



Supporting Anxious Children

This toolkit is for parents or carers of a child with additional needs or a developmental difficulty.

Here are some ideas and strategies ***around supporting and managing anxiety in children with additional needs***



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What is Anxiety?

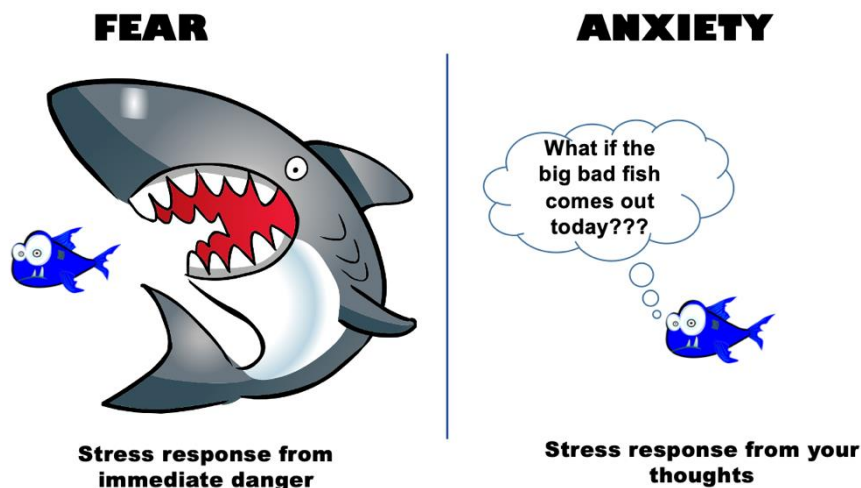
When we say someone is anxious, we usually mean they are frightened of or worried about something. Anxiety can look like many different things. This is especially true for children with additional needs or children with a developmental disability who may communicate their feelings using behaviour or mask their anxiety altogether.

Anxiety is a normal response in many situations, and often goes away once the situation has passed.

In fact, fear and anxiety are often a helpful response to danger. Human beings wouldn't have lasted very long without it!

The difference between FEAR and ANXIETY

When we sense danger, fear often sets off a stress response in our body, which is meant to help us deal with that danger.



This stress response is a really helpful response when there is real, physical danger but when we use our minds to imagine bad things that might happen to us (worry), this also triggers the same stress response, with all the physical symptoms that go with it!

The Physical Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety

Headache

Sweating

Feel dizzy

Short of
Breath

Clammy
Hands

Worry



Wobbly
Legs

Fright

Dry mouth

Hard to
swallow

Funny
tummy

Muscles
feel tight

Heart
banging

Top
Tip!

When we feel anxious, our body experiences physical symptoms like the ones in the diagram above. This can feel scary or confusing to a young person, and they may think that they are poorly or unwell. It can be helpful to talk through a diagram like this, or point to different parts of a doll, to help explain to children how anxiety affects our bodies.

The Science behind Anxiety

We experience symptoms like this when we worry because our brain tells our body to react as if we are being presented with physical threats. Our body releases adrenaline (stress hormones) which sets off a stress response in our body designed to help us 'fight', 'run away' or 'hide' from the danger. This stress response is also known as **fight, flight or freeze**. The unconscious part of our brain that controls our heart-rate, breathing and digestive processes takes over and prepares us to either FIGHT/FLIGHT or FREEZE. Most people experience the symptoms of FIGHT/FLIGHT when they are worried.

