

# Anxiety ages 3-11years – Post Session Pack

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion! It is a normal response when faced with something that our bodies perceive to be threatening or dangerous, embarrassing or stressful. It helps our body prepare to manage the situation we are facing.

- It's a normal, healthy reaction
- Happens in times of danger or worrying situations (fight or flight response)
- Is influenced by a variety of factors
- Anxiety is a feeling of unease such as worry or fear  
(NHS Inform, 2021)

Anxiety becomes a problem when it impacts on daily activities and persists over time (MIND, 2021).

## Anxiety & Stress: A Normal Response

Most of us probably think that childhood is a time when we are carefree, having no worries or responsibilities! Yet studies tell us many children experience extreme stress and have similar symptoms to adults. Like adults, children often have bad feelings and have difficulty handling their stress. However, unlike adults, children don't have the means or the skills to understand or manage their stress in appropriate ways. Children depend on adults to help them! So as parents and caregivers, you need to recognise when your child is feeling stressed and help them feel better.

Stress may be a response to a negative change in a child's life & children eventually learn how to respond to stress as they grow and develop. Many stressful events an adult can manage can cause stress in a child and we need to help children cope.

When children do not learn to manage stress they may develop emotional problems, including becoming depressed, lacking energy and motivation or they may develop strange personality traits such as violence and disobedience. Children that feel this way tend to withdraw themselves from family and friends. They can spend a lot of time alone and lack self-esteem or confidence

After a crisis passes, the levels of stress hormones should drop and the body's various systems return to normal - this is called the relaxation response. However some children are more vulnerable to stress than others, because their hormone levels do not return to normal after a stressful event.

Stress is a normal response when dealing with challenges or pressures in life - over time, human brains have developed to respond in the following 3 ways;

- **Fight** - If your body feels it can overcome the threat, it produces hormones like adrenaline, to pump you up and get you ready to fight!
- **Flight** - If your body feels the threat is too powerful, your impulse is to run! Your heart beats faster and you breathe quicker, to get more oxygen around your muscles to run away!
- **Freeze** - added to the original model and suggests you can also dissociate from the present as a coping mechanism

Modern day stress is greatly different to what our ancestors had to contend with! Instead of the threat of a wild animal, we are more like to be stressed by public transport, social media, crowded places or deadlines. Stress can be healthy and effective in dealing with problems; however the effects of persistent, long-term stress can be detrimental.

(Get Self Help, 2018)

## **Normalise fears developmentally**

Our children's behaviour can directly impact on their anxiety levels and so by changing their behaviour towards a worrying thought, we can help them to change their mood.

If we can help a child change the threatening thought to one which is no longer threatening, the new behavioural response will act to normalise the thought and encourage the child to problem solve how to deal with the issue again in future. This change to anxiety may improve their self-esteem and build resilience.

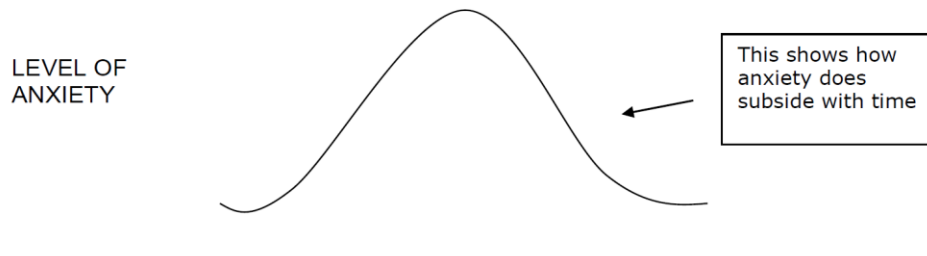
## **Anxious behaviours**

Behaviour patterns that are common part of anxiety include fidgeting, pacing, crying, or shaking (NHS, 2020).

Avoidance is the main behaviour response to anxiety. This can be seen when children refuse to do something they are fearful of (eg. going out in the dark) or completely avoid situations where unexpected/bad things may happen (eg. staying with someone they know so they don't have to talk to strangers).

