

Child Anxiety-Information for Parents

Battersea Mental Health Support Team (MHST)

People use all different words for anxiety, some call it stress, some call it worries but for this leaflet we are going to use the phrase anxiety.

- Anxiety is a normal emotion that everyone experiences.
- Although it can feel unpleasant it can't physically harm you.
- Anxiety can be helpful as it protects us when we're in danger or helps us prepare for things. For example, if we're standing near the edge of something without a barrier, the feeling of anxiety encourages us to move away and protect ourselves.
- Although it can feel unpleasant anxiety cannot physically harm you.

When does Anxiety become more problematic:

Anxiety becomes an issue when we feel unable to manage it and it stops us from doing the things we want to do.



Typical Worries commonly seen at different ages

Age	Developmental stage	Fears and worries
0-6 months	Sensory	Strong sensory stimuli (e.g. loud noises); loss of support
6-12 months	Sensory-motor: cause and effect; object-constancy	Strangers; separation from care givers
2-4 years	Pre-operational thinking: imagination, but limited distinction between fantasy and reality	Imaginary creatures; potential burglars; the dark
5-7 years	Concrete operational thinking: Concrete, logical thinking	Natural disasters; injury/illness/death; animals; media-based fears



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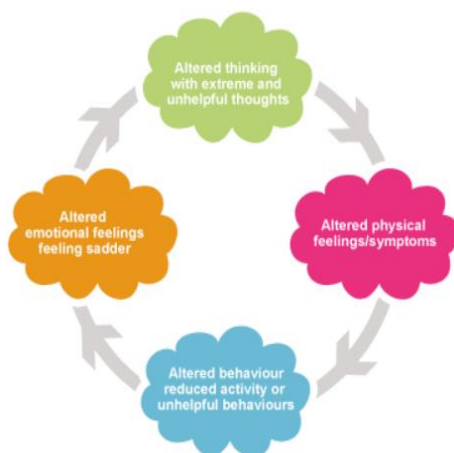
8-11 years	Self-esteem based on academic and athletic abilities	Poor academic and athletic performance
12-18 years	Formal operational thinking: meta-thinking and anticipation of future dangers. Self-esteem based on peer relationships	Peer rejection; world issues

Fight-Flight-Freeze Response

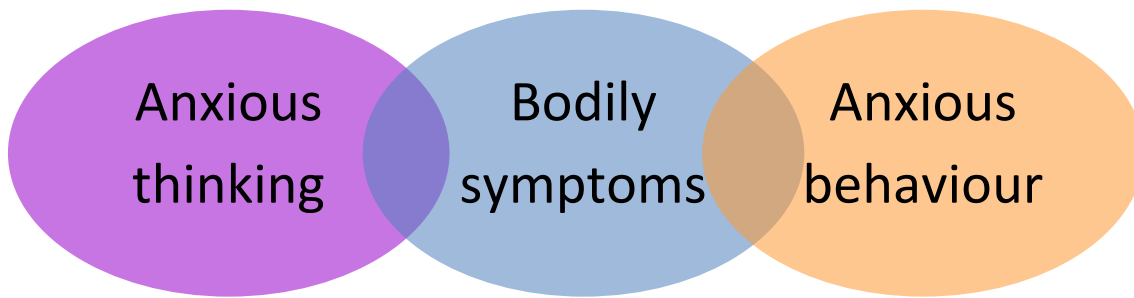
Common symptoms of anxiety are; increased heart rate, dry mouth, trembling, sweating, nausea, light-headedness, shortness of breath and the worry that something bad is going to happen.

When our bodies were first evolving, the danger our ancestors faced was mainly to do with confronting enemies or large animals. Our bodies developed the 'fight-or-flight-or-freeze' response to help us fight or escape danger by making us:

- Breathe quickly to get more oxygen to our muscles
- Increase our heart rate to increase blood flow to our muscles
- Slow down our digestion system
- Increase sweat to cool the body down
- Release adrenaline which causes trembling.



This evolutionary response is what you feel in your body when you feel anxious. When the danger has passed, the anxiety often passes too. However, when the anxiety doesn't pass or is present when there isn't any actual danger it can become problematic. If this is the case, we can look at the vicious cycle of anxiety and make changes to try and break it.