Fight



Flight



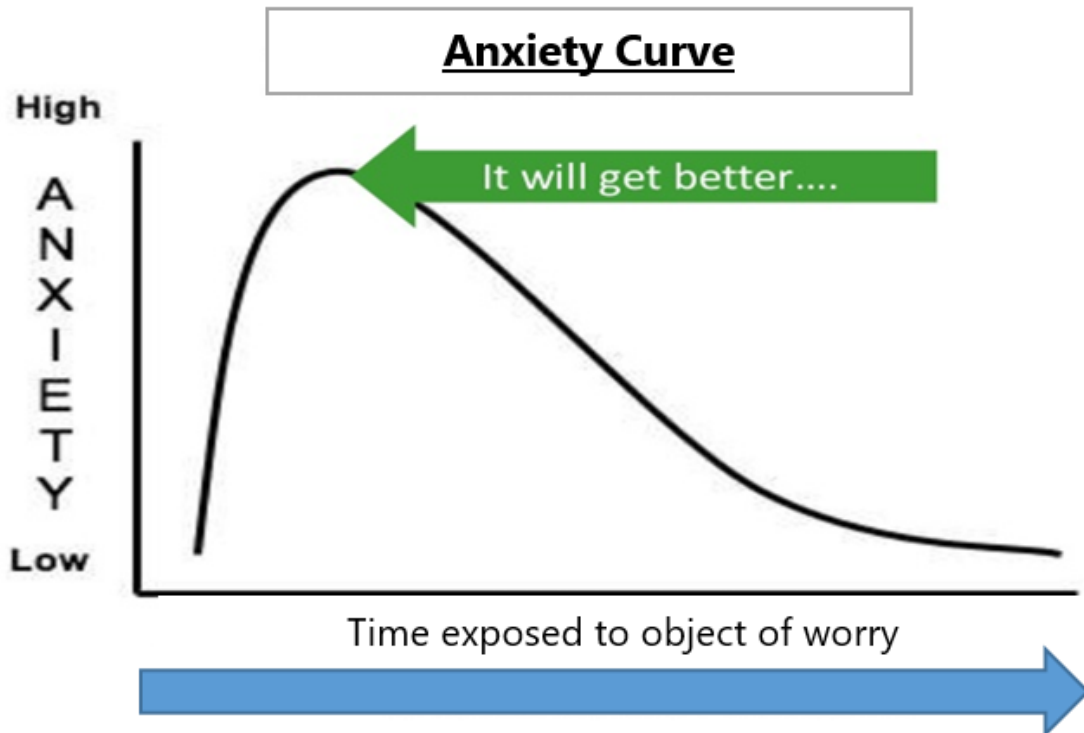
Freeze



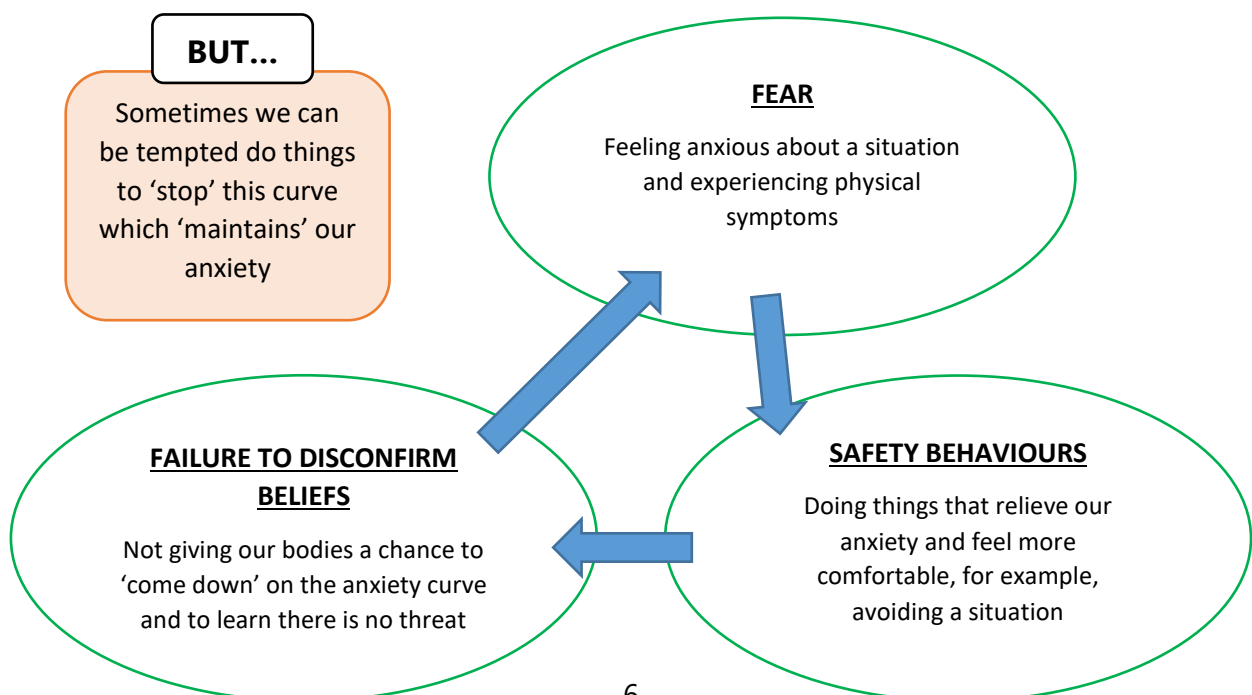
How does our body prepare us?

