

HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE DEAL WITH ANXIETY

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WHAT ANXIETY IS AND ISN'T

Anxiety is not genetic, it is not part of us, it is a mindset. This is very important to emphasise if an individual is to be helped in seeing it as something separate to themselves that is not inevitable and that they can learn to gain better control over.

The difference between anxiety and fear:

Fear is the response to an actual threat of some kind that produces the fight, flight, freeze response and is vital in keeping us safe

Anxiety is the anticipation of something we perceive as frightening, even when there is no actual danger, but which produces the same response.

PHYSICAL CHANGES AS A RESULT OF FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE:

INCREASE IN:

Adrenalin
Heart rate and pulse
Blood Pressure
Breathing rate
Glucose energy release
Pupil dilation
Muscle tension
Body temperature

DECREASE IN:

Digestive activity

RE-DIRECTION OF:

Blood to key muscles
and the brain

Therefore, if we frequently view situations as more dangerous than they actually are, our body is being put under regular, unnecessary physiological stress making it even more important that an individual learns to manage things better.

Some people are more likely, characteristically, to feel anxious.

For others, anxiety might be triggered by life events. For example:

- experiencing lots of change within a short space of time
- having responsibilities that are beyond their age and development (for example Young Carers)
- exposed to family stress around things like health, employment, money
- traumatic or distressing experiences in which they do not feel safe such as being bullied, witnessing/ experiencing abuse, accidents, illnesses, loss
- being around someone who is very anxious such as a parent/ carer

It is natural for all children and young people to feel worried sometimes. There are some obvious causes – starting secondary school, exams, a presentation etc - and some that are particular to an individual such as social anxiety or phobias.

However, it is important to recognise that none of those situations are actually threatening in themselves, it is an individual's perception of them that facilitates the anxiety. The situations should therefore be seen purely as triggers.

Anxiety and Covid-19:

Anxiety at this time is normal!

Most young people have not expressed anxiety about the virus, unless they have a vulnerable family member, but many have spoken of their difficulties around loss of structure, routine, motivation, productivity, independence, social life, physical activities, clubs, fixtures, relationships, rituals, endings, rites of passage coupled with ongoing uncertainty as to how things will further evolve eg: Will my exams take place next year? Will school close again?

There is no quick fix for anxiety. It is not something that an expert can cure for an individual. Improvement comes when a young person is helped, within a supportive relationship, to gain awareness of how and when they experience anxiety and in developing strategies for managing it better. This will take time but can result in the development of life long skills.

Supporting someone with anxiety:

- When supporting someone struggling with anxiety, it is important to challenge the language they use to facilitate them in seeing it as separate to them and therefore something they can, in time, exert more control over. Statements such as “my anxiety” “it’s part of me” “it’s in my genes” “I’m like my mum/dad” “I’ll always have it” need some gentle correction and psycho-education
- Help them to become aware of their **sources** of anxiety eg: *school, family, social situations, appearance, health of others, problems at home, crime & safety, parties, being away from family, perfectionism, what other people think, the future, responsibilities, getting into trouble, World news, blood, death, water, heights, germs/contamination, other people’s expectations, travel, change, the dark, crowded places, injections, the media, being alone, food, exams, speaking to people, new situations*
- Help raise awareness of how they experience anxiety **physically**: – *trembling hands, butterflies, changes in temperature, turning bright red, shallow/rapid breathing, needing to go to the toilet more often, nausea, dry mouth, twitches/tics, sweating more than usual, tense muscles, wobbly legs, panic attacks (these can include racing heart, tightness in chest, sweating, shaking, inability to catch enough breath)*
Getting them to show you with their hands where in their body they experience it to put them firmly in touch with these signs so that they can begin to recognise them earlier

