

Helping Your Child with **Anxiety**

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What is this pack for?

If your child/young person struggles with anxiety it can be difficult to know what to do for the best to know how to help them. The aim of this pack is to give parents and carers some guidance in supporting their children/young people.

This pack will offer information that you can share with your children/young people about anxiety, suggestions for activities, a variety of coping strategies and useful resources.

What is Anxiety?

Children often struggle to recognise their anxious feelings and instead may think that something is wrong or focus on the physical sensations such as stomach aches, headaches, shaking, sweating etc. Teenagers may think that there is something weird, weak or crazy about them.

Often these thoughts and feelings can lead to children and teenagers feeling even more anxious and self-conscious. Therefore the first step in managing anxiety is to have an understanding of what it actually is and how to spot it;

- **Anxiety is normal:** everyone experiences anxiety at some point or another for example when sitting an exam or going on a rollercoaster so helping your child or young person to understand that they are not alone or abnormal to feel this way can be really helpful.
- **Anxiety is not dangerous:** whilst anxiety can feel very unpleasant and uncomfortable it is important to remember that it will pass and it is not going to harm you.
- **Anxiety serves a purpose:** anxiety has a job and that job is to prepare and protect us from real danger. It can also help us to perform at our best (for example in exams) so it can be helpful to remember that although anxiety can be unhelpful in some circumstances it can be a life-saver in others.

Anxiety only becomes an issue when it starts to impact us on a daily basis or when managing worries becomes really difficult. (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anxiety/pages/introduction.aspx>).

Recognising Physical Symptoms

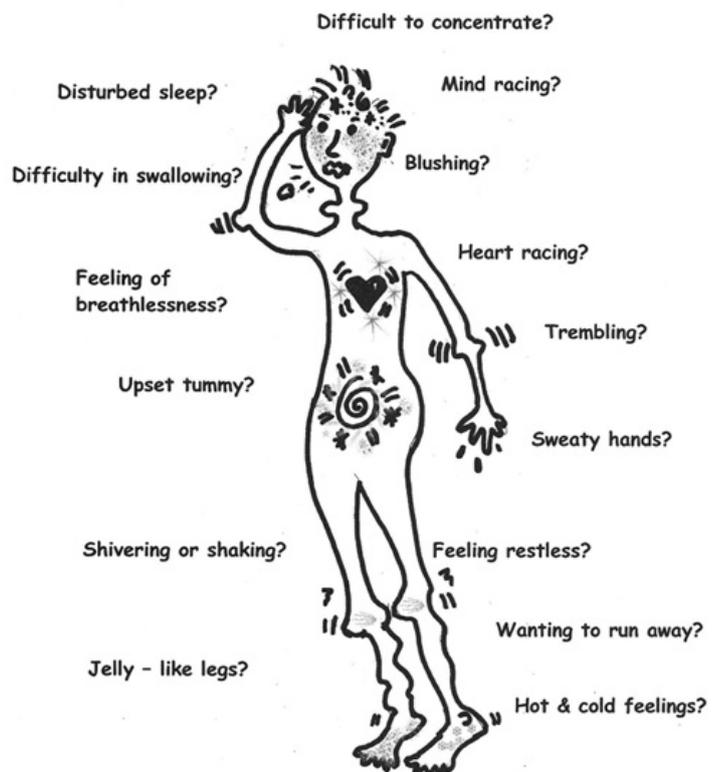
Helping your child in being able to identify symptoms of anxiety is one of the first steps in learning how to manage it:

A way of helping your child or young person to think about these is to ask them to draw a gingerbread person and label the physical feelings they experience.

It can also be helpful to discuss the Fight or Flight response (if appropriate); you can ask your child to imagine they are a cave man or woman living 100,000 years ago and they come across a hungry sabre-toothed tiger. Ask them what are their options;? Fight it or run away (that's flight).

An example that might be relevant today is to think about our options to a bully who confronts you and won't listen to reason. We have two choices: 1) Turn and walk away (flight), or 2) fight, even though we know fighting won't solve the problem.

What does anxiety (worry) look like?



Do you have any of these symptoms?

