

Anxiety difficulties

Anxiety is a natural, normal feeling we all experience from time to time. It can vary in severity from mild uneasiness through to a terrifying panic attack. It can vary in how long it lasts, from a few moments to many years. Naturally, anxiety will be more prevalent for children and young people during periods in their lives that are associated with stress, such as exams, leaving school, and starting new academic years, and during these times additional support may be needed.

All children and young people get anxious at times; this is a normal part of their development as they grow up and develop their 'survival skills' so they can face challenges in the wider world. In addition, we all have different levels of stress we can cope with - some people are just naturally more anxious than others, and are quicker to get stressed or worried.

Concerns are raised when anxiety is getting in the way of a child or young person's day to day life, slowing down their development, or having a significant effect on their schooling or relationships. It is estimated that 1 in 6 people will suffer from Generalised Anxiety Disorder at some point in their lives.

"Try to reduce negative connotations/stigma and normalize mental health throughout your school with a range of promotion materials, outside facilitators and speakers, with staff around afterwards to notice and pick up on anyone who might want to talk."

Many children and young people with anxiety problems do not fit neatly into a particular type of anxiety disorder. It is common for people to have some features of several anxiety disorders. A high level of anxiety over a long period will often lead to depression and in turn, long periods of depression can provide symptoms of anxiety. Many children and young people have a mixture of symptoms of anxiety and depression as a result.

How to help a child or young person having a panic attack

- **If you are at all unsure whether the child or young person is having a panic attack, a heart attack or an asthma attack, and/or the person is in distress, call an ambulance straight away.**
- **If you are sure that the child or young person is having a panic attack, move them to a quiet safe place if possible.**
- **Help to calm the child or young person by encouraging slow, relaxed breathing in unison with your own.**
- **Encourage them to breathe in and hold for 3 seconds and then breathe out for 3 seconds.**
- **Be a good listener, without judging.**
- **Explain to the child or young person that they are experiencing a panic attack and not something life threatening such as a heart attack.**
- **Explain that the attack will soon stop and that they will recover fully.**
- **Assure the child or young person that someone will stay with them and keep them safe until the attack stops.**

Table 3 overleaf gives some examples, based on the Resilience Framework, of how to support children and young people with anxiety.

How to support children and young people with anxiety

Challenge	Ways to support children and young people
<p>A child or young person becomes anxious about situations at school before leaving home and refuses to attend</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a meeting where everyone is involved: parents, the young person, and school support lead (this could be the SENCO, year head, tutor, TA or other trusted adult in the school) to identify the difficulties in school and what support the young person needs to access school when they are feeling this way. (Enlisting) • Work with everyone involved to develop awareness about the vicious cycle of anxiety and how avoiding situations can only serve to increase the anxiety long term. (Core Self) • Support the child or young person to develop self-soothing activities when they feel anxious. (Coping)
<p>A child or young person worries excessively about getting into trouble</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible have a meeting with the family and try and understand how making mistakes or doing something wrong is approached at home, and the consequences. How do adults and older siblings in the family take responsibility for their errors, positive role modelling? (Core Self) • A child or young person with excessive worry will seek reassurance, and reassurance exacerbates the anxiety (because reassurance supports the person to believe that what the anxiety is telling them is real, rather than a perceived anxious prediction of what might happen. It will temporarily ease the distress, yet the person will then seek reassurance again in the future. The problem is the anxiety, not the issue the person is anxious about). Create a mentor within the school, who the child or young person can go to when they feel this way, who will provide the information they need to support them. This could be anyone on the staff who has had some training in resilience. (Learning) • Provide information to the child or young person about thought patterns when they worry and how they can challenge these. (Core Self) • Support the child or young person and others to develop a campaign on anxiety and worry within the school so the young people learn about it, and can act as champions and support other children and young people. (Core Self) • Run workshops for parents on anxiety and worry. See Get Self Help for useful resources to support these. www.getselfhelp.co.uk (Coping)

continued

Challenge	Ways to support children and young people
<p>A child or young person is isolating themselves</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gently talk to them about why they have become isolated, without pressurising. Approach them, letting them know you are there to talk if they feel able. (Belonging) • Create an anonymous feedback mechanism within the school for YP to share how they are feeling, and address any issues in a whole form group setting without singling out any one child or young person. (Coping) • Ensure everyone in the staff team is aware and can check-in with this child or young person, through greeting them in the corridor or in class and asking how they are. (Belonging) • Think about whether there is another child or young person in the year group who you could enlist to support this child or young person. (Belonging) • Run an assembly on isolation and loneliness and what support is available in the school, taking ideas from YP about how to tackle the issue by promoting belonging within the school.
<p>The child or young person struggles to make friends and is socially anxious</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to the child or young person about the barriers they feel to making friends. What gets in the way? When has it gone well? What support do they feel they need? (Core Self) • Identify what support they have available, or is potentially available. Are there any clubs at school that they could get involved with? (Belonging) • Explore outside groups and clubs. Could they access these? What support might they need to physically get there, and can you provide this? (Belonging) • Teach skills that encourage their sense of bravery. (Coping) (See “The Resilient Classroom” academic resilience resource, see http://www.boingboing.org.uk/academic-resilience-resources-directory/) • Run a tutor group session on this issue and generate ideas from other children and young people about how they would approach this. (Coping)

Table 3: Ways to support children and young people experiencing anxiety, using the Resilience Framework.

Recommended further reading about anxiety

Lucy Willetts and Polly Waite (2014) *Can I tell you about Anxiety? A guide for friends, family and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Carol Fitzpatrick (2015) *A short introduction to helping young people manage anxiety*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Anxiety UK: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Jo Derisley and Isobel Heyman (2008) *Breaking free from OCD: A CBT guide for young people and their families*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.