



Supporting a child with anxiety

A guide for parents and carers

We're talking mental health.

If your child is experiencing high levels of anxiety, it can be worrying for you as a parent or carer.

We hope this booklet will help you understand anxiety more clearly and begin to address it. There are many ways to help your child – and you – to deal with this common but distressing experience.

Understanding anxiety

What does anxiety look and feel like?

Anxiety can have many physical and psychological signs:



BEHAVIOURAL

Being irritable, angry, tearful, avoidant, oppositional or withdrawn



PSYCHOLOGICAL

Feeling on edge, wanting to escape, feeling out of control, everything speeding up or feeling people are looking at you



PHYSICAL

Dry mouth, loss of appetite, going to the loo more, headaches, sweating, difficulty breathing, tight chest or problems getting to sleep or staying asleep



COGNITIVE

Being forgetful, disorganised, confused or loss of concentration



What's happening in our body when we're anxious?

When we experience anxiety, our bodies are often producing higher levels of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These are chemicals in our body which are normally released to help us react quickly to something or get away from something dangerous – for our ancestors this might have been a wild animal, a bear perhaps. This is often called the 'fight or flight' response.

When something causes us to feel anxious these chemicals build up in our body, but don't necessarily get used up (because there aren't many bears about these days).

This build-up of chemicals can result in unpredictable and sometimes explosive reactions.





What can be the impact of anxiety?

Anxiety can get in the way of what we think are normal day to day actions. It can impact the parts of the brain which help us with things like memory, understanding language and other communication, and what we call 'executive functioning'. This means things like planning ahead, doing tasks in the right order and making reasoned decisions can become much harder.

A child's reaction to anxiety can sometimes be mistaken for poor or disruptive behaviour, which can mean we 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. In these years, the brain is geared more towards emotional and social responses – for example getting approval from their friends and peers – than 'logical' responses. So don't feel you need to understand the logic; be more prepared to ask 'how can I help?'

Helping with anxiety

Practical ideas for your child

Help them spot the signs of anxiety

Helping your child recognise physical cues can be useful for identifying when anxiety levels may be rising and you may need some coping strategies. At a calm moment ask them what it feels like for them.

For young children you could use a teddy or ask them to draw how they are feeling, for older ones you could ask them to write about their feelings. This may be particularly helpful for those who are not sure what they are feeling or find it hard to describe.

Give reassurance carefully

Anxious children and young people are likely to seek a great deal of reassurance. It may sound strange, but we can sometimes over-reassure our children. This can mean they come to rely on that reassurance to feel better rather than learning to master their own fears and worries.

Instead, look to reassure them that you are there for them and at the same time you believe they are able to manage their emotions themselves rather than always relying on you.

Show you are confident they can cope: "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."



I can understand why you might be feeling worried. When I feel like that I try to...



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 helps this, while avoiding questions that be answered with a simple yes or no.

Share a quiet space

Sometimes just 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.

Validate their emotions

Even when we don't understand our 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..."

Plan ahead

When we know something is approaching which might cause us to feel anxious, we can plan for it, break it down into smaller steps, and prepare to manage it better. This is useful for both young people and adults.

I notice that you were able to calm your anxiety by using that breathing technique.



Helping with anxiety

Practical ideas for you

Remember, as well as ideas to support your child you should also think about how you can support yourself.

Take some time to identify things to help you feel good, happy and calm. 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 – either in person or on the phone.
- Making time for yourself – pampering, watching a fave film or TV show.
- Getting some fresh air – a walk, cycle or just sitting in a garden or park can help clear our heads.

It’s really important to remember not to beat yourself up if you feel you get it wrong – it can feel like trial and error a lot of the time and sometimes all your strategies will go out of the window.



Support for you when things feel stuck

It is very common for parents and carers to feel ‘stuck’ in their situation, which can lead to disappointment that things might not be feeling any better. This can understandably mean you feel frustrated and miss out on recognising any positive things, however small. In this situation, it can be totally normal to feel frustrated, so again it is important not to criticise yourself or feel you are ‘getting it wrong’.

