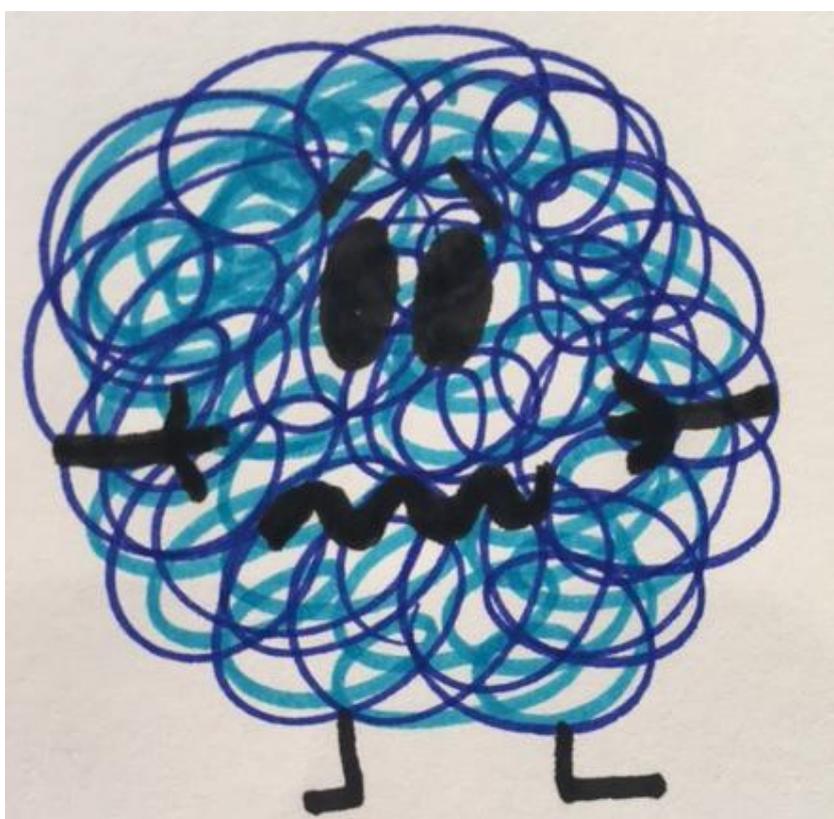


# Supporting Children and Young People With Anxiety and Worry

*A toolkit to help support children with a disability or developmental difficulty  
with their anxiety and worry.*



We may think of anxious children and young people as the fearful and worried children who lock themselves away from the world. This is sometimes the case, but anxiety can manifest itself in many ways, including in angry and explosive behaviour. Whilst no two children will express anxiety or worry in exactly the same way, this toolkit is designed to share some tips and ideas to help parents and carers understand why children might become anxious, and what might help children to cope with their feelings.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is many different things to different people but primarily, anxiety is something we feel. It can be an emotion, a physical symptom or a thought. When we say someone is anxious we usually mean they are frightened or worried about something. The things we worry about don't need to make sense or be logical and they might not be things that other people would worry about.



## What's happening to my body?

When we feel anxious, we can start to experience physical symptoms. These can make us feel worse, especially when we can't attribute them to our anxiety. The first step to helping children with their anxiety is helping them recognise the things that happen to our bodies when we get anxious. This simple labelling can be enough to help children feel that they are understood, and importantly that they are not ill.

Some physical symptoms of anxiety are...

- Headache
- Sweating
- Feeling dizzy
- Being short of breath
- Clammy hands
- Wobbly legs
- Dry mouth or difficulty swallowing
- Heart banging
- Feeling funny in our tummy
- Muscles feeling tight
- Feeling sick
- Urgent need to use the toilet

If children do not have the language to tell you where their body feels funny, you could use a diagram of a body or a doll. Teaching children to point to where their body hurts or feels funny is an important skill.