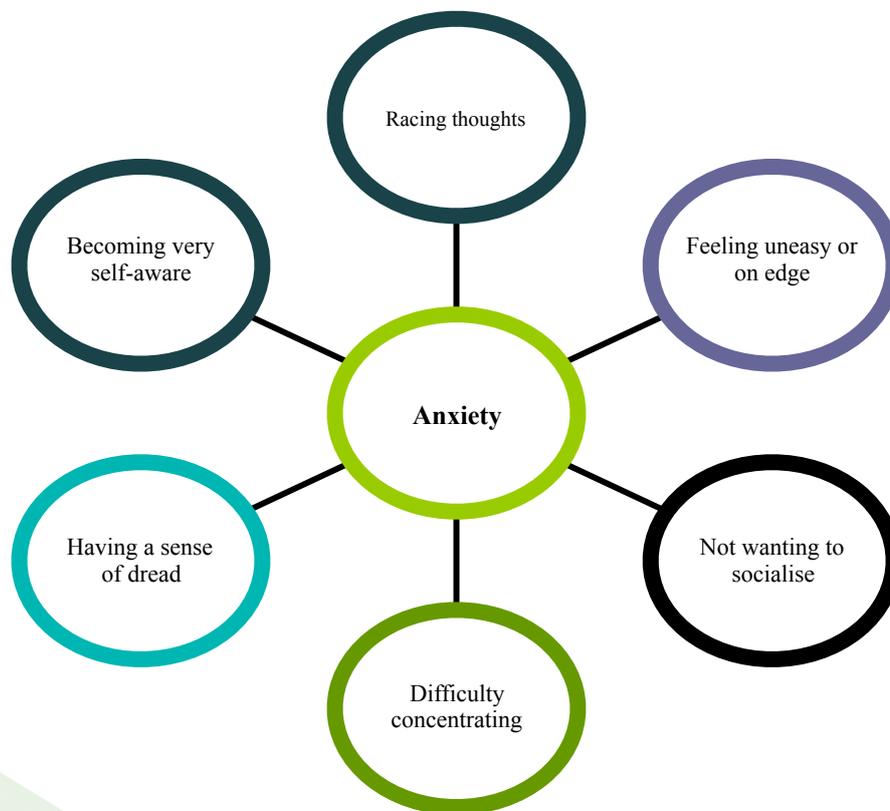
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To prepare for fight or flight, your bodies does a number of things automatically so it's ready for quick action or a quick escape;

- The heart rate increases to pump more blood to the muscles and brain.
- The lungs take in air faster to supply the body with oxygen.
- The pupils in the eyes get larger to see better.
- And the digestive and urinary systems slow down for the moment so we can concentrate on more important things.

Recognising Psychological Symptoms

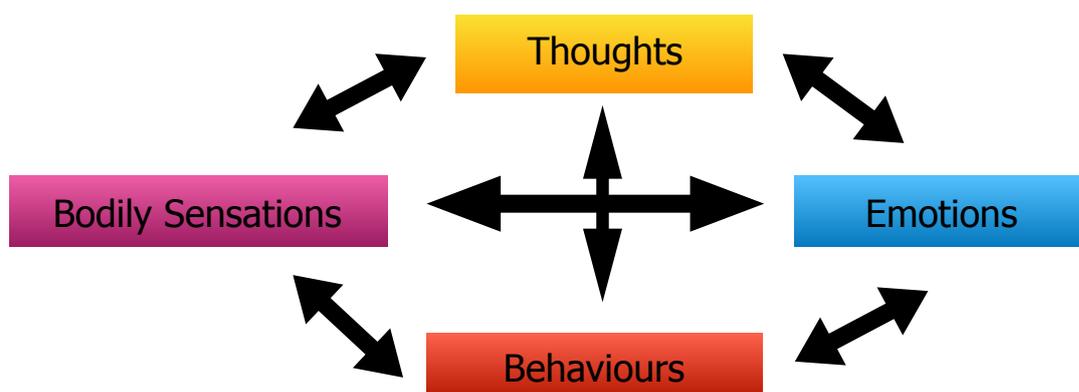
There are also a lot of common psychological symptoms of anxiety but these can sometimes be a little harder to spot:



These symptoms can be very difficult to identify for both you and your child/ young person, it may help to look at any behavioural changes that may be suggestive of anxiety such as avoidance, hyperactivity, changes in school achievement, social withdrawal, restlessness, changes in appetite, changes in sleep, seeking reassurance or anger outbursts.

