



Wellbeing Support: Managing Anxiety

It is very difficult to see our child anxious. We want to be able to take the anxiety away quickly because we love our child and don't want to see them in distress. When our children experience anxiety, it gives us the opportunity to teach them how to manage when life is hard, which it inevitably will be for them in the future. We can show children that we can manage our tough feelings with love, compassion and tenderness for ourselves and others, and they can carry this with them for the rest of their lives.

Learning to manage anxiety and what is happening in our bodies when we are anxious is incredibly empowering and resilience building as many of us face inevitable anxiety in our lives.

Fight, Flight or Freeze

The emotion of anxiety is fear. There are book recommendations below which explain in much more detail, but when we are afraid and our brain therefore senses danger, the survival part of our brain springs into action and sends our body into 'fight, flight or freeze' mode. This is a reflex from when we were cave people and needed to protect ourselves and our young from wild animals; to survive we either needed to fight the animal, freeze so that they didn't see us, or run away as fast as we could.

In order to be able to do this, our brain sends adrenaline surging through our body and we then experience the following sensations, which are all symptoms of anxiety:

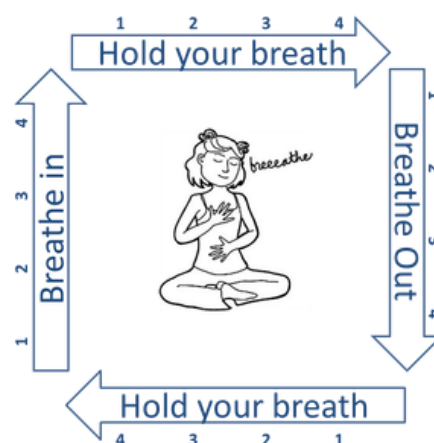
- Your heart pumps more blood around your body (so you have strength to fight or run away). This can cause chest pains, a feeling of it being difficult to breathe normally and a raised heart rate.
- Blood flows quickly to your legs and arms (to help you run/fight)
- You feel stuck but still revved up (as if you're 'freezing' but still alert)
- Cold and sweaty hands and feet (because of all the blood in our muscles)
- Sweating
- Butterflies in your stomach, stomach ache, nausea, diarrhoea, urinating (because blood is diverted away from the digestive system and into our muscles)
- Blood rushing around your body making your skin blotchy
- Goose bumps
- Feeling a sense of dread



Because this survival response helped us survive as a species, it is still very strong in our brain and body today. What also happens is that when we are in 'fight, flight or freeze', the logical left side of our brain, the parts responsible for speaking and memory, the cognitive processing etc. all 'go offline' so our brain can focus on surviving the perceived danger. Therefore, it is really important with anxiety to remember that first things first, a child needs support with calming down their fight, flight or freeze response and telling the brain that there is no immediate danger. Then and only then, a child is able to think more clearly and the physical responses above ease off.

We do this with **breathing**. To surge adrenaline around the body and cause an anxious response, we breathe in much more than we breathe out. Therefore, focusing on long exhales acts as a 'reset' button for the brain.

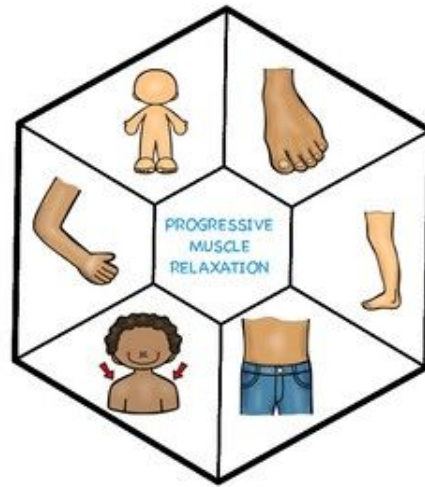
Here is a helpful breathing exercise called 'square breathing':



Once a child is slightly calmer, we still need to support them with releasing the adrenaline and tension which will have built up in their bodies. We can do this with encouraging movement, stretching or a strategy called **progressive muscle relaxation** where you go through different parts of the body, tensing different muscles while breathing in and then releasing them as we breathe out. Often without realising it we are already tensing different muscles when we are anxious which can lead to tummy aches, feeling unwell or dizzy, panic attacks or other physical symptoms. This is a helpful preventative exercise to do before bed or school as well.



SQUEEZE, COUNT TO 5, RELAX



Cuddling and soothing your child with physical touch and closeness is very important as it can help your child feel safe in the face of their fear. Some children like to be tightly held whereas others like soft stroking on their hand or arm. When your child is calmer you can ask them what was more helpful.

