

Quick guide – managing anxiety

What is anxiety?

Feeling anxious or worried is a normal reaction to unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations. Sometimes, this feeling can be overwhelming, especially for children. When we are faced stressful situations, it can set off our brain's in-built alarm bell system, which can lead to the 'fight, flight or freeze' response.

What are common symptoms of anxiety?

Symptoms of anxiety may include:

- feeling nervous or on edge
- feeling overwhelmed or full of dread
- feeling out of control
- having trouble sleeping
- low appetite
- finding it difficult to concentrate
- feeling tired and grumpy
- feeling faint/wobbly legs
- increased heart rate
- tummy pains
- sweating/getting hot



How can anxiety help us?

A certain level of anxiety can help, remember it is a normal human reaction to a perceived danger – it is designed to keep us safe.

Motivation: Sometimes we need a dose of anxiety to motivate to try new things.

Preparation: It can drive you to prepare for the situation, to cover all the bases and to consider what you would do in worst-case scenarios.

Attention: When you are anxious about an upcoming event, your anxiety forces you to recognize it and pay attention in a way that will ideally help you succeed.

Protection: Since anxiety is often related to fear, it is a way to protect us from danger.

Communication: Finally, when people are anxious they are compelled to communicate and share these feelings. It is a way our body helps us find support and a safe place, and it can be effective in strengthening relationships.

When does anxiety become a 'problem'?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it causes considerable distress or interference in everyday life or prevents children from engaging in age-appropriate activities or expected developmental milestones.

Examples include:

- Falling behind in their learning at school
- Keeping isolated or not being able to join in and make friends
- Refusal to go on school trips
- Resisting participating in new activities or trying new things
- School refusal or avoidance
- Presents as challenging behaviour

How can we support our children when they are struggling with anxiety?

Strategies:

- Problem solve together – *'I can see that this situation is causing you anxiety, I am here for you and I'd like to help. What is the problem we need to solve? Can you list off possible actions and outcomes?'*
- Model the behaviour we expect from our children – a calm, measured response.
- Reward the 'have a go' behaviour.....praise for progress.
- 'Gradual exposure ladder' -break the worry down into manageable chunks and use gradual exposure to reach a goal.
- Resist the urge to fix for them.
- Ensure routines are clear and consistent, whilst also acknowledging 'spontaneous' changes – model how to tolerate these.
- Take someone else's perspective – *'if your friend was worried about this, what would you say? What would you do to help them through this?'*
- Provide them with evidence of a time when they overcame a challenge or showed resilience.

Tools to use:

- Mindfulness - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZzFqAPRcLI>
- Breathing exercises – hot chocolate breathing, belly breathing, balloon breathing...
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAbs4pyjLNq>
- Self-soothe box – this could engage the senses so could include things they find comforting e.g. a certain perfume, something soft, a teddy, a photo of people they love...
- Worry box/worry monster – sometimes the process of recording the worry and then placing it somewhere out of sight can be helpful.
- Personalised Calm Plan – a list of strategies to help them self-regulate e.g. listen to audio books, mindfulness colouring in, playing with kinetic sand, a puzzle...

Further support

Youngminds <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/anxiety/>

Kooth <https://www.kooth.com/>

SHOUT <https://giveusashout.org/>

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

Mindworks <https://www.mindworks-surrey.org/advice-information-and-resources/anxiety>

Useful Apps:

CALM <https://www.calm.com/>

Chill panda <http://chillpanda.co.uk/>

Headspace <https://www.headspace.com/>

Moshi kids <https://www.moshikids.com/>

Ollee <https://parentzone.org.uk/ollee>

Books:

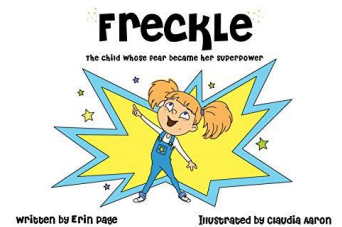
'Ruby's worry' by Tom Percival

Ruby loves being Ruby. Until, one day, she finds a worry. At first it's not such a big worry, and that's all right, but then it starts to grow. It gets bigger and bigger every day and it makes Ruby sad. How can Ruby get rid of it and feel like herself again?



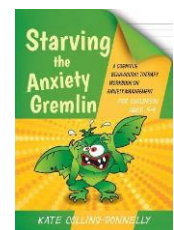
'Freckle: The Child Whose Fear Became Her Superpower' by Erin Page

Freckle doesn't like the big wide world outside her bedroom. Every day is full of new and scary adventures which send Freckle's imagination running wild. Join Freckle as she learns to understand her worries and use those fears to get through smelly soft plays, meeting dragons, and being squashed by big bums! This fun and entertaining story is a great read and enables little children to understand big emotions.



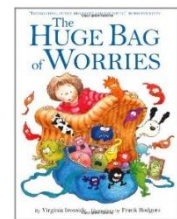
'Starving the Anxiety Gremlin for Children Aged 5-9: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management' by Kate Collins-Donnelly

The Anxiety Gremlin is a mischievous creature who loves to gobble up your anxious feelings! The more anxiety you feed him, the bigger and bigger he gets and the more and more anxious you feel! How can you stop this? Starve your Anxiety Gremlin of anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and watch him shrink!



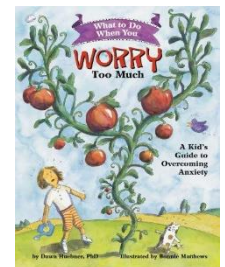
'The Huge Bag of Worries' by Virginia Ironside and Frank Rodgers

Wherever Jenny goes, her worries follow her - in a big blue bag. They are with her all the time - at school, at home, when she is watching TV and even in the bathroom! Jenny decides they have to go, but who will help her get rid of them?



'What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety' by Dawn Huebner

What to Do When You Worry Too Much is an interactive self-help book designed to guide 6-12 year olds and their parents through the cognitive-behavioural techniques most often used in the treatment of generalized anxiety. Engaging, encouraging, and easy to follow, this book educates, motivates, and empowers children to work towards change.



'The Worrysaurus' by Rachel Bright

*It's a beautiful day and Worrysaurus has planned a special picnic.
But it isn't long before a small butterfly of worry starts fluttering in his tummy . .
What if he hasn't brought enough to eat?
What if he gets lost in the jungle?
What if he trips and falls?
What if it rains?!*
Can Worrysaurus find a way to chase his fears away and have fun?