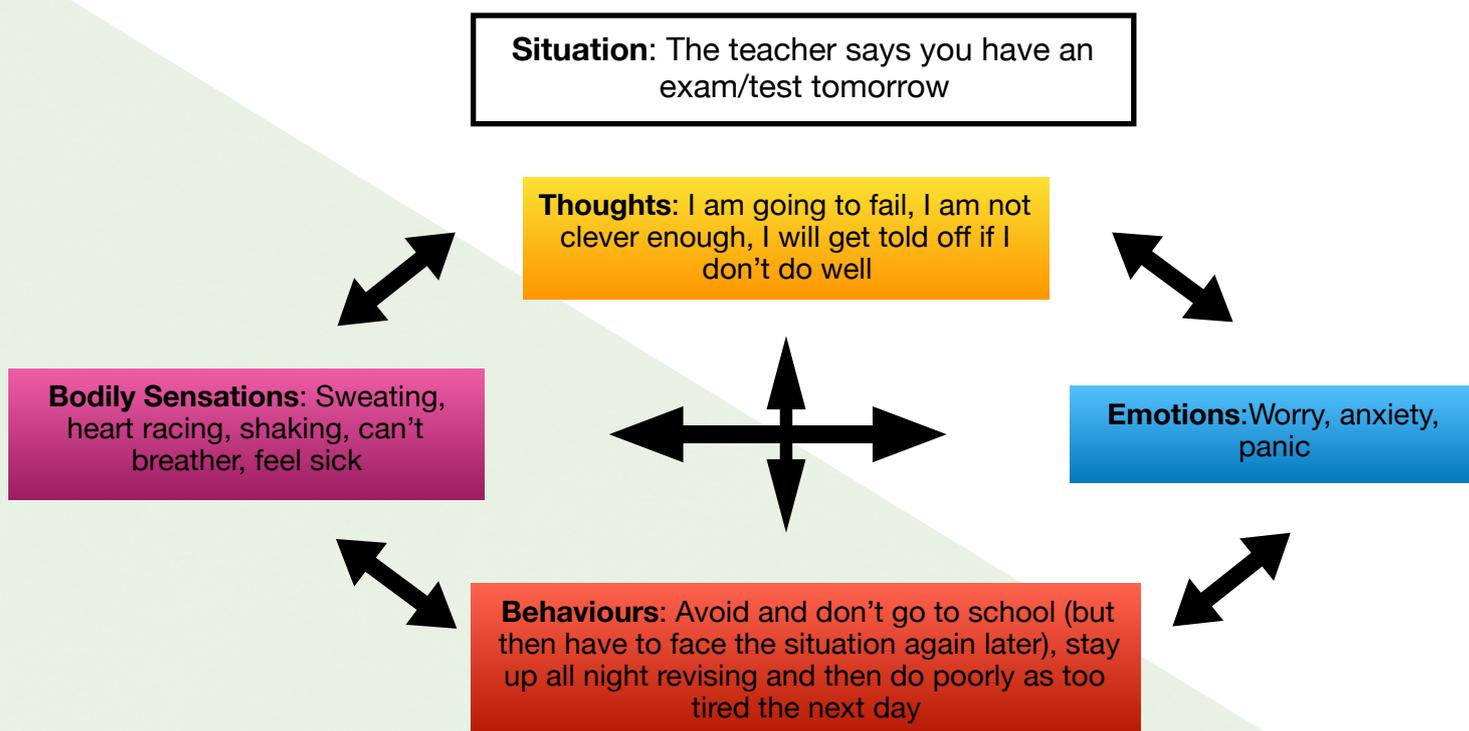
How Anxiety “Works”

Once we understand what anxiety is and how to recognise the symptoms it is helpful to help your child or young person to gain an understanding on how anxiety “works”;



The outside world will naturally have an effect on us and so our reactions to different situations, environments, social situations can be looked at using the model above; we all have **emotions** (how we feel), **thoughts** (what we say to ourselves), **bodily sensations** (physical symptoms or feelings) and **behaviours** (our actions).