## Feelings of Anxiety

Anxiety, like all emotions, comes in a wave. This wave may last a long time or a short time. It is important to remember and it is important to help your child experience that anxiety will pass.



Other feelings children may experience when they feel anxious include: fear, hopelessness, guilt, sadness, loneliness & irritability

## Physical changes of Anxiety

When we feel anxious and our bodies release hormones like adrenaline to help us fight, flight or freeze, we may notice various changes including: heart racing, breathing faster, feeling hot and flushed, muscles feeling tense, sweating, nausea and trembling (Mind, 2021). It's important to help children notice these changes in themselves and learn to link them with emotions and how they are feeling!

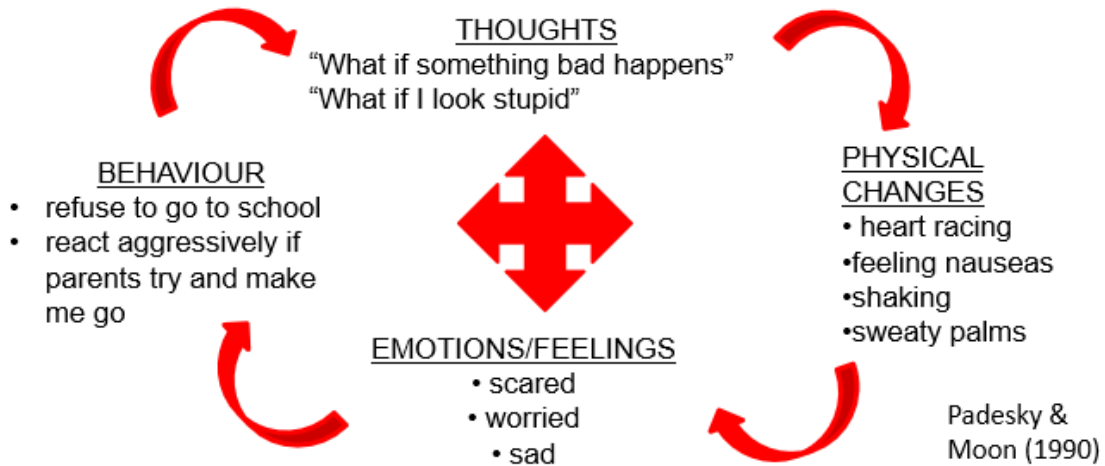
## Anxious Thinkers

Some children constantly feel anxious and nervous, but for no apparent reason. They may worry about a number of events or situations in the past, the present or the future. They may feel anxious about health issues, upcoming events at school, sporting events or conflict with others. This excessive worrying may interfere with daily life including areas like:

- Fears & Phobias
- Separation & loss
- School
- Friendships and social networks
- Interests & hobbies

## Anxiety Cycle

Situation: Going to school



## When is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety can be a problem when it leads to negative thinking, poor self-esteem and avoidant behaviours. Some anxious thoughts may include:

“Nobody likes me”

“I will get it wrong and get into big trouble”

“Something is wrong with me”

“I can’t cope on my own”

## Support your child

It is important that children learn to manage their anxiety rather than avoid it. When we allow children to avoid situations that make them anxious, they are missing out on opportunities to build coping skills and to learn that although they may be feeling scared and anxious, they are okay and they will get through it! As parents, we must validate how our child is feeling but also support and encourage them through these feelings!

## What can I do to help as a parent?

Giving reassurance is a natural response as parents, however when a child is anxious it often doesn't work. It means your child will continue to seek that reassurance every time they feel anxious, instead of learning to self-soothe and reassure themselves that they are okay.

As parents, we need to remove our attention from the anxious behaviours and provide praise only when the anxious behaviour has stopped. You may need to tell your child it is the anxious behaviour you are ignoring and not them and name the anxious behaviour for them.

