

## Managing Anxiety and Positive Psychology

During these extraordinary times, we find ourselves facing situations which for the most part are beyond our control and beyond our understanding. We are being asked to remain calm, yet there are messages of panic, fear and alarm throughout the country. As adults this is testing our sense of self, calm and stability, so how can we help children and young people (CYP) understand and cope with the current situation?

The first thing to consider is your own wellbeing, habits and behaviour. CYP will be understanding the world around them based on the things they hear, see and experience. So, if you are trying to keep going with normal routines, limiting your own social media use and following guidelines safely and calmly; then this is the example they are more likely to follow. Perhaps reflecting on your own situation, reactions and responses might be useful. It is difficult for our children to change without our model and example.

**During this time, we can also help our children through two specific interventions:**

- **Helping children and young people (CYP) to understand and manage worries and anxiety**
- **Helping children and young people (CYP) to focus on positive aspects of their wellbeing, life and current experience**

### Helping children and young people to understand and manage anxiety

#### **What is Anxiety?**

Anxiety is a feeling, an emotion, just like all the other emotions we have. Everyone, children and adults experience anxiety from time to time. Anxiety is a normal and often helpful response to situations that we find threatening or stressful. If we approach a difficult and challenging experience our bodies prepare us by releasing adrenaline into our blood stream which increases our heart rate and quickens our breathing in order to get oxygen and energy to the muscles that most need them. This reaction prepares us for a fight or flight response. We may get butterflies in our tummies and we may feel sweaty and shaky. This physical reaction to stress can be healthy and can even help us to perform better at tasks and protect us from danger.

*Remember:* All people, children as well as adults, are very different in how sensitive they are to 'stressful' situations. If a child or young person has previous experiences of stress and trauma, their responses and reactions may be greater, their sensations heightened, more difficult to manage and regulate.

#### **Anxiety can affect CYP in different ways:**

- The way their body works
- The way they think
- The way they behave
- The way they feel

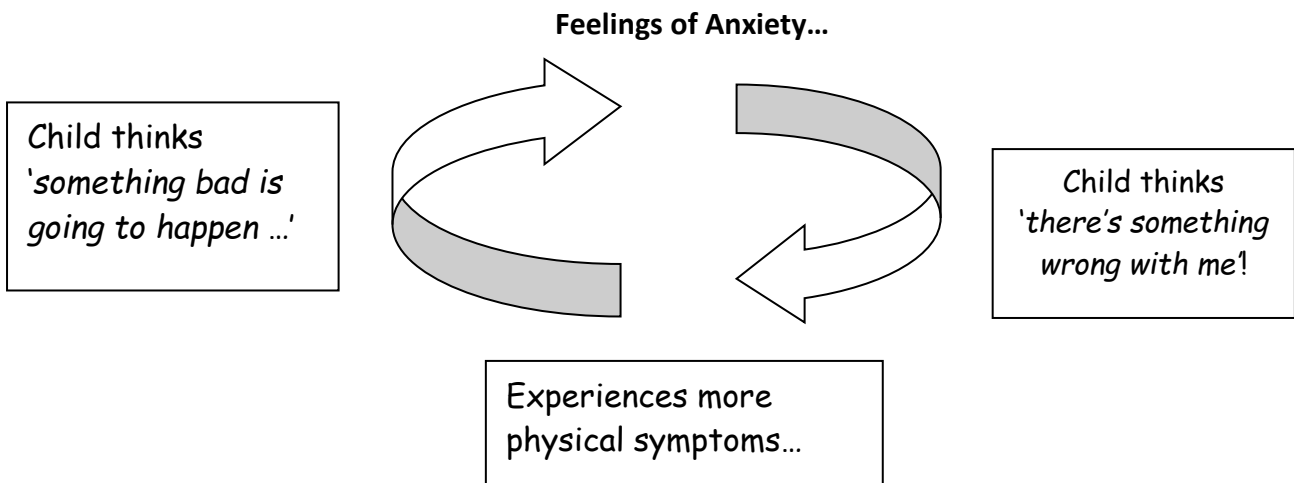
Here are some of the common symptoms of anxiety which some people may experience. Remember we are all different and anxiety can be expressed in different ways:

<b>Body reactions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heart beats faster</li> </ul>	<b>Feelings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing quickens</li> <li>• Feeling sick or having butterflies in your tummy</li> <li>• Chest pains</li> <li>• Fidgety and jumpy</li> <li>• Sweating</li> <li>• Shaking</li> <li>• Muscles tense ready for action</li> <li>• Body aching</li> <li>• Dizzy, light-headed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panicky</li> <li>• Scared but don't know why</li> <li>• Embarrassed</li> <li>• Numb</li> </ul>
<p><b>Thoughts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can't concentrate</li> <li>• Racing thoughts</li> <li>• Constant worrying</li> <li>• Imagining the worst</li> <li>• That something bad is going to happen</li> </ul>	<p><b>Behaviours</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid situations, people or places</li> <li>• Unable to sit still</li> <li>• Increased/decreased appetite</li> <li>• Pacing up and down</li> <li>• Irritable</li> </ul>

**The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety...**

The physical symptoms of anxiety, such as heart racing and feeling sick can make CYP feel even more anxious because they might think something is wrong with them and a vicious circle can develop...



**Anxiety can have the effect of making us think negatively.**

Negative thoughts like:

- "Nobody likes me"
- "I can't do anything right"
- "Something is wrong with me"
- "It must be my fault"

Helping the CYP to recognise, name and change these thoughts can be helpful and supportive.

**Avoidance is a normal response but sometimes it is not helpful**

Both these negative thoughts and these worrying physical symptoms often lead CYP to avoid certain situations. Avoiding the situation may reduce the feelings of anxiety in the short term. However, in the long term the 'problem' is likely to worsen.

If a CYP avoids their feared situation, they learn that avoidance makes them feel safe again. They then do not get the chance to learn that nothing bad will happen to them if they try and face their feared situation. The common-sense advice of "*if you fall off your bike get back on it straight away*" is an example of this. If a child does get back on their bike straight away, they have the chance to learn that riding a bike can be fun and safe.

### **But what about the present time when things are so uncertain?**

It may be helpful to talk about anxiety using the metaphor of a wave. Anxiety, like all emotions, comes in a wave. This wave may last a long time or a short time. It is important to remember, and it is important to help your child experience that anxiety will pass.



We all know we cannot stop the waves on a beach, they just keep coming, we cannot hold them back or push them away any faster. The waves cannot be controlled or avoided. They will come and go, ebbing and flowing. The same goes for anxiety. If we resist the symptoms of anxiety by trying to control it, stop it, avoid it or push it away, the symptoms are more likely to get worse. But anxiety is an emotion, our emotion and we can all learn ways to be with the waves. We can use the metaphor of a surfer. They are not intimidated by giant waves. In fact, to a surfer- the bigger, the better. Surfers are not trying to fight the waves, they are moving with the wave, flowing in the same direction. When you find yourself experiencing a wave of anxiety, try riding the wave.

### **What can I do to help?**

**There are some things you can do to help the CYP to break a cycle of anxiety.**

#### **1. Help your child to understand their anxiety:**

Some children may not know what anxiety is and may not understand why they are feeling scared and nervous. Talk to the CYP about their worries and fears. Talking them through with someone they love, and trust may help them to rationalise their thoughts. Talking with your child about the physical symptoms of anxiety can also help them to understand their own bodies and "*why*" they feel this way. Explain to them that anxiety is like a wave and they can try to surf the wave rather than stop it coming or be drowned by it!