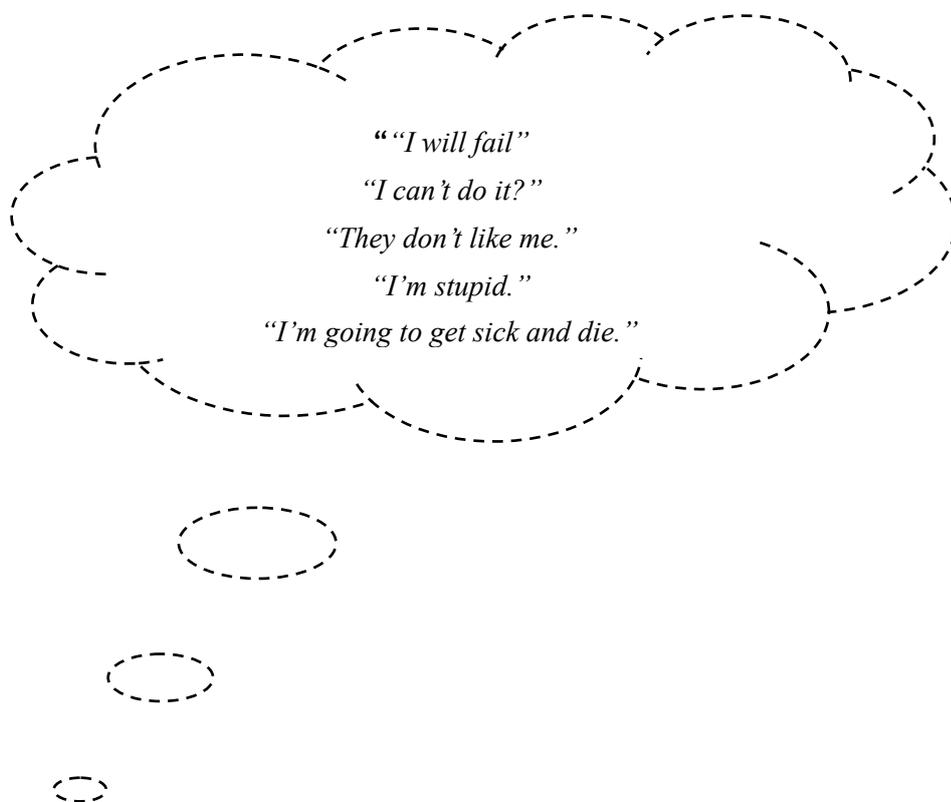
It is important to understand that each of these interact and have an effect on each other. It can be helpful to show your child this using an example;



Recognising Anxious Thoughts

Younger children sometimes find identifying their thoughts quite tricky, and especially anxious thoughts. In general, anxious children/young people think a bit differently than others. For example, they can easily come up with lots of ways that things can go wrong. They can sometimes see the world as more threatening and dangerous than it may actually be for example if a parent is late coming home, an anxious child may think "There has been a car accident!"

What your child says to himself or herself is called "self-talk". Anxious children tend to have negative or anxious self-talk. Some examples may include:



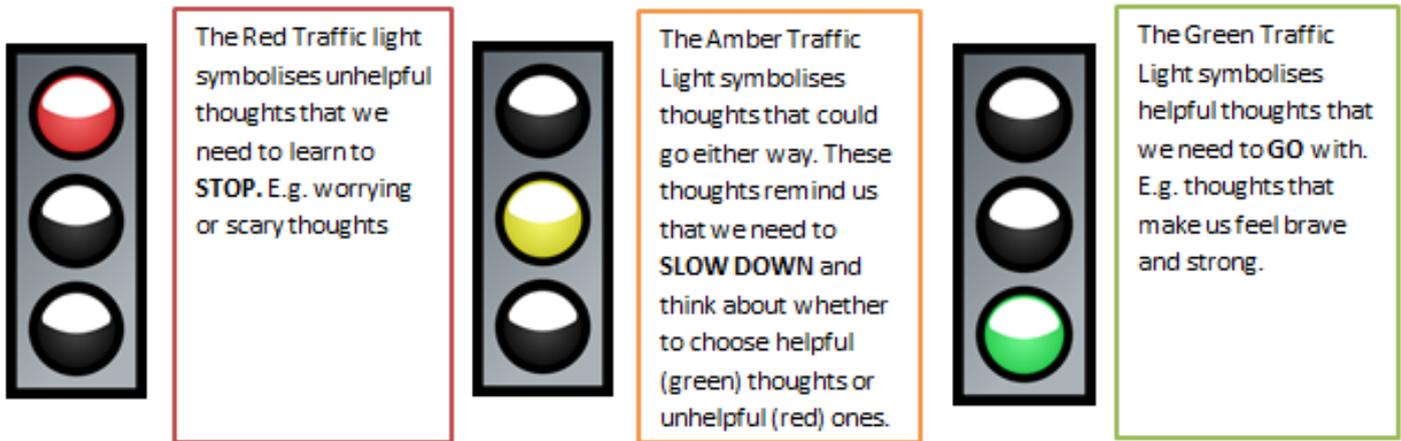
It is important for children to identify their self talk, because anxious thoughts lead to anxious feelings, which leads to anxious behaviour as shown earlier.

