

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY IN CHILDREN



Reaching Families

Anxiety is a natural response to fear

It would be very unusual if you weren't experiencing heightened anxiety in our current circumstances. Ordinarily anxiety has the useful, protective function of making us pause and think about what we are doing, but it can run out of control and become debilitating, triggering chemical and behavioural reactions that in extreme cases prevent someone from leading a normal life.

Anxiety can trigger fight or flight responses which are very difficult to manage when we are confined to our homes for long periods. We all have different levels of tolerance and response to stress (adults and children) and different triggers that can make it manageable at times and totally overwhelming at others.

We are all having different experiences depending on our own individual circumstances. Whatever those are, we have to find a way through this as best we can for ourselves and our families.

Firstly, we need to manage our own anxiety for the sake of our children

This isn't always easy to do and it's very draining to be 'putting on a brave face' all of the time. But it is important, as children will take a cue from us and are usually very sensitive to picking up on undercurrents even when we are trying to be brave. That said, you also need to give yourself a break and don't aim to be perfect and on top of things all of the time.

The information your child receives

- How much control do you have over the information your child is receiving?
- Where are they receiving their information from?
- Is it reliable/ factual? Is it helping or making their anxiety worse?
- Are they picking up on your own anxieties?

As far as possible and appropriate to their age and understanding, we need to help children to understand in a factual, realistic way the seriousness of the situation and why their lives have changed so much. We also need to reassure them about how they can keep safe and that it won't last forever. Social stories and pictograms can help with this. (See links under further information).

Recognising and labelling anxiety

Sometimes anxiety can be disguised as other behaviours – repetitive movements, sadness, anger, aggression, rocking, changes in eating or toileting habits, chewing, biting, blinking. Acknowledging it rather than reassuring or dismissing is more helpful. "You'll be fine", or "It's nothing to worry about" without acknowledging their feelings can be very unhelpful. "I know you feel like this now, but it will pass" is a more useful phrase.

Over empathising is also unhelpful as it can add to the feeling there is something to fear rather than focusing on what helps to manage anxiety and moving on. It can be a tricky balance. Be honest, factual and realistic, appropriate to their age and ability to understand. Answer their questions as far as you can and try to find the answers from a reliable, factual source for the ones you can't.

Thinking and feeling use different parts of the brain and the aim is to encourage the thinking part in times of heightened anxiety so that feelings don't overwhelm and lead to panic. You can do this by encouraging the child to be 'in the moment', to understand that right now they are safe and nothing will harm them - that they can take back some kind of control. There are many ways of doing this. Mostly focusing on breathing techniques and focusing on something tangible to distract and divert.



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Practical Strategies

Five finger breathing: Hold one hand up and draw around the outside with a finger of the other hand, counting one (in, out), two (in, out), three (in, out).....slowly as you breathe in and out as you go up and down each finger. At first you may need to do it for or with your child, this helps to 'co-regulate'. Eventually you can teach them to do it themselves as a technique to self-soothe or self-regulate. This may need to be adapted for children who cannot manipulate or co-ordinate fingers by using an object or imagining it in their minds.

Another useful technique to regulate emotions is Five Things: Encourage them to name 5 things you can see, 5 things you can touch, 5 things you can hear. This grounds them in the moment and distracts and diverts.

Sensory environment: Consider and control far as you can the sensory environment. Some children may find it harder than others to be coping with increased noise from siblings; the smells and chaos of home life; being in the same space as others for too long; or not being around others in a lively classroom etc. Soothing music and or 'quiet time' may be helpful.

Worry Time: It may be necessary to encourage the idea of a 'time to worry', set aside in order to think about the things that are causing worry, but the rest of the time they can be parked or put away. You can use an actual object such as a worry monster or worry box or visual metaphors such as a cupboard, chest or bubble, that shuts the worry away for now.

If a child is getting anxious in between times, they can write or draw their concern and put it in the worry monster or worry box until it is the allotted time to look at it. This way, you are not dismissing their concerns, rather encouraging time to address them properly so that they are not gnawing away all of the time.

Making a box or monster is also a useful craft project to undertake as a time filler and expressing the worries in writing or pictures can in itself make them less scary. During official 'worry time' the child has your complete attention and again you can use drawing and writing to express the fears and explore realistic solutions and likelihood of concerns actually happening and what will keep us safe. For example: we can't catch Corona virus if we stay away from people who have got it and we can kill it by washing our hands etc. Establish parameters, for example – we will have 15 minutes to talk about this and then it is time to..... Follow Worry Time with an activity they enjoy.