Fight or Flight	Freeze
Sweat: to maintain body temperature	Heart beats slower: to conserve energy
Heart beats faster: to help us move faster	Reduced body flow to muscles: to keep still
Breathing becomes faster: to help us move faster	Breathing slows: to keep still/quiet
Blood rushes to limbs: to help us move faster	May feel numb: pain killing hormones released
Our body is ready for action	Our body is ready to 'wait out' the danger

What Keeps Anxiety Going?



Eventually our bodies will get used to being 'exposed' to the thing that is making us worried, and our anxiety will come down. This anxiety curve is true for every situation that makes someone anxious that has no real threat – eventually our bodies will realise we are not in danger and that we are physically **safe**.



Anxiety in Children with Additional Needs

Common worries at different ages



0 to 2 years



Loud noises or big objects looming over them, separation from caregiver, other strangers

2 to 6 years



Fear of the dark, bad dreams, imaginary creatures or ghosts in the night, animals, 'bad people'

7 to 12 years



Being left alone, potential burglars, injury or dying e.g. car accidents or plane crashes, school performance, growing up!

Adolescence



Personal relationships, school performance, identity, natural disasters and world events, their future

What this might look like in children with additional needs or a developmental disability

They may have additional or different things that make them anxious, such as sensory sensitivity to noise, touch or taste

They may present their anxiety through challenging behaviour

It might be harder to tell when they are anxious or why

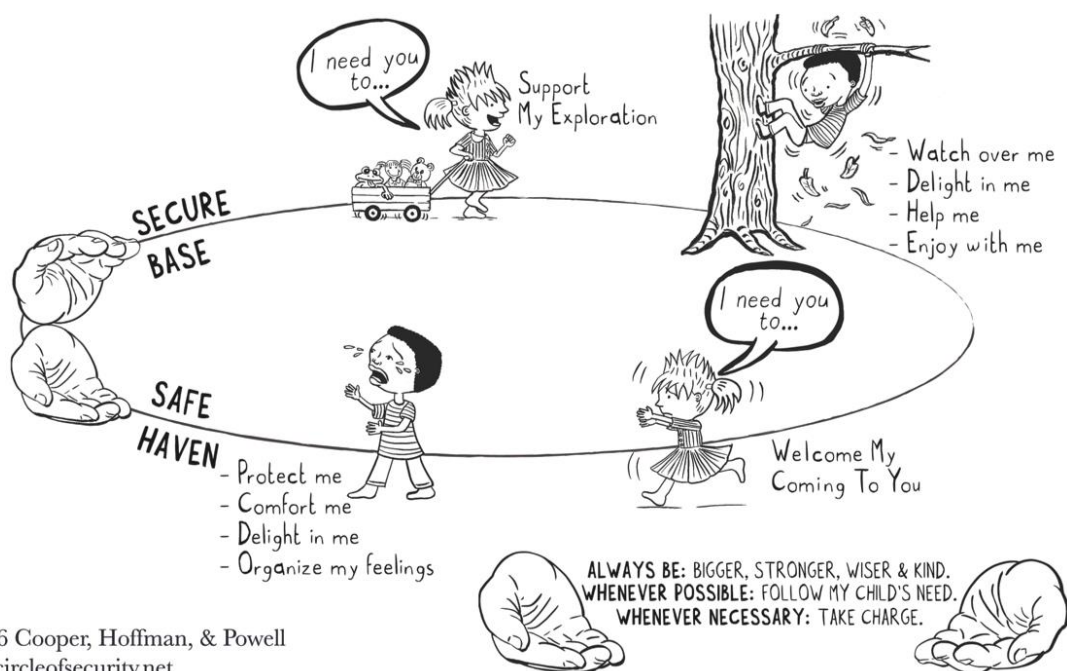
If they have difficulties with language, they may find it harder to express or articulate what is making them anxious or worried