By teaching children that we can manage our own self-talk we can help them to control unhelpful thoughts. Remember, it can be difficult for younger children to understand the concept of what a thought is. In particular, it can be difficult to tell the difference between a thought and a feeling.

For example, your child may say their thought is "I'm scared" (which is actually a feeling) versus "that noise is a burglar trying to break in" (which is a real thought). It is important to expose the thoughts underneath the feelings! Try asking questions like "what is making you scared? What do you think might be going on?"; this can help them (and you) identify the thought processes that are causing and maintaining the worry.

Helpful and Unhelpful Thoughts

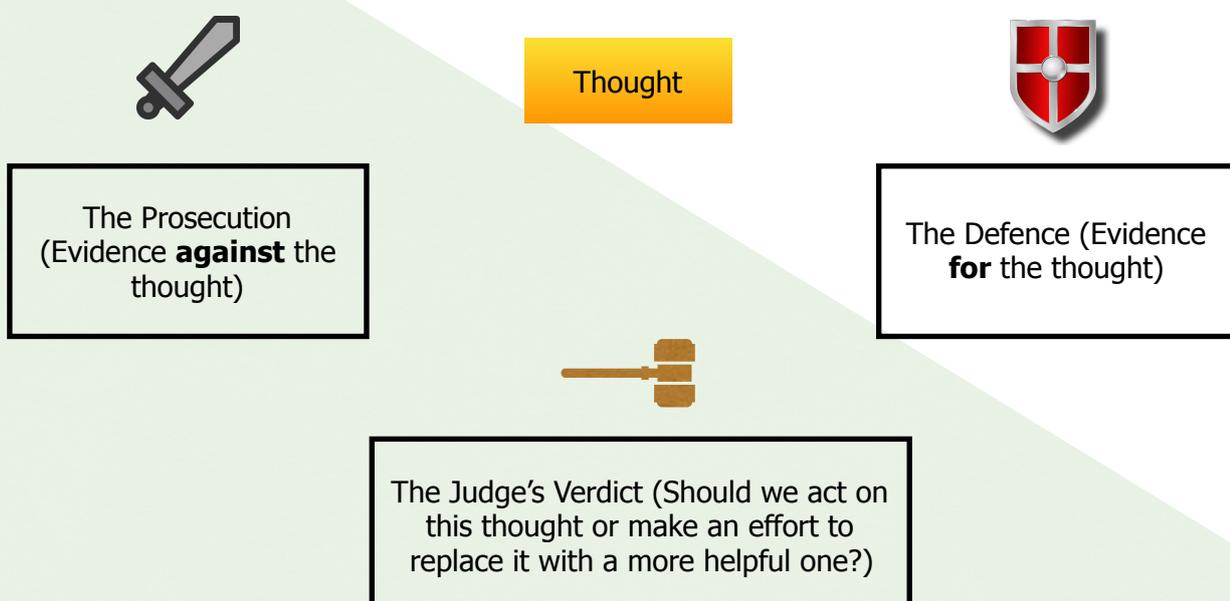
It can be beneficial to explain to your child that there are helpful thoughts and unhelpful thoughts. Sometimes it can be useful to use a Traffic Light system to discuss our thoughts;



Once your child can identify unhelpful or 'red' thoughts it may be useful to introduce thought challenging as often our unhelpful thoughts can be untrue or an exaggeration. Some examples of thought challenging questions could be;

- Am I exaggerating?
- Is this true?
- Am I making this out to be worse than it is?
- Is this thought helpful?
- Is this thought rational?

Older children may like to use the analogy of putting their thoughts on trial. You could have them imagine that their thought is on trial and they have to play the judge,



Management/Coping Strategies

Once anxiety has been identified there are many different ways to manage anxiety. Some strategies are designed to help with the physical symptoms and others to challenge our negative thoughts.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches your child how to relax muscles by systematically tensing particular muscle groups in their body and then releasing that tension. This helps your child to lower overall tension and stress levels. It can also help relieve some of the physical symptoms of anxiety and improve sleep.

People that struggle with anxiety are often very tense throughout the day and often don't recognise what it feels like to be relaxed, by practising Progressive Muscle Relaxation they can learn to distinguish between feeling tense and relaxed.

There are numerous helpful videos on Youtube for example 'The Big Chillin' – World Mental Health Day'.

Guided Relaxation

Activities like guided imagery can support children in finding a peaceful place and to help them to feel safe and re-establish feelings of tranquility when they are experiencing challenging emotions.