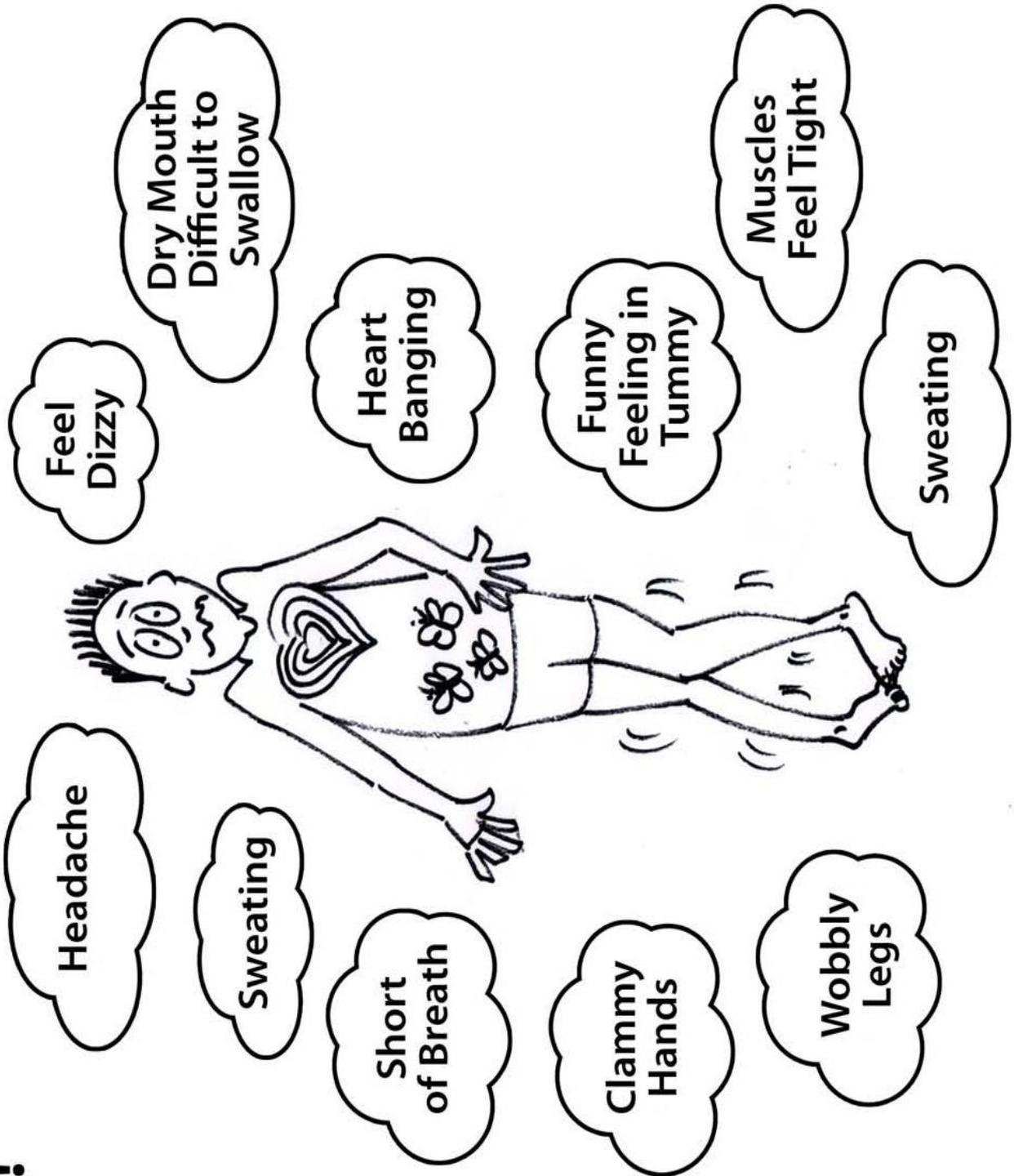
These bodily sensations will have an impact on children's thoughts and feelings. For example, they might feel embarrassed about blushing, or needing the toilet, or they might worry more if they feel they are going to faint. By labelling the sensations as symptoms of anxiety and focusing on intervening with these sensations, we can help to lower anxiety. Breathing, yoga or mindfulness exercises can calm children's bodily sensations in order to break the anxiety cycle.

# What happens to you when you are scared!

# WORRY — ANXIETY

# FRIGHT

By Andy James, used with permission.



