

Let's talk about anxiety: parent and carer guidance

Anxiety is a natural response to everyday difficulties. It's normal for children and young people to feel anxious about certain things – just as it's normal for parents and carers to worry about their children.

Most children and young people who are experiencing anxiety don't require specialist help. A good deal of what parents and carers already do can be helpful.

Normalising anxiety, helping your child to understand their own anxious feelings, and providing support and encouragement can make a big difference.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease such as fear or worry. It's one of the body's natural responses to stress and affects our thoughts, feelings, body, and behaviour.

Anxiety activates the body's fight-flight-freeze response. This means that the body prepares to either confront, escape or freeze in the face of a perceived threat.

Anxiety is not necessarily a mental health condition. Most of the time, anxious feelings are normal responses to stressful situations in everyday life, and they will pass naturally.

When is anxiety a problem?

Difficulties can arise when normal levels of anxiety become more severe or persistent and start impacting a child's everyday life. Anxiety can become a problem when:

it is constant,
intense, and
overwhelming

it occurs in
response to no
real threat, or
the threat is
exaggerated

it interferes with
someone's daily
life and stops
them doing
things they want
to.



The anxiety alarm

A car alarm goes off to alert its owner. However, sometimes the alarm can be too sensitive – it might go off when the wind blows, or when someone walks past. This can be similar to our feelings of anxiety – we might think something is more threatening than it is and feel more worried than we need to.

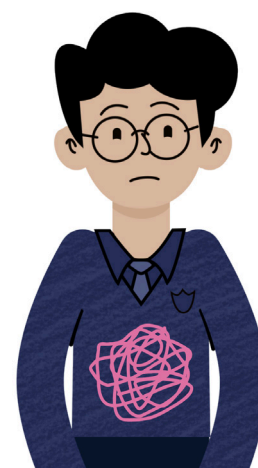


How do I know if my child is anxious?

Children and young people can be anxious about different things. They might be worried about their friendships, doing well at school, or other changes in their life.

Some common signs of anxiety include:

- difficulties being apart from you or other family members
- avoiding or worrying a lot about social activities
- difficulty concentrating, relaxing and sleeping
- frequent stomach aches or headaches
- constantly seeking reassurance
- difficulty leaving the house
- reluctance to go to school or take part in certain lessons
- excessive fear of being criticised.



How can I support my child?

Parents and carers are experts on their own children. Many techniques that specialists use with children and young people are similar to what parents and carers already do. You can help your child by providing support in the following ways.

Listen to understand: listen to your child with curiosity and openness. Try to avoid making assumptions, minimising their feelings, rushing to reassure them, or just telling them to 'calm down' or 'relax.'

Normalise anxiety: explain that anxiety is a normal response to everyday difficulties, and that you're there to support them. You might explain the 'fight-flight-freeze mechanism' or the 'anxiety alarm' example to help them to understand.

Provide structure and routine: where possible, provide a consistent routine - particularly around meals, homework, phone and laptop usage, and sleep hygiene. Make your child aware of any upcoming changes that they can plan for.

Help them to understand their feelings: you might use an anxiety thermometer, diary or worksheet to help your child to identify particular triggers, patterns and anxious responses, and work on a plan together to try to reduce their anxious feelings.

Practise healthy coping skills: use the healthy coping skills cards with your child. You might cut these out and keep them around the house, stick them to the fridge, or encourage your child to carry them with them.

Supporting your child to face their fears

While it can be natural to try to protect your child to help them avoid things that make them anxious, this can be unhelpful in the long run.

Try and come up with a plan with your child to help them overcome their anxiety step-by-step. This might involve gradually working up to confronting a feared situation in a way that is comfortable for them, and gently encouraging them to try new things.

This can be a tricky balance to strike. You shouldn't push your child into situations that are overwhelming for them and bound to fail. This might need some experimentation and tinkering with.

You'll know best how to support your child – work together to find a solution that works for them.

What if my child's anxiety doesn't get better?

If anxiety continues to interfere with your child's everyday life and causes them persistent distress, you should contact your GP and your child's school for further support. You might also contact a local counselling service.

Further support

- **NHS: anxiety in children** – information on supporting children and young people with anxiety.
- **Youth Access** – information about where to find youth support services in your local area.

Looking after yourself

Worrying about your child can itself be anxiety-inducing and isolating. You should make sure that you also look after your own mental wellbeing.

If you're struggling with anxiety, you should:

- talk to someone that you trust – this could be a friend or family member
- try the techniques on the healthy coping skills cards, as well as the NHS's anxiety self-help guide
- make time for self-care – including seeing friends and family, hobbies, and relaxation.

If you're still struggling, you should seek further professional advice. Speak to your GP or contact a counselling service.

Healthy coping skills cards

Positive self-talk



Feel calmer and more confident

Think of some negative thoughts you might sometimes have (e.g., "I can't do this!")

Think of three positive phrases you might try to use instead (e.g., "I can do it, I've done it before!")

Write these phrases down and reflect on when you might use them.

Five senses



Feel relaxed and more aware

Take a deep breath. Look around. Try to notice:

five things you can see
four things you can touch
three things you can hear
two things you can smell
one thing you can taste.

Thoughts in the sky



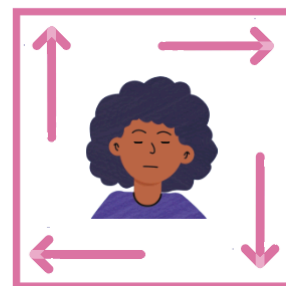
Relax and let go of anxious thoughts

Sit comfortably. Focus on breathing in and out.

As you breathe out, imagine any anxious thoughts floating away into the sky.

Continue this for a couple of minutes, focusing on your breath.

Box breathing



Feel calmer and more relaxed

Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds.

Hold your breath for 4 more seconds. Feel the air fill your lungs.

Breathe out through your mouth for 4 seconds.

Repeat this several times.