Below is an example:

Treehouse Relaxation Script

(<http://kidsrelaxation.com/uncategorized/treehouse-relaxation-script/>)

1. Get your body comfortable and gently close your eyes.
2. Slowly take three deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth.
3. Spend a moment or two, relaxing your feet and legs. Letting go of any tightness and letting them become heavy and relaxed. Imagine a wave of blue light traveling up from the earth into your feet and legs, relaxing everything it touches.

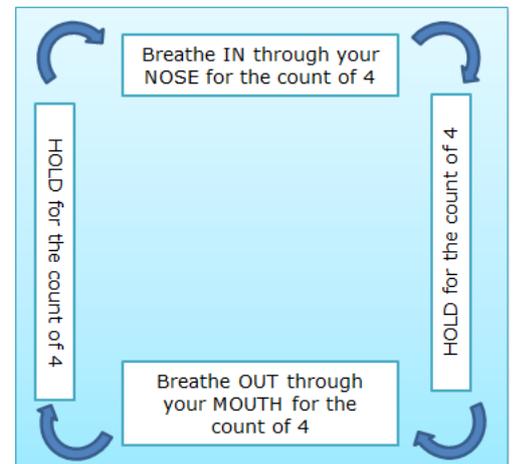
4. Now relax your tummy, chest, and shoulders. Imagine this wave of blue light sweeping through and relaxing this area for you.
5. Pay attention to your arms and fingers, allow the blue light to move through. Feel how relaxed you are.
6. Finally bring the blue light to your head and allow it to flow out of the top of your head and into the air around you. Beautifully done!
7. Imagine you are standing in front of a massive tree. This tree has deep, deep roots and branches that reach out in every direction.
8. This tree is home to your very own treehouse. This is a treehouse of your own design. Picture how you would like your treehouse to look.
9. (Pause between each idea) You can add swings, windows, trapdoors, plants, animals, your favourite things, your favourite colours, just allow yourself to design the treehouse anyway you like.
10. Can you see it? Good. Now allow yourself to travel inside the treehouse. (Pause) Are you inside? Good.
11. Inside the treehouse, imagine anything that makes you feel good to think about. Place pillows, waterfalls, plants, trees, birds, pictures of mountains, anything that you would like that you feel good when you think about it. Go ahead and design the inside of your treehouse now.
12. Know that when you go inside your treehouse you feel really really relaxed. This is a place to let go of all your thoughts, all your worries.
13. Take a deep breath and allow yourself to feel very peaceful and relaxed inside your treehouse.
14. This is a place that you can go any time you would like to feel more peaceful and calm. Know that your treehouse is available to you any time you would like. You can visit here whenever you would like.
15. Now take a deep breath and imagine yourself walking down out of your treehouse. Gently bring your attention back to the room.
16. Rub your hands together to make them warm. Gently place them over your eyes.
17. You can open your eyes whenever you are ready.

Deep Breathing

When we feel anxious our breathing will change, it tends to become shallower and quicker. This can sometimes even lead to hyperventilation. This kind of breathing can make our anxiety worse and so by doing some deep breathing we can lower our anxiety symptoms.

How To Do It:

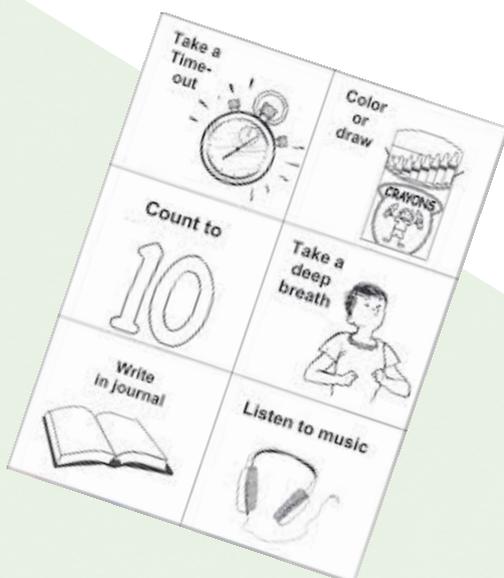
- Take a slow breath in through the nose (for about 4 seconds)
- Hold your breath for 1 or 2 seconds
- Exhale slowly through the mouth (over about 4 seconds)
- Wait 2-3 seconds before taking another breath (5-7 seconds for teenagers)
- Repeat for at least 5 to 10 breaths



Coping Cards

An important tool in your child or teen's anxiety toolbox is the ability to change anxious thoughts into to more relaxed and balanced thinking. However, it can be very difficult for children and teens to remember to use coping tools when they are anxious. They are so focused on their feelings of being in danger that they forget they have a way of telling whether or not danger actually exists (and it usually doesn't).