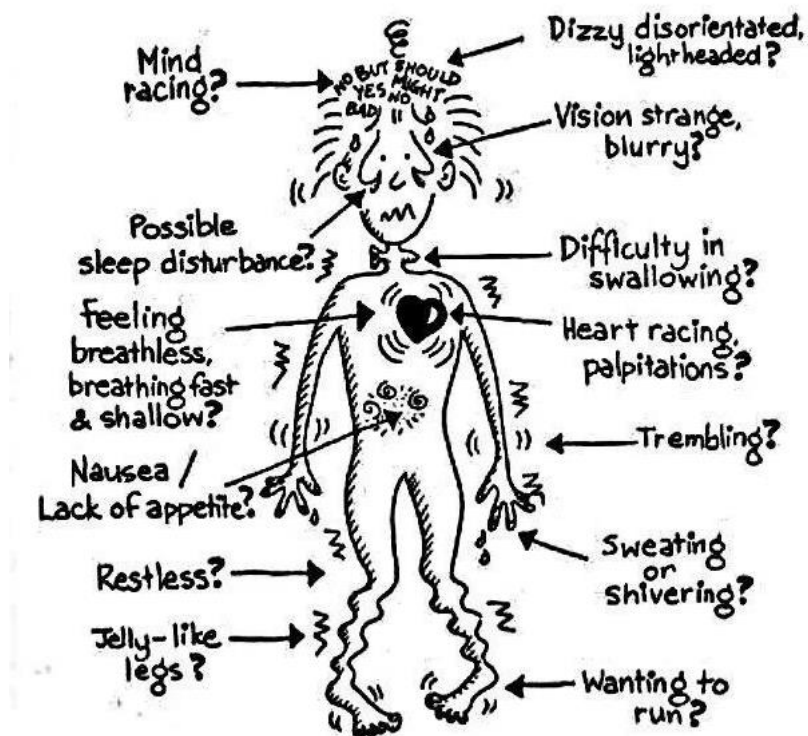
Anxiety can present in many ways; anxious thoughts, bodily sensations and anxious behaviour.

Anxious Thinking

Often when people are experiencing anxiety they **overestimate the danger** and **underestimate their ability to cope**.

$$\text{ANXIETY} = \frac{\text{OVERESTIMATE CHANCE OF DANGER}}{\text{UNDERESTIMATE ABILITY TO COPE}}$$

Bodily Symptoms



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Helpful ways to respond:

Often when children are anxious parents offer **reassurance** to try to help their child feel better. However, reassurance can actually maintain anxiety in a number of ways.

Reassurance may confirm the child's belief that there **is** something to worry about. Some children will get to the stage where they can't try things out unless they've been told it's safe. **Ask questions instead: help your child evaluate whether their anxious thought is realistic or not.**

- ❖ **“What worries you about this situation?”**
- ❖ **“What do you think will happen?”**

When your child has faced a fear or worry, we recommend that parents project an air of confidence and say something like: **“That was a bit difficult wasn't it but you were amazing, you did the right thing! Now you know what to do if that happens again.”** This is reinforcing the **Brave Behaviour** your child has demonstrated successfully.

It is also helpful to encourage your child to recall a time they have overcome a tricky or worrying situation in the past successfully (again using the idea of **Brave Behaviour**) which acknowledges that it is OK to feel worried or scared but that your child has felt this way before in another situation and faced their fears successfully.

Emotional Validation

- Often people try to make a person feel better by dismissing the difficult feeling (for example, saying “you don't need to worry about that”)
- Emotional validation is helpful as it allows you to validate the emotion your child is feeling. **“I can hear that this is really troubling for you, let's have a think together about what's going on”.**
- **When talking about thoughts and feelings, try not to judge, criticize, ridicule, ignore, lecture or dismiss. Try to avoid**
 - “Get on with it, it could be worse, why are you being dramatic?”
 - “Don't be so silly”
 - “Why are you getting so upset?”.