- Help raise awareness of how they experience anxiety **emotionally** – *preoccupied by upsetting, scary or negative thoughts, nervous, on edge, panicky or frightened, overwhelmed or out of control, full of dread or an impending sense of doom; hypersensitivity to noises, smells or sights; worrying about being able to cope with daily things like school, friendships and being in groups or social situations; worrying so much that it is difficult to concentrate and / or sleep*
- Help raise awareness of **behaviours** in response to anxiety: *withdrawal/ isolating themselves, avoidant of school/ social/ group situations, separation from parents, willingness to try new things, repeating certain behaviours/actions/ rituals (often called obsessive compulsive behaviours), eating more or less than usual; self-harming, seeking attention in negative ways, constantly seeking reassurance, procrastination, bingeing, getting others to do things for you, skipping meals, irritability, tearful, aggressive, self-chastisement*

Getting to know these signs can make them less frightening and overwhelming when they happen.

It's important to remember that if your child experiences any of these symptoms, it doesn't necessarily mean they have an anxiety problem but, if any of them are affecting their everyday life, they should be encouraged to talk, to get support either through self-help strategies, or professional support if needed.

An anxious child often overthinks. There are numerous, common **thinking styles** such as:

What if?, black & white, catastrophizing, perfectionism, overgeneralisation, jumping to conclusions, personalisation, distortion, assumptions, self-doubting; should / must and ought statements; self-blaming.

Help them identify their thinking style and present alternative ways of looking at things.

Help an individual become aware that thoughts are not necessarily facts but self-constructs usually stemming from beliefs about themselves. Learn about their self-beliefs eg: *I'm not very popular, I've never been very good at I'm not sporty, I'm ugly, My brother/sister are better than me at .../He/She's the favourite/ the academic one etc.* and support them in developing new, positive, accurate and realistic beliefs about themselves.

How to help a young person in an anxious moment:

- Sit with them and offer calm physical reassurance
- Breathe slowly and deeply together. Count slowly to 5 as you breathe in, and then 5 as you breathe out. If this is too much, try starting with shorter counts. If it works for them, gradually encourage them to breathe out for 1 or 2 counts longer than they breath in, as this can help their body relax. Someone in a heightened state of anxiety is likely to be taking very shallow breaths at the top of their diaphragm – they should be encouraged to slow and deepen their breath to the pit of their stomach.

- Reassure them that the anxiety will pass and that they will be ok. It can be helpful to describe it as a wave that they can ride or surf until it peaks, breaks and gets smaller. We tend, as a generation of parents, to be very involved in our children's lives, attempting, at times, to create the perfect world for them, fixing any problems that come their way. This does our children a massive disservice as they will face many challenges, only some of which will be predictable. They need help in learning that this is normal and to develop the notion that they can find the strength to navigate them. Sitting with your child's distress is incredibly difficult but vital if they are to learn that tough times improve, that they are able to experience adversity and ride it out. It is rarely permanent.
- Safe place/visualisation exercises: Ask them to think of a safe / relaxing place that must be free from any sense of threat. It can be real or imagined. A favourite place, a holiday destination, a scene from a film, a fantasy land – flesh out the picture, what does it consist of? What are the colours? Smells? Who's in it? What is happening? What are people wearing? What was the weather like? Encourage them to practice this exercise in calm moments so that it is more likely to be accessible when they're really anxious
- 5 senses: try stimulating all 5 senses – encouraging them to connect with what they can see, touch, hear, smell and taste to bring them closer to the present moment and further from their anxiety about a past or future event. Think together about 5 things they can see, 4 they can touch, 3 they can hear, 2 they can smell and 1 they can taste.
- Activity: because anxiety largely takes place in our minds, encourage them to *do* something that helps them feel calmer – physical exercise such as running, walking, swimming, team sport, going to the gym, boxing for example, or, listening to music, painting, drawing, colouring, baking, writing a journal, watching a favourite film or reading.
- Learning to self-soothe. We think nothing of a baby or young child being soothed by the use of a dummy, a teddy, a blanket, by receiving comfort from a grown-up but as they grow older and such props are no longer age appropriate, it is important that a young person develops ways of self-soothing so that they have a repertoire, upon which they can draw, in challenging times. These might include favourite foods, re-runs of a favourite TV series/ film that they can watch with a parent/ alone, favourite places to visit, quality time with a parent, a game, a bath, a pyjama day etc
- Encourage them to think realistically about a situation – how likely is that to happen? What is the evidence for your fear? How do you think everyone else is feeling?
- Allocate bounded worry time for anxious thoughts – I will sit down for 10 mins, setting a timer on my phone, and allow all anxious thoughts to come and when the time is up, I will get up and do something different and if any more anxious thoughts intrude, I will tell myself I won't think about them now but in the next bounded