Practising a **grounding technique** helps to bring the child to the here and now and gradually show and tell the brain that there is no immediate danger to react to. Focusing on long exhales will be telling the brain that danger has passed as your body would not be breathing in that way if there was a literal danger. Any activity which encourages children to look around them and start to notice their surroundings, or begin using different parts of their brain can help. Playing categories by going through the alphabet to name different animals, doing some simple mental arithmetic in a silly way, playing a counting game or the exercise below are all helpful grounding techniques (and work for adults too):





Today, our worries and fears are often not about wild animals, but our bodies still react in the same way as if there is a wild animal. That's why all those things in the list above happen to us and our children when we feel scared or worried. This reaction happens if children are worried about exams, being on their own, visiting the dentist or if someone in their family is ill. The problem is that this 'fight, flight or freeze' response doesn't help with what children most often worry about. Children can learn to notice sooner when they are becoming anxious and practice their calming strategies sooner to avoid the brain going into danger mode.

If a child becomes extremely anxious, they will not be able to engage in a reflective discussion about why they are afraid of something, or even be able to identify exactly what they are fearful of as they need to calm down their danger response first, as described above. Once they are calmer, this is when we would focus on a discussion about what the child is anxious about and come up with some solutions together.

Talking about Anxious Feelings:

One of the most calming and important things children need to support them with managing big emotions such as fear is **empathy and understanding**. It is deeply soothing for children to feel understood and have someone name their emotions for them when they perhaps don't have the emotional vocabulary or reasoning to be able to do so when they are emotional.

Many parents worry about putting words into their children's mouths. However making guesses about what your child could be feeling and why is helpful. You could use phrases such as 'I wonder if you're feeling worried about being late to school because you don't want to get into trouble?' or 'I wonder if you could be feeling worried about Mummy and Daddy going away because of the news being quite scary at the moment and you want to feel close to us?'. A child can agree or disagree with you and may take a few days or hours to tell you what they were feeling. Identifying the feeling can support you and your child with what deep reassurance they need. Most of the time, children's fears are linked deeply to feeling belonging, not feeling rejected and knowing they are safe. If we can reassure them that facing difficult things like school tests, music exams, trying new things, being away from their parents, making a new friend or going for a blood test does not affect how loved and safe they are then children can face challenges with more resilience and ability to manage the



nerves and anxiety which come up. Being empowered with the knowledge of their body responses being an ancient survival strategy helps to calm children down quicker but takes time, practice and patience.

The following guidance for children in the face of anxiety is helpful:

- Firstly, admitting to yourself that you have fears and worries and that it's normal is really important. You don't need to think you're useless or say things to yourself like "You're so annoying for having all these worries". Try saying instead "It's OK you have worries. Everyone does. Worries mean I care!". Talking to loved ones about your worries is really helpful. Everyone worries, some of us more than others. We can become as strong as superman at being able to manage our anxieties.
- List good reasons not to be afraid or anxious, what keeps you safe, all the reasons why you are loved, why you are awesome, all the brave things you have done, and anything else you feel would be helpful.
- Eating healthily, getting good sleep and doing lots of exercise helps us be really strong in the face of worries and anxious feelings.
- Talk aloud or write down your feelings in a special notebook. (Encouraging children to write down their worries and then looking at them at the end of the day, before being in bed when anxiety can arise, is helpful for the child to see that some worries come and go, and others need our attention. It helps them learn to see that feelings do pass, and that they can be supported with what they need help with. Writing their worries down helps children get their worries out of their bodies and to externalise them.)

A final point here is that it can be helpful to discuss your child's 'worst fears' when it comes to their anxieties and worries. Often their very worst fear is extremely unlikely to happen, but you can then provide reassurance on what would happen if their worst fear does happen. Children are very imaginative which is why they can become anxious so easily as their worst case scenarios can be quite catastrophic. If your child is worrying about something which you cannot control or reassure them about with certainty, it is helpful for children to hear that they'll always be loved and cared for by their family, no matter what. You can empathise with them about how difficult it is to not know everything that is going to happen in the future, but that they will always be loved and be special.



Helpful resources

Further information is on the handouts 'Encouraging emotional expression' and 'Speaking to children about difficult topics'. I hope these can provide further depth on the causes of anxiety for your child and offer you support in this difficult time.

- What To Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids - James J Christ
 - Explains the reasons behind anxiety and the flight/fight/freeze response very clearly. Suitable for KS2+ but good for adults to read to understand anxiety to explain to younger children too. Full of helpful strategies.
- Anxiety is Really Strange - Steve Haines
 - For parents to understand anxiety more, easy to digest, comic strip style book.
- Happy, Healthy Minds - The School of Life
 - A children's guide to emotional wellbeing covering topics including anxiety, bullies, identity, anger, feeling misunderstood, separation and confidence. Excellent for adults too!
- The Whole-Brain Child - Dr Daniel Siegel and Dr Tina Payne Bryson
 - Useful tools based on neuroscience and the child's developing brain to help with your child's general emotional well being.
- [YouTube video - 'The Triune Brain'](#) as explained by kids.
- The Invisible String - Patrice Karst
 - For comfort in separation anxiety.

If you find that with implementing strategies from this handout and the books above does not support your child's anxiety, or if their anxieties are seriously impacting your family life, do visit the GP for help and support.