Understanding your child's anxiety – some children may not know what anxiety is and may not understand why they are feeling scared and nervous. Talking with your child about the physical symptoms of anxiety (mentioned above) can also help them understand their own body's reaction and why they feel this way. Be sure to explain to them that anxiety is like a wave and they can surf the wave rather than stop it or be drowned by it.

Exercises to try:

- Reading (for distraction)
- Body Diagram (to draw and label anxiety symptoms mentioned previously)
- Anxiety diary (to notice any patterns of anxiety to then plan better ways to cope)
- Positive thinking (helping children learn to accept their anxiety but know they will be okay!)

## Distraction techniques

Used to distract from our anxious thoughts and to get our minds focussed on something else!

As we're distracted, this lets our body know we're safe and our anxiety symptoms start to settle!

Types of distraction techniques include:

- Counting backwards from 100 in 3s
- Saying your 3 times tables
- Counting circles in the room
- Count a dominant colour in the room
- 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique

Anna Freud (undated)

## Relaxation

Why does relaxation help us? It tells our body we are safe and therefore enables our minds to also relax, reducing the feelings of anxiety and worry.

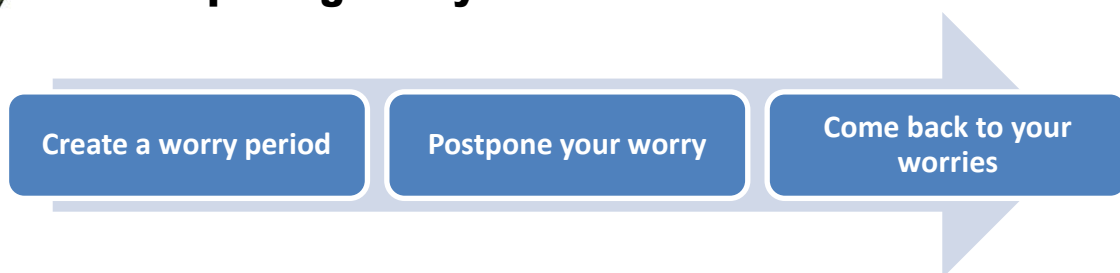
### Examples:

- **Breathing exercises** and calming your breathing is one of the most effect ways to let your body know you are safe! Exercises include candle breathing, star breathing and finger breathing.
- **Going for a walk** and thinking about what is around you? Noticing the trees, the breeze, the sunshine etc, helping you to distract from anxious thoughts.
- **Exercise** releases endorphins which help us feel good and stops the release of stress hormones.
- **Listening to music** that is calm and not too loud or activating.
- **Painting & drawing** and being creative helps to focus our attention and improves our concentration
- **Reading a book** can help us to relax and again enables us to use our imagination and creativity, rather than wasting energy on feeling anxious or worried
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** is a technique where you progressive tense and relax the different muscle groups in your body. As you release tension in your body, tension is released in the mind and generally, people feel more calm and relaxed and are able to think more clearly and rationally.



CAMHS (2021)

## Postponing worry



Allowing children to put worries to one side (in a box or worry monster), knowing that they will come back to them later, can support them to develop their worry management strategies and can improve their coping skills & self-esteem in the long term!

Ensure there is a set worry period, so children know worries will be revisited and they will be supported through coping with that worry, with the help of adults around them. Without putting aside protected time to re-visit worries it can feel as though they grow bigger and get worse!

## STOPP method

Can be used when someone is experiencing anxiety symptoms and they are struggling to cope!



S - top

T - ake a breath

O - bserve (What am I thinking? What am I reacting to? What am I feeling in my body?)

P - put in some perspective (see the bigger picture. Is this fact or opinion? How would someone else see this?)

P – practice what works (what's the best thing to do for me, what helps me feel better?)

