays in an alert state, looking out for danger. Then we start to feel stressed or anxious.



Why do children feel anxious?

All sorts of things can make children and young people feel anxious. Some may be big such as a first day at school, moving to a new school or changes at home such as separation or divorce. However, things that seem less important to adults such as not understanding school work, feeling left out of friendship groups, or going to hospital appointments can all make children feel anxious. In fact, some children find situations that most other people enjoy (such as going to a party) stressful.

What are signs of anxiety in children?

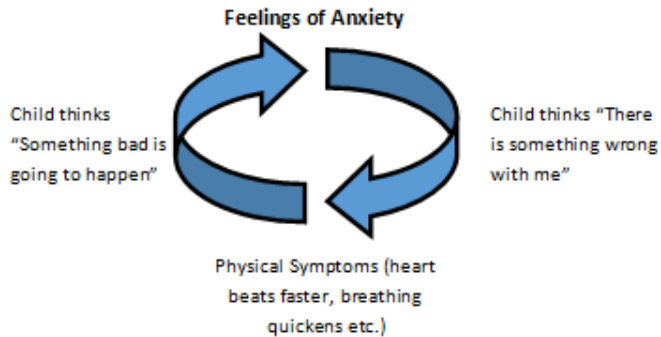
Feeling anxious can affect the way children think, feel and behave. They might;

- Have trouble sleeping
- Have tummy pains or headaches
- Feel dizzy or light-headed
- Feel sick or have trouble swallowing
- Become more clingy or do the opposite & become more withdrawn
- Find it difficult to concentrate
- Have worrying thoughts
- Feel panicky or scared, sometimes without knowing why
- Fidget or find it difficult to sit still
- Seem irritated or get angry quickly
- Cry or become distressed about small things
- Try to avoid going to places they usually like



The Anxiety Cycle

The physical symptoms of anxiety (such as heart beating fast, feeling shaky or sick) can make children feel even more anxious because they might not realise it is anxiety and think they are ill. They may get stuck in a vicious cycle of anxiety.



Children’s worrying thoughts can increase their anxiety which may make them want to avoid the situations that are worrying them (e.g. going to school). While in the short term avoiding the situation (e.g. school) can help to reduce the feelings of anxiety in the long term, their difficulties are likely to worsen as they begin to associate not going with feelings of safety. Without being helped to face the feared situation they can become stuck.


Anxiety is like a wave. It can be brief or can stretch over a long period of time, but will always pass. It is important to remember this and to help the children experience for themselves that the anxiety will pass. To do this, children need to be supported to stay in their feared situation long enough to allow the anxiety to rise and then fall. This helps them learn that they can cope.

How can you help your child with anxiety?

- Help them understand what anxiety is and why they are feeling scared and nervous in certain situations. Name it to tame it. Identifying an intense emotion (“naming”) has the effect of reducing the stress and anxiety (“taming”) in the brain and the body that that emotion is causing.
- Encourage them to talk about worries and fears. It may be useful to do this while you’re doing something else together (driving in a car, cooking) as this may feel less threatening.
- Discuss with them what help they need from the adults around them to cope with those feelings (e.g. what you and teachers can do together to help make school feel like somewhere they can cope).
- Notice and praise them when they are being brave and trying hard.
- Help them learn ways to calm the body
 - Encourage them to move their body through exercise, play & dancing
 - Practice deep breathing or relaxation with them to calm the body and mind
 - Help them notice unhelpful thoughts (this is never going to get better) and think up some more useful statements they can tell themselves (this is anxiety, this feeling will pass)
 - Draw a body shape and labelling all of the bits of the body that feel strange when anxious. Talk through the feelings and sensations, so that they understand what is happening.
 - Sometimes talking through “what is the worst thing that could happen?” is helpful. Then you can discuss how likely / unlikely that is or what they can do if that does happen. This can help them feel that they can cope so things to feel more in control.
 - Encourage them to do activities that soothe and calm them like drawing, looking after pets or listening to music.



It is important to remember that anxious feelings are natural and will pass

Videos that may be useful	
'What is anxiety' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16EoZOsCJgs Useful video explaining what anxiety is for older children and young people	
'We all have Mental Health' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxIDKZHW3-E Useful video to watch with secondary school aged children to act as a prompt to your conversations about anxiety and mental health. Anna Freud NCCF	
Books that may be useful	
'Helping your child with fears and worries'. Creswell and Willetts (2019)	
'What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety' Heubner and Matthews (2015) (6-11 year olds).	
Apps that may be useful	
The smiling mind app can be downloaded via the apple or google store and provides accessible, life-long mindfulness skills for dealing with the stresses of life.	
The Chill Panda app measures heart rate and suggests tasks to suit your state of mind e.g. breathing exercises. Designed for children and adults.	
Mindful gNats is an app for young people encouraging practicing mindfulness and relaxation skills every day	
Face to Face and online support that may be useful	
Online Counselling via Kooth: http://www.kooth.com/ Kooth is a free, welcoming and confidential way for young people aged 11-18 to access emotional wellbeing and early intervention mental health support across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot.	
Platform: https://platform.org/project/4yp-swanse-bay/ Platform provides one-to-one support, peer support groups, workshops and the State of Mind Programme for 13-16 year olds in Swansea & NPT.	
The exchange-counselling service: http://www.exchange-counselling.com The Exchange specialises in providing psychological support to children for both primary and secondary aged children.	
Tidy Minds: https://tidyminds.org.uk/ Tidy Minds website provides location support information and advice for young people living within the Swansea Bay University Health board.	
Young Minds: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/ Young Minds is a website providing on-line practical support for young people or parents.	
Silver Cloud: https://nhs.wales.silvercloudhealth.com/signup/ Silver Cloud provides online Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for young people aged 16+ and also for parents/carers of children age 4-11, and 12-18 who are supporting an anxious child.	