- Read books about worries and anxiety - There are some wonderful children's books that may help you to approach and talk about anxiety, stress, worries and fears (see list of books on back page)
- Label a diagram of the body - try drawing a body shape, ask your child to label all the bits of the body that feel strange or funny when they feel anxious. Talk them through the feelings and sensations so they can recognise what is happening to them next time they feel anxious. Let them know this is natural and they are not odd or silly to feel these things
- Keep a diary - writing a diary may help you/your child to identify places, times or situations that trigger anxiety. This may help them to understand why they are anxious

## 2. Positive Self-Talk Replacing worries with positive thoughts can be very helpful:

Ask the CYP to write down some of the thoughts and worries they may have when they are feeling anxious or afraid. Often naming the scary thing can itself make it less scary and easier to manage. Then next to each of the statement, think together of alternative "positive" statements.

For example:

"Something bad is going to happen"	changes to	"I am ok, and I am with people who care"
"This is never going to end"	changes to	"This feeling will pass"
"I can't do it, I am stupid"	changes to	"I am strong, I can do it"

Repeating, the positive statements over and over, can help to calm the CYP to break the cycle of anxiety described above. Younger children may need to say these things out loud for quite a while, and to hear them said by trusted adults before they learn to say it "*inside their heads*". Other CYP may like to write them down, decorate them and make signs and posters as visual reminders.

It might be helpful to ask your child "*what is the worst thing that could happen?*" Talk to them about their very worse fear. If you take their fear to the extreme and let them see that there would be ways of coping even if this happened, then they may feel more able to cope with their lesser fears. Children often have practical fears about where they would live, who would make their tea or help them to put their shoes on. Acknowledge these as the things the CYP needs help with and help them to understand that important people will be there to understand and help.

## 3. Make time for Relaxation and Breathing exercise:

In our everyday lives we often don't put aside enough time to relax. Doing a simple relaxation exercise, together with your CYP could have enormous benefits for you both. Relaxation: helps to relieve stress and anxiety, combats fatigue, assists healing, promotes better physical health, improves sleep, improves concentration and improves relationships.

Remember that there is no one way of relaxing and people find many ways to relax. It is important for your child to find the best way for them.

Activity to help physical relaxation - This is an exercise that involves tensing and relaxing your muscles.

- Find a quiet place, free from interruptions
- Get comfortable - lying down is best
- Concentrate on your breathing...slowly in and out...
- Start with your HANDS and ARMS and then move right down your body clenching and relaxing all your muscle groups from FACE and NECK to YOUR FEET and TOES. Finish off with a WHOLE-BODY tense.
- TENSE the different muscles as hard as you can 6. Hold for about 5 seconds.....and then RELAX
- How different do your muscles feel when they are tensed or relaxed?

For younger children, who may not understand the terms "tense" and "relax", you can also add the image "like a robot" and "like a rag doll".

Quick relaxation exercises (taken from book "Think Good - Feel Good" by Paul Stallard, 2002)

- Arms and hands: Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you.
- Legs and feet: Push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs, and stretch them out in front of you.
- Stomach: Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it.
- Shoulders: Scrunch up your shoulders.

- Neck: Push your head back against the chair or bed.
- Face: Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together.

Controlled Breathing Anxiety often causes rapid breathing. Learning to control breathing will be a helpful skill for CYP to develop.

- Find a quiet place, free from interruptions
- Get comfortable - either lying or sitting
- Close your eyes and place your hand on your stomach
- Focus on your breathing
- Take a long slow breath in
- Take a long slow breath out
- Try and concentrate on the air filling your lungs and then slowly coming back out
- Feel your stomach move in and out with each breath (this is important - with deep relaxed breathing, it is your stomach that moves and not your chest)
- Repeat
- Practice breathing for 5-15 minutes a day

Tip: Ask your child to think of a colour that makes him/her feel comfortable and relaxed. With eyes closed, have him/her visualise breathing in that colour through his/her nose and into his/her lungs. Guide him/her to visualise the colour moving down to reach all parts of his/her body, more and more, with each breath, until he/she is filled with the peaceful colour and is totally relaxed and in control.