## **Why is this happening to my body?**

It might be helpful to explain to children **why** they are feeling these physical symptoms. The reason we feel like this when we worry, is because our brain tells our body to get ready to 'fight' or go into 'flight' (run away). Stress hormones flood the front part of our brain (the frontal lobes) which switches off our rational thinking. Our bodies react as if we are being presented with an immediate physical threat so prepares us to fight the threat or run away by pumping blood around our body faster to get to our muscles. This is why our heart races and we feel tense. We feel sick because our body is trying to get rid of unnecessary weight to run away or our muscles tighten to prepare us for a physical fight (even if that's not what we want to do).

## **Why am I feeling anxious?**

Different situations will cause anxiety for different children. It is helpful if you are able to start noticing what things cause children's anxiety because sometimes children can't tell us what is making them feel worried. If you are able to label this for them, it will help them feel understood. These are things that you can start to notice...

Are they worried about being on their own and feeling unsafe?

Are bed times particularly difficult – are they worried about monsters/the dark?

Are they worried about looking silly in front of other people?

Are they worried they won't cope with a new task or new situation?

Is there a trigger in the environment such as a smell or noise that reminds them of something difficult?

Is there a change in schedule that's making them feel uncertain about what's happening?

Is something reminding them of a time that they weren't safe?

These worries can happen for lots of different reasons. These can be due to a child's past or current experiences/struggles. Sometimes children with developmental difficulties have extra challenges related to things like a difficulty communicating, feeling overwhelmed by sensory experiences, or feeling anxious about a busy, unpredictable social world.

The list of things that make children worry is endless and sometimes anxiety can be a helpful emotion to keep us safe or move us forward. But it's when these anxieties start to have a negative impact on children's lives that we need to think about stepping in and giving them some tools.

## Our own temptations and fears as parents/carers

### *But I just want to make it better....*

There are certain things that we are all tempted to do when children experience anxiety. It's impossible to get everything right all of the time but by being aware of these temptations, we can start to notice when we are doing something that might not be helpful for children.

### *Dismissing and minimising*

Sometimes it can be tempting to rush children in to feeling better by dismissing or minimising fears. This can be by saying things like "don't be silly, that would never happen" or "it's not a big deal". These words often come from a place of kindness but don't make children feel understood.



### *Promising*

When children are anxious, it's natural to try and reassure them in any way we can. Sometimes we can do this by promising children that fears won't happen but it's important to try not to do this as we can't control every aspect of the environment.



### *Avoidance*

Sometimes we feel that it is just easier to avoid the things that make children anxious in a hope to avoid the child's anxiety but also the behaviours that come along with this. For example, a trip to the shop 'might not be worth the battle'. Although this can be true some of the time, by avoiding a child's anxiety we are not helping them overcome this fear but instead we are feeding it.



## ***Our own worries***

Sometimes children are picking up on our own anxieties. This could be children sensing that parents feel uneasy to leave them in a new place. Our own worry can be useful, if it drives us to make something safer for our children; however, at other times our worry may be holding our children back in order to reduce our anxiety. Although it can be difficult to separate from children when they have been dependent on us for a long time or when their disability may make them more vulnerable, it is important to not let our own hesitation get in the way. These fears can be even bigger when children have a disability or developmental difficulty as these separations tend to have to be more planned than typical separations. Sometimes as parents, you might need to make a conscious effort to allow your child to experience independence and you might have to prepare them and teach them skills to be able to manage this. These additional preparations can add stress to an already difficult time. (Miller 1994)

## **Supportive relationships**

Something we know that helps children when they are feeling worried is being around someone who makes them feel safe and understood. This is someone who can 'be with' them through their emotions. 'Being with' a child's emotions is about matching their emotions and is a balance of not rushing them to feel better but also not feeding in to their worries. We can sometimes over/under estimate how a child copes and this can be even more likely if they have a disability or developmental difficulty. When children know that they have someone they can rely on, they can start to feel safe and work through difficult emotions. (Powell et al, 2013)

## **Anxiety Masquerading as Challenging Behaviour**

Sometimes anxiety is a response to a threat which can lead children to go into 'fight or flight mode'. Some children may feel a need to run or shrink away (flight mode). Other children may become confrontational or disruptive, have a 'temper tantrum', ask a lot of repetitive questions, or seem to try and control others (fight mode). This means that anxiety can sometimes look like anger, hyperactive or oppositional behaviour.