One thing that might help with this is to keep a diary around what happened **before, during, and after** a situation that you feel might be making your child anxious. If you notice a pattern – this can be the first step to putting strategies in place to try to help reduce anxiety for your child.

The Circle of Security®

Sometimes children can pick 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. 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.

The Circle of Security® diagram below shows how it can be helpful to be attuned to when children need to **'go out'** on the top of the circle and **explore** away from their secure base. This may feel harder for parents of children with additional needs or a developmental difficulty as they may be more vulnerable or anxious about the world around them. However, it is still important that children get opportunities to do this.



Equally, 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 into their worries. We can sometimes over/under estimate how a child copes and this can be even more likely if they have additional needs or a developmental difficulty. When children know that they have someone they can rely on, they can start to feel safe and work through difficult emotions. An example of this is when children may be feeling anxious and will want to come **'back in'** to their secure base, as shown on the bottom of the circle.

Common Pitfalls for Adults

We can all fall into common traps when trying to support an anxious child or young person.

Overly minimising concerns

1

Sometimes it can be tempting to reassure children by downplaying their concerns, perhaps saying "there's nothing to be scared of here!" or "[A fly] can't hurt you!" Unfortunately it takes a little while for us to both learn and *believe* these things, and so comments that don't allow time for processing the anxiety as an emotion, and don't validate that feeling, often have little impact.

"It's not a big deal"

Automatic Reassurance

2

When children are anxious, it's natural to try and reassure them, because we want to make them feel safe. If we don't provide children with any reassurance, it can make them feel alone and uncertain but sometimes we can reassure too quickly which doesn't give children enough time to explain their feelings. When we reassure too quickly, children can feel that we haven't understood the situation or care about how they feel which can make their anxieties grow.

"I promise it will be fine"

Avoidance

3

It is natural to want to protect children from situations which cause them distress and worry. However, this is tricky when the situations which cause your child to be anxious are part of everyday life. In the short-term, it can seem 'not worth the battle' but in the long-term, avoiding situations also means removing the opportunities for children to learn that things they are worried about might actually be ok.

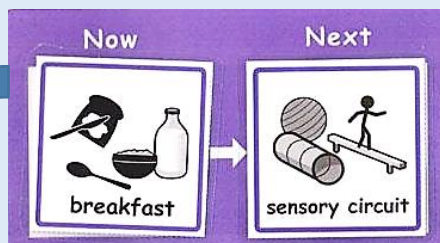
"You don't have to do that if you don't want to"

Preventative Tools and Strategies

Here are some strategies that you can use to support your child to manage their anxiety. Some of these can also be helpful to try and **pre-empt** anxiety about a certain situation.

Routines and Visual Timetables

Day to day activities can be unpredictable, and the anticipation of what comes next can cause anxiety for children and young people with additional needs. By using clear visuals on a timetable strip, perhaps with '**Now, Next, and Then**' steps, you can help your child feel more aware and prepared for what is expected of them.



Be **kind** to yourself, though. It's not always possible to predict every part of a day.

Drawing Feelings

For children who might find it tricky to articulate or explain their anxiety, supporting them to draw or write their feelings can be a helpful strategy for caregivers to understand what is going on for them before things escalate.

This is a creative way for children to express their feelings and emotions in a way that is appropriate and adjusted for their developmental stage.



Social Stories

Social stories can be helpful for children and young people who experience difficulty with social interaction and understanding complex social situations.



