



## Supporting Your Child with Anxiety- A Guide for Parents and Carers

### Understanding Anxiety-

#### What does anxiety look and feel like?

Anxiety can have many physical and psychological signs:



#### What happens to the body when we are anxious?

When we experience anxiety, our bodies often produce higher levels of hormones like **adrenaline** and **cortisol**. These chemicals are normally released to help us react quickly to something or get away from something dangerous.

This is often called the **'fight, flight or freeze'** response. When a situation causes us to feel anxious these chemicals build up in our body. If not used, this build-up of chemicals can result in unpredictable reactions.



#### What is the impact of anxiety?

Anxiety can get in the way of normal day to day actions. It can impact the parts of the brain which help us with things like **memory, auditory processing, understanding language** and other **communication, social and emotional functions and 'executive functioning'**. *Executive functioning is a person's ability to plan ahead, do tasks in the right order and make reasoned decisions, including emotional control.* A child's reaction to anxiety can sometimes be seen as poor or disruptive behaviour, we can sometimes miss the emotional response behind the behaviours. Parents and carers often find it hard to understand the logic of their children's behaviour and the choices they make, especially during adolescence. As parents/carers, don't feel you need to understand the logic; be more prepared to ask *'how can I help?'*

### Helping with Anxiety-

#### Practical ideas to support your child:

Helping your child recognise physical cues- *notice physical signs that your child is anxious and help them to begin to recognise them.*

Help to identify when anxiety levels are rising- *suggest coping strategies they can try when anxiety levels are rising.*

Ask your child what it feels like for them- *this is helpful for children to enable them to recognise signs of anxiety and communicate that feeling.*

Give careful reassurance- *anxious children often seek reassurance. Do not over reassure; instead let them know you are there for them but that you believe they are able to manage their emotions themselves. It is better for children to develop their own skills to manage their fears and worries, with your support.*

Show them you are confident they can cope- *Use language such as, 'I think you know the answer to this', 'I believe you can do it'. Notice and validate when they overcome a fear themselves, or with your support. 'It was great that you were able to calm your anxiety using that breathing technique' or 'Going for a walk with a friend really seems to help when you are getting anxious'.*

Share a quiet space- *Sometimes being in a quiet, shared space with your anxious child can be the best approach. If your child doesn't want to talk about what's creating the anxiety, just sitting with them, saying very little, can be the best thing to do.*

Plan ahead- *If you know something is approaching which might cause them to feel anxious, plan for it, break it down into smaller steps, and prepare to manage it.*

Reinforce positive behaviour- *When your child does overcome a fear, ask what helped them to do it; this can reinforce their positive behaviour. Asking 'what' and 'how' questions help.*

Validate their emotions- *Even when you don't understand your child's behaviour or emotional response, it's important to acknowledge how they are feeling, as that is*

*their reality: 'I can understand why you might be feeling worried. When I feel like that I try to...'*

### **Coping ideas for supporting children and young people:**

#### **5 ways to wellbeing-**

- **Be active-** helps to change brain chemicals to improve wellbeing and mood
- **Connect-** builds a sense of belonging and provides emotional support
- **Take notice-** helps to develop a sense of awareness of our own mental wellbeing. Reminds us of the positives
- **Learn-** boosts confidence and raises self-esteem
- **Give-** helps to connect with others and develop self-worth

### **Helping with Anxiety-**

#### **Practical ideas to support you:**

Children and young people often reflect the emotions and behaviour of adults around them – so if the adults around them are agitated and anxious, they are more likely to copy that. We sometimes call this 'mirroring' and it is a really useful thing to remember to help them stay calm themselves.

Things to help you feel calm and happy could include:

- **Having someone to talk to and share your feelings with.**
- **Making time for yourself, doing something you like.**
- **Getting outside.**
- **Listening to music.**
- **Being around pets.**

It's really important to remember to be kind to yourself if you feel you get it wrong – it can feel like trial and error a lot of the time.

It is very common for parents and carers to feel 'stuck' in their situation. This can understandably mean you feel frustrated and miss out on recognising any positive steps, however small. It can be totally normal to feel frustrated but it is important not to criticise yourself.



### **What to do in the moment:**

Avoid asking 'why'? Instead look to acknowledge and validate their feelings where you can.

Ask 'what can we do to distract you?' You can also give them choices to help them feel more in control.

- **Listen-** validate what you child is telling you
- **Try to stay calm and focus on your child's needs-**
- **Try to keep your emotions in check-** try not to react to your child's anxieties or try to 'fix' them.
- **Reassure them that the feeling will pass-** allow yourself to sit with your child's anxieties, knowing and showing confidence that they will pass

### **Additional Information and Support-**

**Thought-Full:** [www.westsussex.gov.uk/Thought-Full](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/Thought-Full)

**Mind:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/>

**Young Minds:** <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

**Young Minds Parent Helpline:** <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/>

**Anxiety UK:** <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

**Anna Freud Centre:** <https://www.annafreud.org/>

**NSPCC:** <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/>

**Mental Health Foundation:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>