
*Understanding
and supporting
children with
anxiety.*



Aims of the session:



UNDERSTAND WHAT ANXIETY IS.



RECOGNISE AND KNOW THE
SIGNS OF CHILDREN DEALING
WITH ANXIETY.



IDENTIFY STRATEGIES THAT CAN
BE USED TO MANAGE ANXIETY.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety affects between 5-19% of young people, with up to 5% of children under the age of 12 affected.

An overwhelming one in six will experience anxiety in some form during their lives. Helping children learn how to not only recognise when their worries begin turning into anxiety, but discovering how to talk about their feelings and seek help is vital.

Just like adults, feeling worried or fearful from time to time is natural for children. However, if these feelings start to affect their day-to-day activities such as school work, playing with friends, taking part in after school activities, or persist over long periods of time, this may be a sign that they are experiencing anxiety and may need help to overcome it.

Types of anxiety

Separation anxiety

Common in young children, typically six months to three years old, separation anxiety is when a child worries about not being with their parent(s) or regular carer(s). In older children, this can be a sign that they are feeling insecure about something such as a change at home.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

One of the most common forms of anxiety, children may feel anxious about a wide range of things rather than a specific event. They often feel anxious most days.

Specific fears or phobias Common childhood fears such as dogs, water, or the dark are a normal part of growing up. If this fear becomes overwhelming and affects their day-to-day life, it could have the potential of becoming a phobia.

Social anxiety.

A level of social shyness is normal for some children. When it starts to affect everyday activities like shopping, speaking on the phone, going to school, or seeing friends, it could be a sign of social anxiety.

School based anxiety

Children may become anxious about schoolwork, going to school, friends, or bullying, particularly when changing schools or moving classes. Rather than sharing these worries with you, they may complain of feeling sick, tummy aches, or show signs of being tired in the morning


Causes?

We don't always know what causes anxiety. Some things may contribute to children's anxiety, such as experiencing multiple stressful events one after the other, or they may pick up on anxious behaviours or tense situations around them. It may not be a single event causing their anxiety.

Children tend to feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up.

- NHS

Anxiety UK describes anxiety as a bucket that we keep adding little stressors to.



Children may experience a mixture of physical and emotional symptoms at any age.

These can include:

- *Feeling fearful or panicky*
- *Complaining of 'butterflies', tummy aches, chest pains or headaches*
- *Feeling tense or fidgety Increased need to go to the toilet*

Symptoms can come and go, so it can be beneficial to note down any symptoms you notice to see if they persist. Seeing one or most of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean your child has anxiety.

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling
- NHS

Strategies

There are plenty of ways you can help your child understand their feelings and tackle their anxiety.

Talk to them

- Make sure they know it's ok to talk about what's worrying them. Let them know you understand how they feel, and you're here to listen.
- Reassure them that you love them, are proud of them, and you are here for them no matter what.

Explain anxiety

- If they're old enough to understand, try explaining what anxiety is and the physical effects it can have on our bodies.
- The NHS recommends describing anxiety as a big wave that builds up and then ebbs away again, while Anxiety UK describes it as a bucket that collects our worries and then overflows when things get to be too much.
- Find a simple way to explain it that works for you.

Empower them

- Help them to find their own solutions to their problems.
- Try asking them what they think may help, and encourage them to explore solutions themselves or with you, rather than focusing on what could go wrong.

Find an outlet that works for them

- If they are finding it tricky to talk about what's worrying them, ask your child to try drawing what they are feeling, or writing it down, then discuss what they are feeling together.
- Some children may find it easier to explain their worries this way.

Recognise the signs

- Teach your child to recognise the signs of anxiety in themselves.
- If they can spot and understand what they are feeling, they can ask for help.

Find relatable materials

- Whether your child is anxious about specific events or things in general, there are hundreds of books, cartoons, apps, and activity packs out there to help them - and you - understand what they are feeling, and tackle it in a healthy way.

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Take a deep breath

- Try practicing a few simple relaxation techniques with your child to help them calm down and focus when they start to feel the signs of anxiety taking hold.
- Simple breathing exercises like taking a deep, slow breath for a count of three in, then out for a count of three can help them to calm down and break out of a negative thought cycle.

Keep a diary

- Encourage them to write down their worries, how often they feel anxious, and other symptoms they may have.
- Recording what, when, and how their anxiety is triggered can help them to recognise and understand situations that they may not realise are making them anxious.