Drawing out or writing out a social event can help bring clarity and context to what might happen. These can be really useful with things like medical appointments.

Sensory Need Strategies

Some (but not all) children with additional needs may have sensory needs in relation to their **taste, smell, sight, hearing, touch, movement** and **balance**. These needs exist on a spectrum of **sensory seeking** needs vs. **sensory avoidant** needs. **Sensory seeking** children might enjoy **more input** from things like fidget spinners, squeeze toys and swings. **Sensory avoidant** children might need a little **protection** for their senses, for example, ear defenders.

Using the appropriate strategies for your child can help reduce sensory-related anxiety.

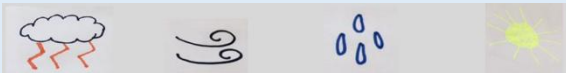


Helping Children to 'Let Go' of Worries

Anxiety can be a difficult thing to 'move on' from when it gets stuck in our heads. It can often lead to rumination which can mean that we aren't fully living in the moment, or that it's tricky to feel relaxed enough to do things like get to sleep. The below strategies might help children and young people to '**let go**' of their worries and things they can't control.

Feelings 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.



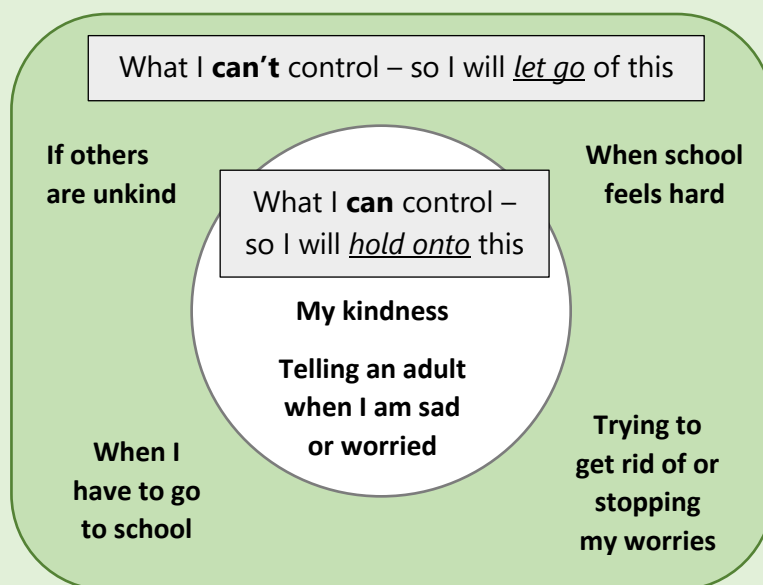
Thought Balloons

Support your child to write or draw their anxious thoughts onto drawings of a balloon. Count down, and imagine letting the balloons go. Perhaps you could try letting *real* balloons go!