session by which time, either they will no longer bother me, or I can think about them then.

There is no one set of appropriate strategies. It's important to find what is right for the individual by offering them a selection and seeing what works.

Some Dos and Don'ts:

In a UK Office of National Statistics Child and Adolescent Mental Health survey, the following reasons were given by young people for not talking to their parents:

- Their parents didn't understand what they had to cope with
- Their parents would over-react
- They would worry or upset their parents
- They would be told off
- They would be made to feel stupid
- They would not be believed

When asked what would make them want to discuss their worries with someone, the reasons included:

- Being listened to
- If the person had experienced the same thing
- Being believed
- If the person knows how to sort out the problem
- Not being judged
- Keeping it confidential
- Not being told off/ blamed
- If the person didn't try to take control

To facilitate a young person in talking about anxiety, it is important to empathise with their experience and validate their feelings rather than being critical or expecting them just to stop worrying. If it was that easy, they would.

Think together about whether there's anything in particular that's making them feel anxious. Are there changes that could be made at home or school that would make things easier? If they are worrying about things that are outside their control, it might help to name together who is responsible for managing the problem and in identifying all the areas that they are, currently, in control of. Helping a young person accept however, that they cannot control everything, is an important life skill.

Explore the worst case scenario allowing them to confront their fear, to talk it through to the worst possible outcome from their pov and how they might look after themselves – saying it out loud in this way can help them get a sense of control over it as it is rarely going to be as bad as they think.

Supporting them in facing situations that make them anxious rather than avoiding it is important because when we do the latter, we might think we are helping a distressed child but we are inadvertently reinforcing the notion that there is something to be scared of.

Encourage them to do the things we know are important for our mental health: physical exercise, sleeping well, eating healthily, drinking water and spending quality time with friends and family. Regular exercise is particularly important for anxiety because it can help to reduce the symptoms in the body. It doesn't have to be strenuous.

Encourage them to cut out stimulants. Coffee, caffeinated drinks and alcohol all trigger the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Spend quality time together and talk about other things. Even if it's just for a little while, you can help them take their mind off their worries by having fun and relaxing

Try activities that help us to relax, such as mindfulness, yoga or meditation.

The following are links to further recommended resources for Young People struggling with anxiety:

Four coping techniques for when you feel anxious <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/four-coping-techniques-for-when-you-feel-anxious/>

The grounding technique <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/the-grounding-technique-that-helps-me-when-im-anxious/>

Progressive muscle relaxation <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-i-use-progressive-muscle-relaxation-for-anxiety/>

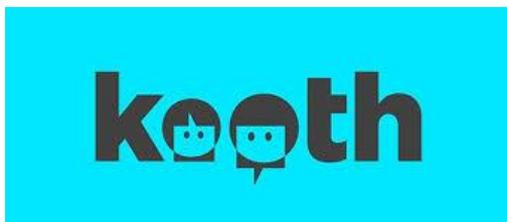
How to make a self-soothe box
<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-to-make-a-self-soothe-box/>

How to cope with panic attacks <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-you-can-help-someone-having-a-panic-attack/>

Tips for coping with social anxiety
<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/tips-for-coping-with-social-anxiety/>