## Additional Tools

### What's happening next?!

#### Social Stories & Predictability

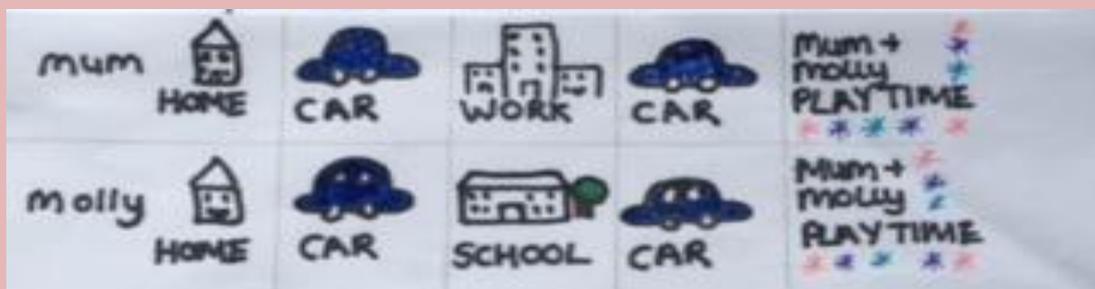
For some children, **providing social stories** (Gray,1991) lets them know what is expected from them and will illuminate an invisible context. Social stories can be described as short (visual or written) descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity. These stories include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. These can be very personal to a child and include their name and pictures of themselves. They may need to go over this social story multiple times before they feel reassured. **Using time tables** will also help children know what's happening next.

**Routine needs to be predictable.** Children need to know what's happening in small steps and build up to things. If you know of a situation in advance, you could go on visits and look at pictures in preparation. Although this can't always be the case, you could use a **'change' visual symbol** and add this to a time table. Even if a change happens last minute, you can use this symbol to reassure children that 'change' is part of that daily routine.



**Split social stories** – This is providing a social story or timetable for your child but also adding a social story of what family members will be doing while they are away from them. This might be particularly useful for children who struggle with separation.

If separation is hard for your child, you could add reunions to their time tables so that they can see when you will be coming back together.



Some children might prefer a **verbal schedule** with a detailed breakdown of the whole day whereas other children might find too much information overwhelming and find shorter sentences easier such as "First \_\_\_\_, then \_\_\_\_". You may need to repeat these over and over again before your child feels reassured. For children who are verbal and asking you to repeat, you can try asking them to repeat the schedule back to you instead.

## Worry dolls/teddies

The purpose of a worry doll is that children can 'give them' their worries and the worry doll will work on them overnight while they sleep.

A worry doll gives your child an opportunity to share their worries and also gives them a chance to let go of their worries overnight. A lot of the time, we feel better after a night's sleep, so some worries will have disappeared when they wake up. The worry doll can go under a pillow or on a table, wherever your child feels comfortable with them.

When we talk about worry dolls, these don't have to be specifically bought 'worry dolls'. You could use teddies or perhaps you could spend some time making a worry doll with your child. Some children have 'worry eaters' or 'worry elves', you can tailor the theme to your child's interests.

The important part is that it is something your child can give their worries to and they will work on them. Try not to promise that the 'worry doll' will fix everything as sometimes worries might be about something we can't control.



## Choices

For children with anxiety, control and empowerment can play a large part in alleviating anxieties.

Give them as many choices as possible. These can seem like insignificant choices to us but it will all play a part in children feeling less anxious.

Sometimes it may feel like we are giving up our control but by giving children choices, we still have overall control but we are allowing them to feel some control over a situation.

### Examples of this:

Instead of "It's time for bed", you could say "Shall we go to bed now or in five minutes?"

Instead of "You need to get dressed", you could say "Will you wear your blue top or green top today?"

# The worry bully

It might help children to think of worry as something external. You can get them to draw their worry, or even refer to it as their 'worry bully'. You can encourage them to tell you what it feels like or looks like.

You can ask children to think about things like "What would you say to a worry bully?" or encourage them to tell it to go away.