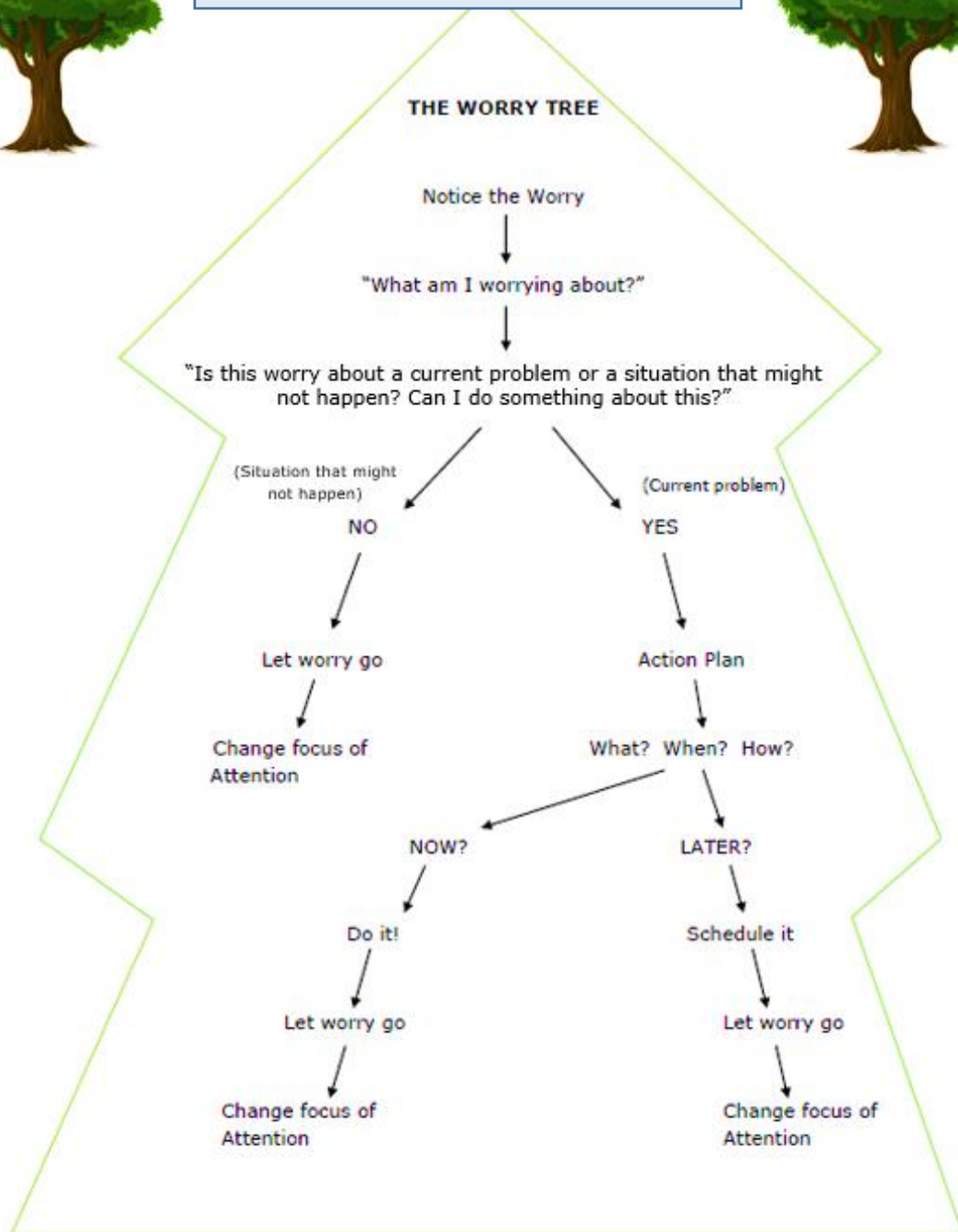
Control Wheels

Control wheels can be another helpful way to support children to remember what they can and can't control about situations that may worry them. This example is around anxiety about school, but you could create your own depending on what is specifically worrying your child.



Worry Tree

Follow this worry tree flowchart for a structured way to know when to 'let go' of a worry you can't control!



www.getselfhelp.co.uk

Adapted from Butler & Hope 2007

www.get.gg

1

Calming Strategies

Finally, here are some calming, grounding, and relaxation strategies that might help your child or young person when they are feeling worried and anxious. As we discussed earlier, it's still important to **'be with'** your child in their anxiety. Particularly for children with additional needs or a developmental disability, repeated attempts to calm or redirect them from their anxiety can cause frustration, and the anxiety curve teaches us that anxiety will always eventually decrease. Use your instincts and wealth of knowledge about your child as a caregiver to find a balance, and to judge when is best to try these activities.

Star Breathing

Start at any 'breathe in' side. Hold your breath at the point. Then breathe out. Keep going until you have gone around the whole star. Turning the paper as you go might help!



Self soothe box

A self soothe box is a box that contains items that can distract and ground you when you're feeling worried or stressed. Find a box, and fill it with things that make you feel calm and safe. When you feel worried or upset, you can turn to your box for ideas to help.

Activities—a colouring book with a selection of coloured pencils, your favourite book to read, printable yoga activity cards, your favourite songs to listen to on a music player or CD, a bottle of bubbles.