P.A. C. E – A useful and easy to remember acronym which stands for: Playfulness – try to keep light and see the humour where possible; Acceptance – being anxious some of the time is natural and normal; Curiosity – exploring what is behind the feeling; Empathy – must be horrible feeling like this, how can I help?

Predictability - really helps for some children. Their worlds may have been turned upside down and very little is the same as it was, but we can create a new routine and provide structure in their day. Visual timetables are really helpful for this and easy to make. Try to keep to a routine (without being too rigid) for getting up, doing activities or school work, playing, getting exercise or physiotherapy, mealtimes and bedtimes as far as possible – keep a distinction for weekends.

Getting the children involved with making the symbols and having some choice of activities may help them to better accept the arrangements. Visual timetables can be quite sophisticated with laminated strips and symbols or a very simple list. Presenting something visually can have a surprisingly powerful effect.

Social contact – Human beings are mainly social creatures and need social contact. Some children on with Autism may not miss it so obviously, but you may have concerns about them getting too withdrawn and what might happen when things get back to normal. It is important to try to maintain contact with friends and family, but you will have to find new and inventive ways of doing this.

Make some time daily to write letters, draw pictures, use Skype or WhatsApp, talk on the phone. You may be able to see people from a distance, to wave, talk through a window, or across a garden fence or if you can, go on a trail spotting teddy bears or rainbows.

Positive Psychology - Life's natural optimists are probably faring better than most at this time. But Positive Psychology talks about 'learned optimism', suggesting that we can learn to see the more positive side of things even if it isn't an instinctive response. This can make it easier to cope with adversity.



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Try to see the positives – For some the slower pace of life and more time together is having some advantages for others there is much more stress to deal with. Keeping busy and occupied can be helpful; dig out old toys and games; plant things if you have an outside space; encourage narrative games with cars, dolls, dinosaurs etc; make dens or pretend vehicles; go on imaginary outings (restaurants, cinema, shops, fashion show) ; burn energy – discos, ball games, work-outs; teach relaxation techniques, practice Mindfulness or Yoga; cook or bake together; reading or audio books; play charades or put on plays; teach new life skills (and encourage help with housework!); start craft projects; DIY even, as age appropriate; make more of mealtimes; have more fun at bath time and more stories at bedtime. Play schools, shops, possibly hospitals (where toys get better).

Look for and emphasize the good news stories, the helpers, the survivors and try to discourage negative thoughts as far as possible. Enjoy nature, music, dancing, singing – find at least one thing to be grateful for every day, (more if possible). If you are busy and happy there is less time to be anxious.

In Summary

- Remember that worry changes nothing, it is a negative emotion – it steals your capacity to experience joy
- Intervening early to divert negative thoughts is the best way of dealing with it in children
- Work hard to find the joy in small things – actively look for positives
- This, as all things, will pass

Further reading and useful links

- **National Autistic Society** - various information and resources: www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx
- **YoungMinds Crisis Messenger** - texting service for young people experiencing a mental health crisis: www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/get-urgent-help/youngminds-crisis-messenger
- **stem4** - mental health resources for young people, parents and professionals: <https://stem4.org.uk>
- **Kooth** - information and counselling service for young people: www.kooth.com
- **Cerebra** - free online guide to anxiety for parent-carers: www.cerebra.org.uk/download/anxiety-guide-a-guide-for-parents
- **Mental Health Foundation** - a guide to living with anxiety: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/are-you-anxiety-aware-booklet
- **West Sussex Local Offer** - a guide to anxiety in Autism: https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/584-anxiety-in-autism-booklet
- **NHS UK** - a guide to caring for children during the pandemic: www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/looking-after-children-and-young-people-during-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak

Useful apps

- **Autistica** - app to help people with Autism manage anxiety: www.autistica.org.uk/get-involved/molehill-mountain-app
- **Smiling Mind** - a daily mindfulness and wellbeing app: www.smilingmind.com.au
- **twinkl** - children's book exploring emotions and wellbeing: www.twinkl.co.uk/book/the-huge-bag-of-worries

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