#### **Other things that can help CYP to relax:**

*Sleep* - Encourage your CYP to get a good night's sleep. Children are more likely to be irritable and stressed if they are tired. Developing a bedtime routine may help to reduce anxiety.

*Exercise* - Exercise helps our bodies to relax. Physical activity, like walking, riding a bike or yoga helps us to use up adrenaline and nervous energy in a positive way. Exercise also releases chemicals in our brains called endorphins that make us feel good. Joe Wicks is currently set out to be the Nations PE Teacher and you can view his daily 30-minute sessions on YouTube at 9am.

You can access yoga sessions that you can do with CYP too, for example Cosmic Yoga sessions are available on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/user/CosmicKidsYoga>

*Food* - A healthy balanced diet is important for all aspects of wellbeing. Any child will be more easily agitated if they have ingested too many sweets, chocolate or caffeinated soft drinks etc. Try to make sure your child cuts down on these foods and instead eats plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

*Hobbies* - Encourage your child to take up a hobby. This will help them to relax and focus their mind on something they enjoy.

*Physical comfort* - Some children love to be stroked, massaged or just held. This can be reassuring and relaxing.

*Music* - Your child may respond well to music. Experiment with different kinds of music so they can find which is relaxing for them.

## Helping children and young people (CYP) to focus on positive aspects of their wellbeing, life and current experience.

Positive Psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits and enabling settings. The key messages from Positive Psychology that can be used to support CYP during these difficult times:

### **Help CYP to notice their positive experiences:**

- Ask your CYP to think of three good things that happened today, write down these three things in a journal and keep as a record
- Spend time outdoors, in nature and if you can't go outdoors try watching nature or travel programmes
- Grounding activities - here's the 54321 game
  - Name 5 things you can see in the room with you.
  - Name 4 things you can feel ("chair on my back" or "feet on floor")
  - Name 3 things you can hear right now ("fingers tapping on keyboard" or "tv")
  - Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
  - Name 1 good thing about yourself

### **Introduce activities that CYP enjoy into their daily activities**

- Play England states describes play as: *'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.'* Providing opportunities for this are essential for wellbeing throughout life. Try new things together and then encourage semi-independence in activities before full independence. Developing new hobbies and interests takes time and experience.

### **Practise telling yourself and others positive stories**

- Remembering the CYP at their best – think about, share or write about a time when the CYP were at their best and then reflect on the personal strengths, qualities and experiences displayed in their story. Re-reading this story every day for a week had many benefits for positive wellbeing.

### **Use boosters to change the mood – positive affirmations/statements**

- Jar of Positives – with the CYP ask questions and write down the answers on post it notes – place all these positive statements into a jar. You could decorate the jar and personalise with names and pictures. When the CYP is feeling upset, you could encourage them to look through and read positive statements. Questions might include:
  - I like who I am because...
  - I'm super at...
  - I feel good about my...
  - My friends think I have an awesome...
  - I mean a lot to...
  - Others reckon I'm a great...
  - I think I'm a pretty good...
  - Something I really enjoy is...
  - I really admire myself for...
  - My future goals are...
  - I know I can achieve them because I'm...
  - I'm naturally gifted at...



- Others often praise my...

### **Encourage 'flow' a total emersion in a positive experience**

- Flow is described as a sense of deep engagement in an activity, during which time passes quickly and the person is working at full capacity: nothing distracts us as we learn, grow and make progress towards our goal. Flow is emotionally a rather neutral state, because the focus is so completely on the task at hand. However, the aftermath is invigorating; the person feels happy and relaxed with a sense of achievement. Flow is more likely to happen when we are working at something we have chosen to do. Young children will play for hours, learning and growing, oblivious to what is happening around them. Translating that absorption into a more formal learning setting is a challenge. Activities that encourage Flow, remember it is the process rather than the product that is important:
  - Music
  - Sports
  - Gaming and Technology
  - Construction activities like Lego
  - Art and Creativity
  - Cooking
- Using signature strengths in a new way – Create an inventory of the CYPs character strengths and read through the top five strengths. Then challenge the CYP to think how they might use those five strengths in new and exciting ways. They were challenged to use one within the next week.