What to do if seeing friends and family makes you anxious
<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/what-to-do-if-seeing-friends-and-family-makes-you-anxious/>

Recommended Apps for Young People:



Helplines to recommend to young people

No Panic

<https://nopanic.org.uk/>

Anxiety UK

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk>

THE MIX

<https://www.themix.org.uk>

YOUNGMINDS CRISIS MESSENGER

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/get-urgent-help/youngminds-crisis-messenger/>

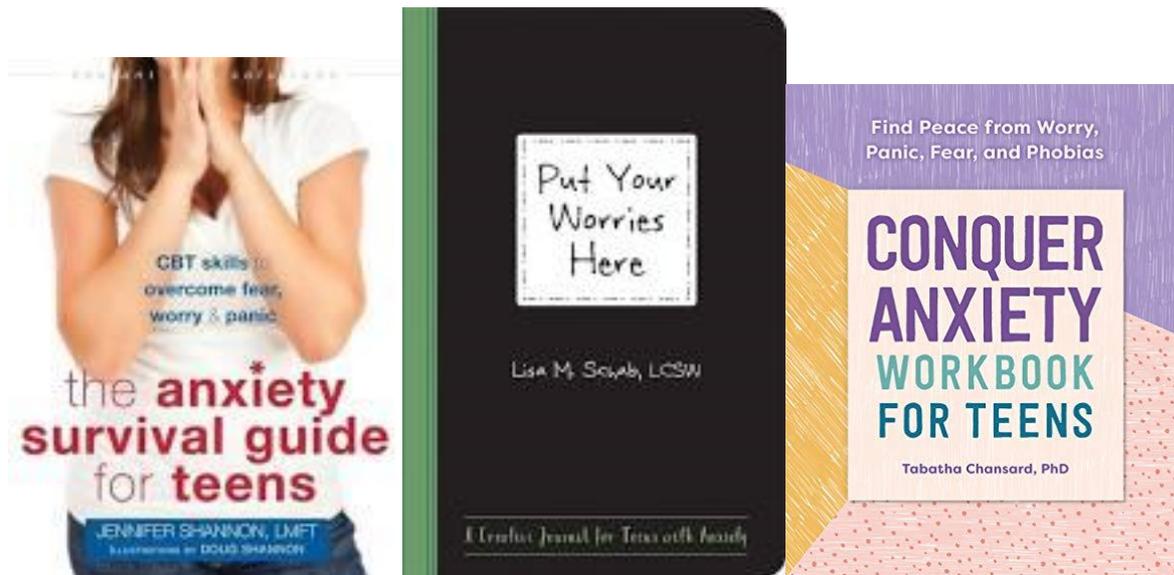
MEETWO

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

CHILDLINE

<https://www.childline.org.uk>

Recommended books for Young People:



When and where to seek professional support:

If self-help strategies are not making the situation better and anxiety is affecting their life, for example, if they are feeling persistently anxious, often having distressing thoughts, or avoiding things like going outside or speaking to others, it's a good idea to seek professional support

GP & CAMHS. Parents can speak to their GP, with or without your child, or older students can go to the GP themselves. Together you can discuss whether a referral to CAMHS, an assessment by a mental health specialist, or referral for another kind of support is needed. Waiting lists are long however so these options will only be available in severe cases.

The type of support or treatment offered will depend on their age and the kind of anxiety they are experiencing. Talking therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help them to understand the thoughts and feelings behind their anxiety and find practical strategies to help them cope.

Medication may be offered if their anxiety is very difficult to manage or talking therapy has not helped. <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/medications/?page=2#listing>

Counselling: Place2 Be in-school support is available to all students during term time if you think your child may benefit and engage with talking therapy.

If it's an affordable option for you, you can find a private counsellor, therapist or family therapist through directories such as www.bacp.co.uk or www.thecounsellingdirectory.org.uk