You could also try 'If you were a superhero, what super powers would you have to get rid of these worries?'. This superhero can have skills that would help them cope with whatever they are finding difficult. They might be able to stand up to bullies, have cooling powers to calm their face when they are embarrassed or give them positive self talk when they feel nervous.



## Emotions like the weather...

When we are anxious, it can be really hard to remember a time that we didn't feel worried or a time that we will feel better. It might be helpful to explain to children and young people that our emotions come and go, a bit like the weather. Although it may feel like it's stormy right now, if we sit with our emotions it will pass. Some days might be stormier than others but the weather is always changing and our emotions are a bit like that too. By having a supportive relationship with young people, we can support them to sit with their emotions and let them pass.



## Anxiety Apps



Some apps might be more suitable for children who can read. For children who can't, perhaps an adult can familiarise themselves with the app and they can use the techniques together without having to read it.

- Breathe - This App can guide you through breathing exercises.
- SAM app – Self-help for Anxiety Management, this app helps you recognise what causes anxiety, manage anxious thoughts and behaviours and guide you through exercises.
- Calm – This app can guide you through mindfulness exercises.

## Worry Time

You can set some time aside to spend with your child to discuss their worries. This could be 15 minutes a day and you should be careful to keep to the timeframe you set. If children start discussing their worries with you, outside of these 15 minutes, you can gently remind them to put their worries in a box until your next worry time.

When we think and talk about our worries, we are letting them grow. By asking children to put their worry aside until a specific time, you are helping them to start to think less about their worries.

By the time 'worry time' comes, they will probably have forgotten about a lot of the 'little' worries which would otherwise have escalated.

This can be a hard skill for children and young people and you can help them do this by being clear and consistent with the boundaries. You can also suggest fun things to fill the time that they would normally have spent worrying.

This idea comes from a book called 'What to do when you worry too much...' (Huebner, D. 2005) which is a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) based work book for children, full of illustrations, which explains anxiety and easy to understand strategies. The full reference of the book can be found in our references section.

It might also be helpful to have a card with all the other things they can do instead of worrying. You can bring this out when children are worrying and let them pick what they would like to do instead. Perhaps you and your child could draw a sheet of what they can do instead...

### You could say something like....

"It sounds like you're talking about your worries but it's not worry time at the moment. We need to put those worries in a box until worry time at \_\_\_\_\_. What fun things can we do instead of talking about our worries? Let's take a look at our card."



## Transitional Objects

A transitional object is a comfort object or security blanket that provides psychological comfort. An example of this would be a bracelet. If each family member picks a colour of wool, it can be platted to make a bracelet. Each family member can then wear the bracelet when they are separated to still feel close to each other.

A transitional object can be used at bedtime for children who find going to bed hard. This could be taking a parents jumper to bed or a teddy to remind children of special people.



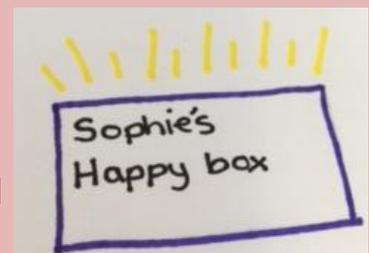
## Happy Box

When we are sad or worried certain things can make us feel better, like looking at old pictures or smelling a nice candle. This is exactly the same for children. It might be a good idea to create a 'happy box' with your child, full of things that cheer them up so that they can easily access all the things they love when they need them the most.

It might be useful to put one thing for each sense in the box i.e. something that smells nice, something that looks nice, something that feels nice, something that tastes nice and something that they enjoy listening to.

Here are some ideas of what you can put in your child's happy box...

- A cuddly toy
- A picture of family or friends
- A piece of nice material
- A little candle melt or material with some lavender oil
- A small pack of something they like to eat
- A CD with their favourite music
- A letter written from someone they love
- A fiddle toy



## Escalating and deescalating thoughts

Sometimes when we panic, our thoughts escalate. For example, a worry about talking to someone because we might stumble over our words can turn in to a much bigger anxiety.

Nobody will ever want to be my friend



Everyone will make fun of me



They will laugh and tell everyone else



They will think I'm stupid



I will stumble over my words when I talk to them

Lots of people want to be my friend.