Memories—a photo that makes you smile (e.g. with your best friend or from a family holiday), or another item that brings back good memories (e.g. a pebble or seashells from your favourite beach holiday).

Relax—things that make you feel relaxed and calm, e.g. cards demonstrating deep breathing exercises, calming music, a CD with animal or nature sounds.



Smell—a calming essential oil spray (e.g. lavender), or an clothing item sprayed with your favourite perfume (e.g. the perfume of someone who makes you feel safe).

Positivity cards—create cards or posters with your favourite uplifting quotes and phrases that make you feel good and are reassuring, e.g. "I am enough" and "everything will be okay."

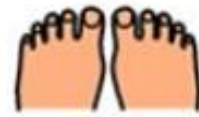
Touch—this could be a stress ball or fidget spinner to distract you. Other items could be a teddy to cuddle, a soft blanket to wrap yourself in or lotion to rub into your skin.

Muscle Relaxation



squeeze

Start at your **feet**



feet

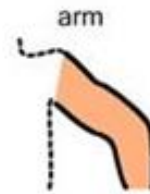
Squeeze the **muscles**

Slowly **let go**



leg

Squeeze your **legs**



arm

Slowly **let go**

Slowly move up your **body**



hands

Until you reach the **top**



head

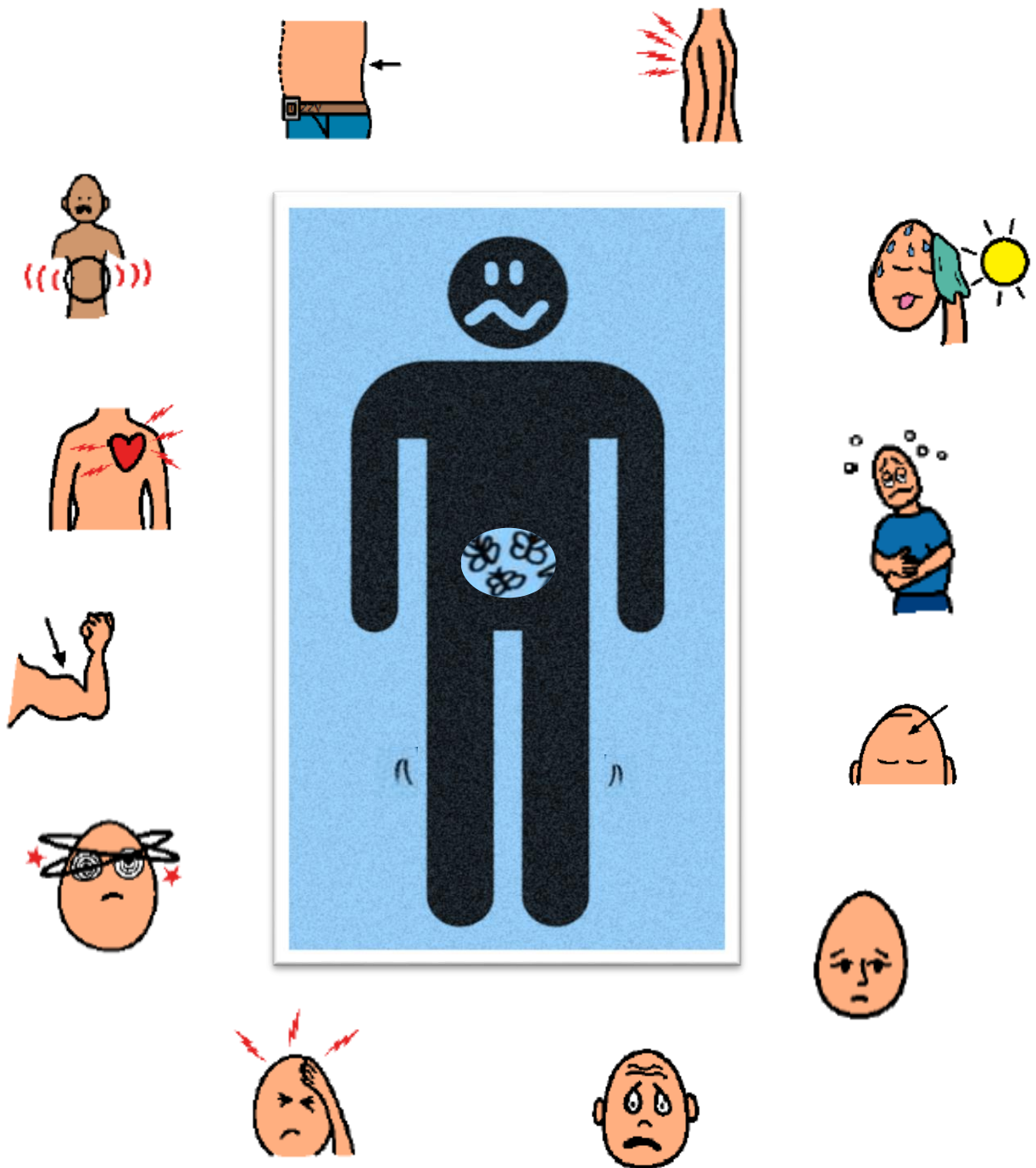


Top
Tip!

Children who are **sensory seeking** may particularly enjoy this physical calming activity!

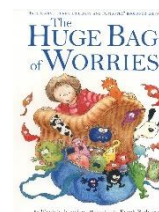
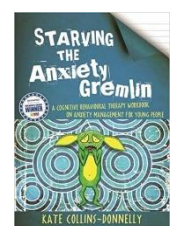
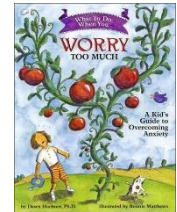
Exploring Feelings Exercise

Now it's your turn! Help your child understand the feelings associated with anxiety by completing this activity together. You could use it when your child is feeling anxious to help them communicate how they feel, or just as a practice to learn more about anxiety and physical symptoms! Ask your child to 'draw' what they are feeling in their bodies. You can use the images below as prompts or a guide.



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



Useful Resources

Self-help Apps

Self-help apps can be a useful and viable way of support. The NHS have published apps on their digital library, some focussed on helping you relax include:



Useful Websites

