

Insight into...



How to Support Young People with Anxiety: a Guide for Parents/Carers

Health & Wellbeing Series: A4

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@WL_EPS

"Just because no one else can heal or do your inner work for you doesn't mean you can, should, or need to do it alone" Lisa Olivera

Anxiety is normal

To grow, your child must experience anxiety from time to time. Anxiety is a normal part of life and can even be helpful in some situations like coping in an emergency. Symptoms of anxiety are the result of the "fight or flight" response. This is the body's normal response to danger. It triggers the release of natural chemicals in the body. These chemicals prepare us to deal with a real danger. They affect heart rate, breathing, muscles, nerves, and digestion. This response is meant to protect us from danger. But with anxiety disorders, the "fight or flight" response is overactive. It happens even when there is no real danger.



Trying to eliminate anxiety from your child's life is impossible. In fact, avoiding the things that make your child anxious will increase anxiety. As a parent/carer you can help your child face what they are worried or anxious about and increase their confidence and skills in understanding and managing their anxiety successfully.

This Insight has been written to be used alongside the other Insights in the Anxiety Series: What is Anxiety?, Supporting Young People with Anxiety and Anxiety Management Strategies.

What you can do to help

As a concerned parent/carer there are a number of things you can do to support your child. These range from self-help strategies to accessing appropriate professional help. The best way you can support your child is to find out as much as possible about how they are feeling and listen to them.

Talk to your child about anxiety. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack. Talk to them about what anxiety is and about what is happening in their body, and why. Understanding what is going on, what it is called, and why it happens can really help. Helping your child to recognise their anxious feelings early on will help them to ask for help. Use the other Anxiety Insights as a prompt for discussion around these topics.

Use the following phrases as a way to support your child, let them know you understand them and you will help them in any way you can:

"I'm here for you" "How can I help?" "Together, we can work on this. We're a great team."

"I love you. You are safe" "Why do you think that is?" "If how you feel was a monster, what would it look like?"

This story is useful to help children understand where anxiety comes from and can be adapted depending on the age of the child.

In the past, when we were still cavemen, we came across many dangers, like dinosaurs and sabre tooth tigers. Our bodies (naturally wanting to protect us from danger) designed a special alarm inside us that was set to go off whenever danger was present. This alarm gave us the ability to fight the danger, or run away by increasing our heart rate, and supplies of blood to our muscles- making us breathe faster. It also made us think more quickly, and be on the alert for dangerous situations. It worked brilliantly! However, as we don't have dinosaurs or sabre tooth tigers on the planet anymore, we don't need the special alarm as much. Unfortunately we can't turn it off, and some peoples' alarm system gets stuck in 'on' mode, which causes them to feel ready for danger at all times. This is what anxiety is.

Learn to differentiate the different levels of anxiety your child is feeling by getting them to rate how anxious they are feeling on a scale of 1-5, for example, 1 representing very relaxed and 5 being the most anxious they could be. This will give them a way of describing how intense their anxiety is at different times and to show that anxiety peaks and then falls away again. This is a normal process and can be reassuring for you and your child.



What you can do to help continued....

- A whole range of **self-help techniques** have been described in the previous Anxiety Insight such as relaxation and how to challenge your thinking. Discuss these strategies with your child and agree to try one or two at first. Try to notice what things help them relax or feel better and work with your child to find more that work - young people will often know what works best for them. Explain to your child that it will be ok, and that the anxiety will pass. It can be helpful to describe anxiety as a wave and help them to 'ride' or 'surf' the wave and see that it gets smaller after it peaks.
- In addition to tools already discussed previously such as 'Worry Books' or 'Jars', you can try to help your child put their worries into perspective by **re-labelling** them according to who needs to worry about them, for example, money worries are for the adults.
- Get **professional help** if you feel your child's anxiety is not getting any better or is getting worse. It is normal for healthcare professionals to initially suggest 'watchful waiting' which involves careful monitoring of symptoms to see whether they improve or get worse with no specific intervention. Follow-up is then arranged.

What anxiety disorders commonly affect young people?

Anxiety can be experienced in lots of different ways. There are five commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders which each differ in terms of the focus of the fear. In all instances the fear results in some form of avoidance:

Separation Anxiety: is when the child worries about being apart from family members or other close people. The child may fear being lost from their family or of something bad happening to a family member if they are not with that person.

Specific Phobia: the anxiety is triggered by very specific situations or objects such as spiders, flying or crowded places, even when there is no danger to the person

Generalised Anxiety Disorder: when you are having regular or uncontrollable worries about many different things in your everyday life.

Social Anxiety: is when you experience extreme fear or anxiety triggered by social situations (such as parties, workplaces, school, or any situation in which you have to talk to another person).

Panic Disorder: is when you have regular or frequent panic attacks without a clear cause or trigger. You may feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, which can itself trigger a panic attack.

It is important to note that in some situations there may be some overlap of the types of anxiety experiences.



Looking after yourself

If your child is having problems, don't be too hard on yourself or blame yourself. Although it can be upsetting and worrying if your child is having a bad time, and it makes your relationship with them feel more stressful, you are not a bad parent.

If things are getting you down, it's important to recognise this. Talk to someone you trust and see what they think. Friends and family can often help - don't be afraid to ask them to have your child for a bit if you need some time out. It's easy to say take some time for yourself but in reality this may not feel possible. You might be too busy or exhausted for exercise or hobbies. But even a night in with a friend, a DVD box set or your favourite dinner can help.

Asking for some support from your doctor or a referral to a counselling service is a sign of strength. You can't help your child if you are not being supported yourself.

Promoting wellbeing with your child

- "We're going for a walk" Exercise relieves anxiety and boosts mood.
- Limit technology time - there is so much available but it is important to limit screen time
- Family time such as eating meals together has a positive influence on relationships
- Sleep is important in good mental and physical wellbeing

Further Information and Support

Anxiety.org.uk

Helpline: 03444 775 774

Youngminds.org.uk

Text support: text YM to 85258

Mind.org.uk

Online help tool

Childline.org.uk

Helpline: 0800 1111, 1-2-1 counsellor chat or online support tool