People are normally friendly.



Other people wouldn't even care.



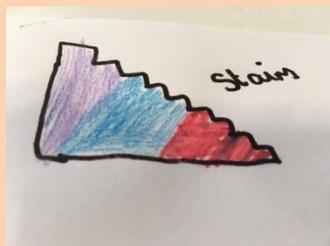
They probably wouldn't even notice



Plenty of people stumble over words

These escalations won't be logical and young people aren't always aware that they are doing it. You could discuss if this is happening with your child, if you both agree then you could try pointing it out to them when they are next escalating their thoughts. Try to avoid doing this in a blaming way, saying something like "It sounds like your thoughts are escalating or that your worries are getting bigger" can be enough to help.

You could also ask questions to help deescalate their thoughts. These could be things like "How likely do you think that is?" or "What would you think if someone stumbled their words talking to you?". These aren't meant to be accusations or interrogations but just gentle ways of bringing their thoughts back down.



## Sensory needs

Touch can be particularly helpful in reducing anxiety, especially when provided with a firm pressure. Giving a child a big firm hug or letting them hold your hand tightly can provide the calming input they need to help cope with a situation that is causing them anxiety.

Some children have difficulty processing sensory information. This means that they might be overly sensitive or under sensitive to certain things in the environment like sound, light, smell, movement or touch. This might be the case with your child but it's unlikely that they would be able to verbally tell you this.

Sometimes things we don't even notice ourselves can bother children such as the sounds of hangers in clothes shops, the feel of a label on the back of a t-shirt or weak smells can feel overwhelming to them. Children can become very good at meeting their own sensory needs by doing things like shouting, covering their ears/eyes and finding ways of leaving overwhelming situations.

Making sure an environment is suitable for your child's sensory needs may help reduce their anxiety. This can be done in many ways such as wearing ear defenders in loud/busy environments or wearing sunglasses in places that might feel too bright. .

*If you feel your child is struggling with sensory input, you should speak to your GP or Paediatrician about making a referral to Occupational Therapy who will be able to help.*

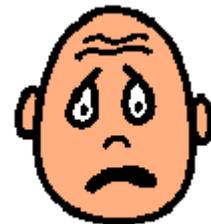
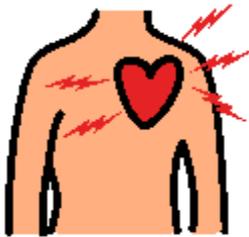
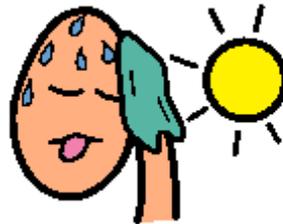
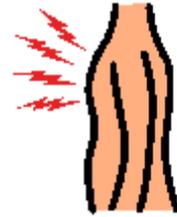
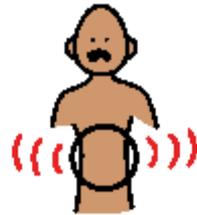
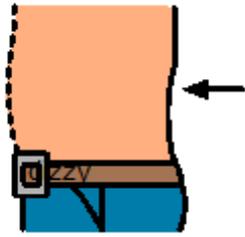


## Finding unique solutions....

A lot of children will have something specific to them that can help them feel less anxious. This can be a wide range of things from a song they like you to sing to a specific episode of a programme that they like to re-watch. These can sometimes incorporate their special interests, so a child who likes cars might want to watch an old car race again and again as it helps them calm down.

Many children and young people have special interests and this can sometimes be more intense when a child has a developmental difficulty or disability. Sometimes 'hooking' in to this child's special interest can help them when they are feeling anxious. This can be something like asking questions about it or just showing pictures of something related to distract them. Sometimes we can use their special interest to help them overcome anxiety, for example "*what would \*insert favourite character\* do in this situation?*"

## Useful Pictures



Perhaps you and your child could use these pictures with the figure on the next page.

By Andy James, used with permission.