### **When you get low, recall happy memories**

- Recalling a happy event, perhaps a time when the CYP could not stop laughing, suggests to our mind and body that we feel happy now. This produces chemical changes, a release of endorphins, in the present. Practising recall of happy memories teaches children that they are not helpless victims of their emotions: there are things they can do to improve their mood.
- Say thank you – spend time writing and sending a letter of gratitude, to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.
- Treasure chest - This is a box or an album of happy memories. Create an individual or family treasure chest. When you have a really good experience, you write about it, draw it, take a photo to remind you of it. You put the notes, or drawings, or photos into your treasure chest. When you are low, or wish to be inspired, you open it up and savour the good experiences all over again.

### **Finally, the benefits of Laughter!**

Research has demonstrated the many physiological and psychological benefits of laughter. We are designed to be amused, playful and to experience joy and happiness. Laughter is accessible to everyone regardless of race, culture, language, beliefs, gender, age and ability. So, share it and be grateful for having been made so perfect. Start by sharing our smile, this is a great way to produce endorphins and because of the mirror neurons, we tend to mimic those around us, and this spreads the happy feeling. 'Laughter is the social glue that binds us together' Patch Adams. Do more of what makes you laugh, whether that's doing a silly dance, telling funny stories, watching comedy (V, Movies, DVD's, Radio, Print Media and Internet). Find out about what makes you and the CYP laugh and enjoy it together.



# MANAGING CORONA VIRUS (COVID-19) ANXIETY



## For You

- Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage
- Connect through calls/text/internet
- Add extra time for daily stress relief
- Practice self-care
- Focus on your mental health

BlessingManifesting

## For Kids

- Reassure them that they're safe
- Let them talk about their worries
- Share your own coping skills
- Limit their news exposure
- Create a routine & structure

## For Quarantine/Isolation

- Keep in contact with your loved ones via social media, texts, and phone calls
- Create a daily self-care routine
- Keep yourself busy: games, books, movies
- Focus on new relaxation techniques



## **Booklists:**

### **For Teenagers:**

- Getting through Anxiety with CBT: A young person's guide by Gurney-Smith, Ben
- The anxiety workbook for teens: activities to help you deal with anxiety & worry by Schab, Lisa M
- My anxious mind: a teen's guide to managing anxiety and panic by Tompkins, Michael A
- Helping children cope with anxiety by Eckersley, Jill

### **For Early Years and Primary:**

- Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside - Is a storybook about anxiety appropriate for 4-12-year olds.
- Don't pop your cork on Mondays: The children's anti-stress book by Adolph J. Moser - A book about stress, why we experience it at how we diminish it. For 9-12-year olds.
- I'm Worried by Brian Moses - A children's book about anxiety. Also includes notes for parents and teachers.
- A boy and a bear. The children's relaxation book by Lori Lite - A storybook about a boy and a polar bear learn to relax together.
- The Affirmation Web: A Believe in Yourself Adventure by Lori Lite - Story book providing positive thoughts and statements
- Night Light: A Story for Children Afraid of the Dark by Jack Dutro and Kenneth Boyle
- Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
- There's a Nightmare in My Closet by Mercer Mayer

### **For Parent/Carers:**

- \* Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step by Step guide for Parents by Ronald M. Rapee (2000)
- \* Helping your Anxious Child by David Lewis (2002)
- \* School Phobia, Panic Attacks and Anxiety in Children by Marianna Csoti (2003)

### **References:**

Helping Children Cope with Anxiety: A guide for families published by Child and Family Psychology Service, Gwent NHS trust

<https://positivepsychology.com/positive-education-happy-students/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/positive-psychology-in-the-classroom>