With practice, however, your child can learn to use coping thoughts on his or her own. This is really helpful as you might not always be there to remind your child to use the tools (for example, when at school, or sleeping over at a friend's house).



Worry Box

A worry box is an approach to addressing excessive worry and anxiety in children, it aims to take the worry and anxiety off of the child, and places it onto a tangible item such as a box.

Pending the interest/s of the child, this activity begins with the child decorating the box. This helps the child to feel some sort of ownership over the activity as well as empowerment in dictating the physical appearance of the worry box. Some children feel more comfortable talking and expressing difficult or uncomfortable feelings while either moving their body or by being distracted by something else. Therefore, this initial phase of the project serves as a beneficial time for the parent/therapist and child to discuss, explore, and process concepts and ideas relating to the project.

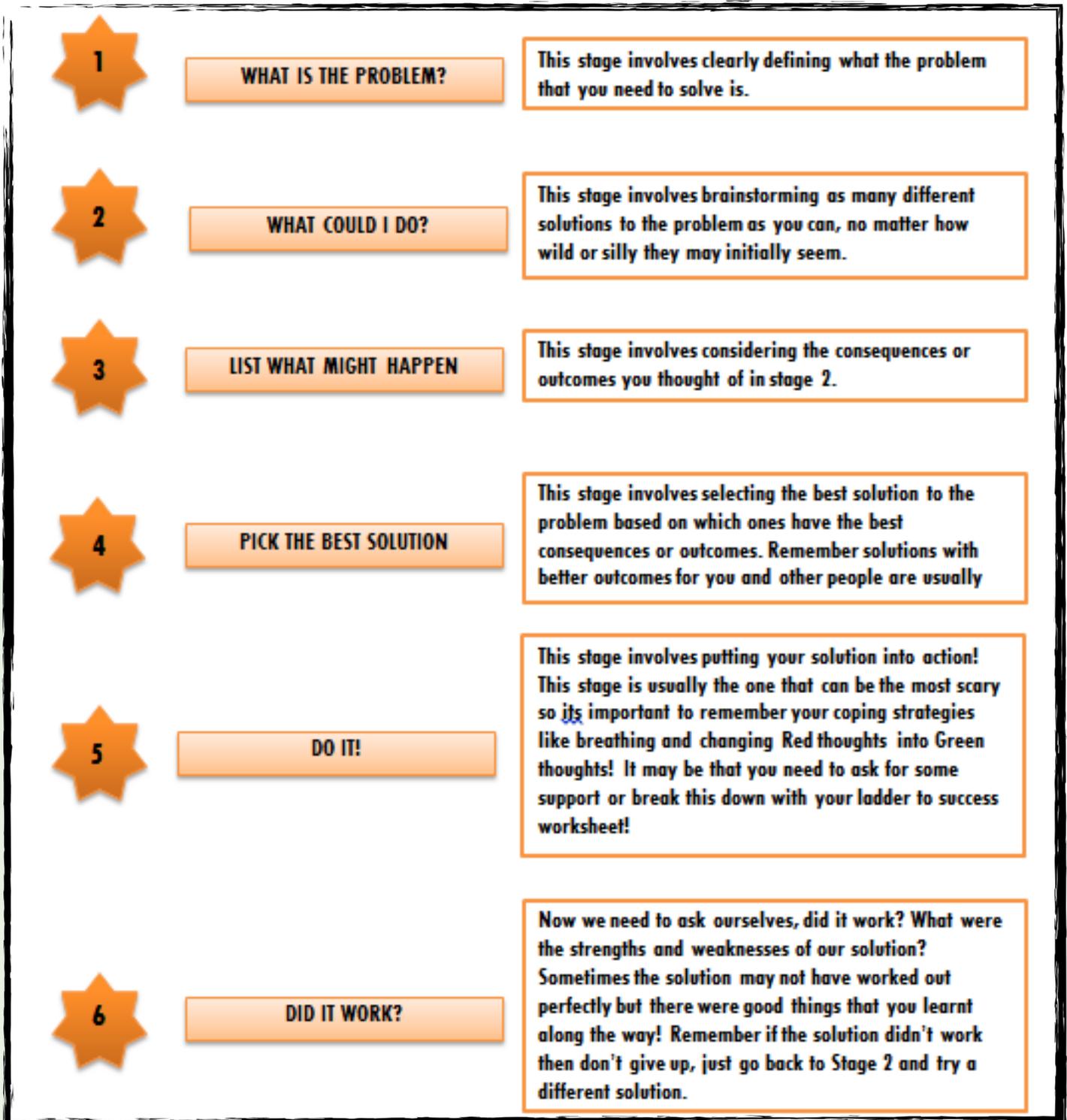
Next, 'worries' that the child is experiencing are written down onto strips of paper which are then folded and added to the worry box. Depending on the child's abilities and age, adult assistance in writing down worries may be required. If this is the case, it is helpful to also allow the child to draw a picture of whatever is being written down. This allows the child to have that connection and ownership over the 'worry.'