The following websites may offer some useful resources and information regarding building resilience, learning disabilities, and mental health support.

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety-in-children/>
- <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>
- https://www.moodcafe.co.uk/media/19579/cyp_parents_1_2_web.pdf

Further Support

Helping Hands Psychology Team: If you require further support please use the contact details overleaf to contact the Helping Hands team in your designated Children's Centre.

GP: If you are concerned about yourself or a member of the family you can access support from your local GP.

Charities: Charity organisations such as Mind Cymru, Samaritans and Young Minds may also be able to provide you with support.

Mind Cymru	02920 395 123
Samaritans	116 125
Young Minds	0808 802 5544

Local Support Groups: Groups are a great way to meet new people and to talk about shared experiences. Here are the links to some we are aware of in the local area:

<https://www.facebook.com/SparrowsAln/>

<http://www.valleydaffodils.co.uk/>

<https://www.asdinfowales.co.uk/newport-autism-support-group/>

<http://www.buildingbridgesproject.org.uk/>

<https://hopegb.co.uk/>

<http://www.onelife.wales/About-us/>

<https://www.magicparents.co.uk/>

Contact

This toolkit was created by the **Helping Hands Psychology** service at Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB).

Your feedback is important to us! If you would like to tell us what you thought about this self-help toolkit, please get in touch with us by emailing ABB.HelpingHandsTeam@wales.nhs.uk. We would love to hear from you.

Additionally, if you need any help or support with using or accessing these resources, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Helping Hands Psychology Team at your local children's centre.

Serennu Children's Centre 01633 748023	Nevill Hall Children's Centre 01873 732713
Caerphilly Children's Centre 02920 867447	

Please contact the team if you would be interested in any of our other toolkits on the following topics -

Understanding and Managing Behaviour

Transitions

Friendships

Building Resilience

Supporting Siblings