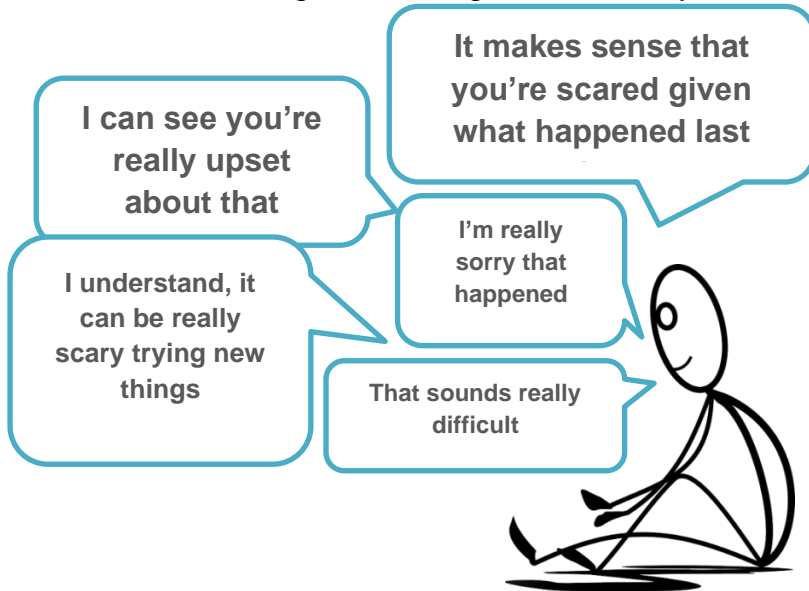
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It is helpful to:

- Allow your child to express their feelings,
- Acknowledge what they are saying
- Summarise what you think they are feeling. This shows that you recognise and validate how they are feeling .
- Even if you don't understand why they feel the way they do , it's still important to acknowledge the feelings and that they matter.



Avoidance (a common behavioural response to feeling anxious)



When we feel anxious about something, we naturally want to avoid the thing that makes us feel anxious. Avoidance can make us feel better for the short term i.e. by not having to face our fears however it is not an effective long term strategy as it does not allow children (or adults) to learn to overcome their fears. Avoidance can maintain /keep the anxiety going.

Parents can sometimes inadvertently let their child avoid anxiety provoking situations because they want to protect them from feeling anxious.

How to help your child face their fears (Brave behaviour):

- Let them have a go - encourage independence
- Encourage your child to face their anxiety in small manageable steps.
- Notice and praise brave behaviour – Rewards for having completed a brave step or task!
- Model facing anxiety- let them know if you are worried about something and show them how you cope.



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- Look out for safety-seeking behaviours (one that allow your child to avoid feeling anxious), especially ones which you might be doing for your child.
- When your child has faced a fear or worry, say something like: *“That was a bit difficult wasn’t it but you were amazing, you did the right thing! Now you know what to do if that happens again.”*

Relaxation Techniques

Muscle Relaxation



Squeeze a lemon!

Imagine you have a lemon in your hand. Squeeze it really really tight. Think about how your hands and arms feel.

Count to 5... and relax. How do they feel now?



Stretch like a giraffe!

Imagine you are as tall as a giraffe. Stretch your arms and your legs as far as you can. Think about how they feel.

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



Hide in your shell!

Imagine you are a little snail and have a shell on your back. Lift your shoulders up and pull your shell up as high as you can. Think about how your shoulders, your neck and your back feel.

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



Wiggle your toes in the sand!

Imagine you standing on the beach and you have the sand under your toes. Wiggle your toes and push down into the sand as far as you can. How do they feel when you are wiggling them?

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



Squeeze through a tunnel!

Imagine you are crawling through a small play tunnel. You have to make yourself tiny to fit. Breathe in and hold your stomach. How does your stomach feel? How does your back feel?

Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

Controlled Breathing

- ❖ Put one hand on your tummy.
- ❖ Imagine you are sniffing some flowers; breathe them in slowly while you count to 7. You will feel your hand rising.
- ❖ Hold the breath and count to 2.
- ❖ Release your breath slowly and count to 11 .
- ❖ Practise!