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Actually, feeling stuck can also mean that things are not getting worse, and this is important. Here it is more about waiting for your child to feel able to move forward, meaning patience is a really key thing to display. It is important to reinforce positive things and experiences, in particular those things which help you as parents and carers to look after yourselves.

What can you do 'in the moment'?

It can feel really tough to stay supportive in the middle of your child's anxiety.

Some things which parents find useful:

- 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 in control more.

Try to stay calm and focused on your child's needs.

Listen

Keep your emotions in check as much as you can.

Let them know that what they are feeling will pass, a bit like a wave.

Healthy coping ideas for supporting children and young people

FEEL GOOD BOX

Make a box of physical things which reminds them of happy times and positive feelings. This could include pictures, notes, tickets to events or any other small objects which have good memories attached to them.



BE ACTIVE

Encourage physical activity, especially ones that take place outside such as walking, running or cycling. Make sure it is something the young person enjoys.



MUSIC

Create a short playlist of songs which helps them feel good. Shortcut it to a home screen on a phone or tablet so it is easy for them to access when needed. Singing also helps to regulate breathing.



DISTRACTION

Try to notice things around us, for example 5 blue things, 4 red things, 3 different smells, 2 sounds. Counting backwards can also be good.

FINGER BREATHING

Stretch one hand out and trace all around it with the index finger of your other hand. As you breathe in trace up to the top of each finger, breathing out as you trace back down.

BOX BREATHING

Breathe in through your nose to a count of four, then hold the air in your lungs for four, breathe out for four, then hold your lungs empty for four. Repeat for five minutes.



What other parents have said

A weekly family meeting helps us. We talk about our feelings, plan meals and generally check up on each other.

Ultimately [what has helped] is learning to cope with the ups and downs and enjoying moments with her when she can see a way forward.

Reminding myself of all the positive things she has done even though things might be looking bleak at the moment.

When she gets upset we use a gravity blanket which has been extremely useful.

Trying to rationalise things doesn't work [for my child], lots of collaboration and good conversations do work.

We bought him a punchbag on which he could take out his anger.

Looking for further help?

As we don't provide clinical help to individuals, we have listed below some organisations which offer direct advice if you are concerned about anyone who may be anxious or experiencing other mental health problems.

ANXIETY UK

Call: 03444 775 774
Mon-Fri: 9:30am - 5.30pm
Online: anxietyuk.org.uk

Support, advice and information on all anxiety, stress and anxiety-based depression conditions.

HUB OF HOPE

hubofhope.co.uk

Put in your postcode and find help local to where you live for a range of difficulties.

SAMARITANS

Call: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org

If you're having a difficult time or if you're worried about someone else.

SHOUT

Text: SHOUT to 85258

24/7 text service, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere.

THE MIX

Call: 0808 808 4994
Text: THEMIX to 85258
Online: themix.org.uk

Free confidential support and advice for under 25s in the UK, including a helpline, crisis messenger service and webchat.

YOUNGMINDS

Text: YM to 85258
Online: youngminds.org.uk

Free, 24/7 text support for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis.

YOUNGMINDS PARENTS HELPLINE

Call 0808 802 5544
Mon - Fri: 9:30am - 4pm
Email and webchat via the website
Online: youngminds.org.uk

Parents Helpline support with detailed advice, emotional support and signposting about a child or young person up to the age of 25.

Inclusion here does not mean the Charlie Waller Trust recommends or endorses any of these organisations above others, nor can we guarantee that the organisation will have a solution to your particular problem.

All details correct at time of going to press.



Remembering Charlie

Charlie Waller was a strong, funny, popular, good-looking and kind young man, with a close and loving family. To the outside world, he had everything to live for. Yet in 1997, at the age of 28, Charlie took his own life. He was suffering from depression.

In response to this tragedy, his family founded The Charlie Waller Trust, to open up the conversation around depression, and to ensure that young people are able to understand and look after their mental health and to spot the signs in others.

Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

GET IN TOUCH

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FIND OUT MORE

charliewaller.org

FOLLOW US



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SUPPORTING US

If you have found this resource useful please consider donating to help us continue our work



Text

To donate £10 **Text 'CWT' to 70085**
This costs £10 plus the cost of a standard rate message



Online

Visit charliewaller.org/donate