## What our young people had to say....

*We thought we would ask some of our young people about the things they found helpful and not so helpful when dealing with their worries. Our group were 15+ and all had different experiences of anxiety. They all came up with helpful ideas they wanted to share with others.*

### *What helps you when you feel worried?*

Calm colouring

Playing games

Listening to music

My mum

Playing with my dogs

Being with someone I trust

Talking to friends

Using calming apps

Having someone to talk to

Writing it down

Having something to fidget with

Some alone time



### *What is sometimes not so helpful when you are worried?*

When other people get in the way or follow me

Sometimes worry comes across as anger

When I lock myself away

When my friends don't understand me

When there are extra pressures so things like exams

When people say things like "don't be silly" or "it's not a big deal"



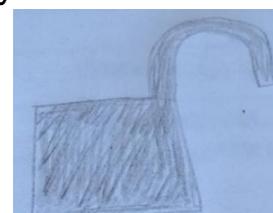
### *What advice would you give to other young people?*

If you're really worrying go to a quiet space and talk to people you trust.

Don't lock yourself out.

Share with other people.

In a year's time, this won't matter.



## “Belly” breathing

Calm breathing means taking slow and controlled breaths. One way to do this is to think of it as blowing a balloon in your tummy.

Put your hands on your tummy and close your eyes.



Breathe in slowly for 3 seconds through your nose.



Pretend that you are trying to blow up a balloon in your tummy, so when you breathe in you can feel your tummy get bigger like a balloon filling with air.



Wait 2 seconds, and then slowly breathe out through your mouth for 3 seconds.



When you are breathing out, imagine your balloon is emptying of air. Feel your tummy get smaller when you breathe out.



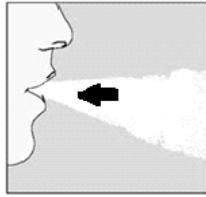
Wait 2 seconds and then do it again! You should try calm breathing 5 times to slow down your breathing when you are feeling anxious, angry or sad. Sometimes you might want to do it more than 5 times. You can even do calm breathing to help you relax before bed.



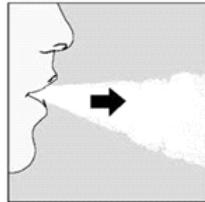
When you feel angry or worried, sometimes you might feel your heart beat faster or that your breathing becomes faster.

By focusing on our breathing, this helps us to feel calmer.

I want you all to make a fist shape with your hand and take a deep breath in.

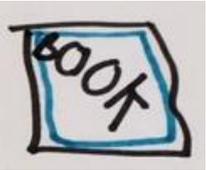


I then want you to breathe out while you open your hand out like a flower.



You can repeat this for 5 times or as many times as you like until you feel a bit more relaxed.





## Recommended books

- ❖ The 'What-to-do' guides for children and young people to work through. These books are recommended for developmental ages of 6-12 years.
  - *What to Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming OCD (What-to-Do Guides for Kids)*
  - *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*
  - *What to Do When Your Temper Flares: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Problems with Anger (What-to-Do Guides for Kids)*
  - *What to Do When You Dread Your Bed: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Problems with Sleep (What-to-Do Guides for Kids)*
  
- ❖ *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin for Children Aged 5-9 (Gremlin and Thief CBT Workbooks)* by Kate Collins-Donnelly
  
- ❖ *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin – A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management for Young People* by Kate Collins-Donnelly.
  
- ❖ *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside
  
- ❖ *The Big Book of Calmers* by Jenny Mosley and Ross Grogan
  
- ❖ *Relax* by Catherine O'Neil
  
- ❖ *Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration: Therapy for Children with Autism and Other Pervasive Developmental Disorders* by Ellen Yack, Paula Aquilla, Shirley Sutton.
  
- ❖ *The Out-of-Sync Child* by Carol Kranowitz



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## How to get further support:

- **Helping Hands Service** – A support service for parents/carers of children with a disability or developmental difficulty living in Newport, South Monmouth or South Torfaen. **Contact: 01633 748 023.**
- **New Pathways Child and Young Persons Project.** New Pathways has a counselling project for children and young people to discuss anything that is worrying. For more information: [www.newpathways.org.uk/counseling/](http://www.newpathways.org.uk/counseling/) Number: **01685 379310**
- **Your GP.** If you are concerned about your child, please speak to your GP about how they are able to support you/help you access other support