Get Self Help (2009)

## Grounding technique

5 things you can see



4 things you can feel



3 things you can hear



2 things you can



1 thing you can taste



CAMHS (2021)

## Problem Solving

An important life skill for children to develop coping skills and ways to manage challenging situations

1. What is the problem?
2. Possible solutions
3. Pros and cons of each solution
4. Choose your favourite solution
5. Make a plan
6. Implement the plan and then review

Creswell & Willetts (2019)

## The Worry Tree



## Anxiety Ladder

Often children avoid certain situations that cause them anxiety, which sometimes leads them to miss out on important parts of life!

Using an Anxiety Ladder can help them achieve goals by setting small, achievable steps, to help them manage small amounts of anxiety at a time

The steps should be realistic, pre-planned and ranked from least anxiety-provoking to most anxiety-provoking.

Every step on the ladder is a milestone towards reaching their goal and should be celebrated!



## Separation Anxiety: Strategies

Creswell & Willetts (2019)

Separation anxiety is a common difficulty, where anxiety is experienced when separating from the caregiver, usually during times of transition e.g., going into school or at bedtime

### Create a Transition Plan

Try to reduce any stress before school and develop a consistent routine when saying goodbye so that the child is prepared, e.g., a hug and a kiss or a squeeze of their hand.

### Transition Object

An item that is used to take the place of the adult, provides emotional comfort and reassurance that the adult will return.

The adult can also keep something of the child's and communicate that they are keeping the child in mind.

### Extracurricular Clubs and Activities

Support the child's participation in activities separate from the family unit to encourage independence and develop their confidence and self-esteem.

### Primary Mental Health Consultation

Swanson (2014)

## Taking your thought to court

This is a helpful technique to support your young person if they are struggling with a negative belief. For example, 'I am going to fail all of my exams'.



This task can be completed with the handout given on the parent information session you attended.

Alternatively, the main questions to ask your young person are:

- What thought is on trial?
- From 0-100 how much do you believe this thought?
- What evidence do you have that this thought is true?

- What evidence do you have that this thought is not true? What would others say?
- After looking at all of the evidence, let's have a look at your original thought? How much do you believe it now?
- Can we think of a different thought that might be more true?

This method may not be appropriate for younger children

Get Self Help, 2018

## Helpful Videos for children

**The Worry Rap** – helpful video for children to understand anxiety

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7g8Atv27Q8>

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation** – guided video to show children how to use this strategy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihO02wUzgkc>

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation** – guided video for younger children

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc>

**Bubble Breathing** – guided breathing technique

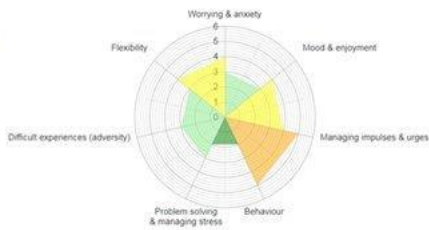
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tOJZQhO\\_Uw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tOJZQhO_Uw)

**STOPP method** – simple explanation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x35DyHwfto>

## Dimensions Tool

The Dimensions Tool may help identify areas of concern for your child and can offer some specific resources and self-help information in relation to these



It is useful to map out your child's strengths and challenges across four domains of wellbeing:

- Body and Health
- Feelings and Self control
- Relating to People
- Thinking and Learning

You can access Dimensions Tool by clicking onto the below link:

<https://dimensions.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/>

## Resources

Anna Freud (undated): <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/distraction-techniques/>

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Padesky, C. A., Mooney, K. A. (1990). Presenting the cognitive model to clients. *International Cognitive Therapy Newsletter*, 6, 13-14

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Swanson, W., 2014. *Mama Doc Medicine: Finding Calm and Confidence in Parenting, Child Health, and Work-Life Balance*. United States of America: American Academy of Pediatrics.

Talkplus (2019). Worry Management. Retrieved from [https://www.talkplus.org.uk/downloads\\_folder/Worry\\_management.pdf](https://www.talkplus.org.uk/downloads_folder/Worry_management.pdf)

The STOPP method- (Carol Vivyan 2009), permission to use for therapy purposes. Adapted from Ciarrochi & Bailey 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/STOPP.pdf>