Every day (or however often is deemed appropriate), an adult and child can check in with each other through the use of the worry box. For example, begin by having the child take out one strip of paper at a time. The strips of paper with worries written on them serve as excellent visuals to spur conversation and processing. Through discussion, the child will indicate whether or not that particular worry is still causing them anxiety. If that is the case, the child can fold the paper back up and place it back into the box. If the child feels as though this is not something that is a worry anymore, the child and adult can discuss a ritual for disposing of the paper. For example, maybe the child would like to rip it into several pieces and throw it away. Other children may want to stomp on the paper and then throw it away. This is also an excellent place in the project for the child to exert some independence and control in deciding the mode of disposal.



Problem Solving

Developing problem solving skills can be a significant tool in managing worry as often the problem itself can cause your child/young person to worry. Before children/young people can solve the problem, they need to identify exactly what the problem is. In fact, just stating the problem can make a big difference. Once children/young people identify the problem, teach them to develop several possible solutions before springing into action, you could try using this 6 step problem solving plan;



Gradual Exposure

The process of facing fears is called gradual exposure, this involves having your child/young person repeatedly go into feared situations, experiencing less and less anxiety, until s/he is no longer anxious. Exposure, when done gradually, is not dangerous and will not make the fear worse. In fact, up until now your child/young person may have been avoiding or escaping from the people, places and things they fears, which has maintained the anxiety. By engaging in gradual exposure to their fears, your child can learn that these people, places and things are not dangerous, and they can cope. Done correctly, gradual exposure can eliminate anxiety once and for all.

Gradual exposure begins with the development of a list of the situations, or the parts of a situation, that are scary for your child/young person. Next, you and your child/young person will rank these steps from least to most scary using a 0-10 rating scale. Finally, your child or teen will work his/her way up the list, facing things that initially cause him/her anxiety, but developing confidence and experiencing success along the way. For example, a child or teen that is afraid of water. S/he starts by looking at water, then putting feet and legs in the water, then to the waist, then the whole body, then floats supported and, finally, swimming.

Exposure is one of the most effective ways of overcoming fears, although it takes some planning, encouragement, modelling, and patience.

Never trick, flood or push your child/young person as this will likely make the fear worse and cause mistrust.

Grounding

Grounding is technique in which the child or young person uses their environment and senses to draw their attention away from the thing that is causing them anxiety. An activity such as below can be helpful in teaching children how to ground themselves;

Name **5** things you can **SEE**



Name **4** things you can **HEAR**



Name **3** things you can **SMELL**



Name **2** things you can **FEEL**



Name **1** thing you can **TASTE**



Useful Reading

As with everything, the more practice put in the more effective these techniques will be. Constant reinforcement and gentle encouragement can be the best tool in helping your child/young person manage their anxiety, where possible make things part of a routine and keep communicating with your child/young person to find out what they find helpful.

For Children:

- The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside
- What To Do When You Worry Too Much – Dawn Huebner
- When My Worries Get Too Big! – Kari Dunn Buron
- David and the Worry Beast – Anne Marie Guanci
- Wilma Jean the Worry Machine – Julia Cook
- Coping Skills for Kids – Janine Halloran
- What to do When You're Scared and Worried – James J Crist
- Wemberly Worried – Kevin Henkes
- Sitting Still like a Frog – Eline Snel

For Teens:

- Stress 101 – Margaret O. Hyde
- Anxiety Sucks: A Teen Survival Guide – Natasha Daniels
- A Still Quiet Place for Teens: A Mindfulness Workbook to Ease Stress and Difficult Emotions – Amy Saltzman