Discover more tips at:

www.happiful.com

and

www.counselling-directory.org.uk

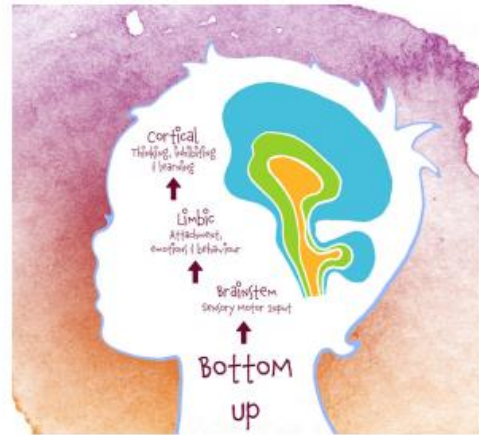


Brainstem Calmers



A psychiatrist, Dr Bruce Perry, has developed something called the 'Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics', which is a framework that helps us to know how to help children who have suffered early trauma and loss.

Children's brains organize from bottom to top, with the lower parts of the brain (brainstem aka "survival brain") developing earliest, and the cortical areas (thinking brain) much later. Traumatized children's brain become stuck in the brainstem, and they therefore swing between their survival modes of fight/flight/freeze/collapse.



One of the most helpful ways to move children from these super-high anxiety states, to their calmer 'thinking brain', is patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity

Creating a therapeutic web of relationships around the child together with regular brainstem calming activities can, over time, help a child's brain and body to learn that they are safe.



Brainstem calming activities need to be:

- **Relational** (offered by a safe adult)
- **Relevant** (developmentally-matched to the child rather than matched to their actual age)
- **Repetitive** (patterned)
- **Rewarding** (pleasurable)
- **Rhythmic** (resonant with neural patterns)
- **Respectful** (of the child and family)

[Brainstem-Calmer-Activities.pdf](#)

Be open and be available

Demonstrate that you are available to talk but without forcing the conversation at a particular time. Children and young people may be experiencing fear and anxiety from a range of sources. They may be worried about a grandparent, or catching the virus themselves, and they may express this in a variety of ways. Talking about what is happening in a child-friendly and age appropriate way, and helping children to find positive ways of expressing their fears³ (e.g. A creative activity) can help reduce fears in younger children.

Consistency and routine

Sometimes words like 'consistency' and 'routine' can sound dull or disciplinarian. What we're really talking about is establishing and maintaining healthy habits. Whatever words we use, these regular patterns of behaviour are really important for children and young people and help them feel safe and contained. These routines or healthy habits may take the form of a visual plan for the week, or a checklist of things to do to help children and young people to structure their day and manage their time. Other examples may include going on a walk each day or taking five minutes to plan an activity. Working with young people to develop their own plan is often a good way of getting the best results. If a young person isn't responding to or resists routine, be consistent, stay calm and keep the dialogue open. Supportive relationships are important in managing anxiety and gentle persuasion has more chance of working than conflict. Try to avoid escalating conflict when tensions are rising, remove yourself from the situation and return to the issue when everyone feels calmer and more receptive to addressing it.

Encourage problem solving

Children with anxiety often feel overwhelmed and will inevitably need some reassurance at this time. However, it is important for children to try to problem solve for themselves as problem solving can reduce the impact of stressful life events on anxiety.⁶ Rather than always simply offering reassurance, try responding to their questions with another question. For example, 'I know you are worried about us getting sick, but what are the things we are doing to keep ourselves safe?' This can help break what may seem like a larger problem down into smaller, more manageable problems that have more clearly identifiable solutions.

Work together

Teachers and school leaders can model positive ways of managing anxiety, both in the classroom or remotely.⁷ This can be reinforced by parents and carers at home. Receiving positive information and modelling calm can help to reduce fears.⁸ Exploring ideas together around 'what helps me to feel calm?' will enable children themselves to come up with what works best for them. Breathing exercises are a good place to start.

Maintaining a healthy balance.

Encourage children and young people to make time to engage with friends remotely. Remind young people of the value of allocating 'down-time' to their routine. Encourage them to do things they enjoy, such as art, listening to music, physical exercise and going for a walk as part of their daily exercise. Some pupils might need to be reminded that along with keeping up with their schoolwork, this is an important part in maintaining a healthy balance to their day and will help them sustain their relationships. For younger children play in particular is important during this time as it can help children manage complex emotions.¹⁰

*ANXIETY
TOOLS for
parents*

*[rebuild-and-recover-anxiety-tools-for-parents.pdf](#)
[\(mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk\)](#)*



*Let's invite
the children
in.*

What does the word 'anxiety'
mean?

How can it feel when we
are anxious?

Some activities to try

Simple breathing exercise

Sitting comfortably, breathe gently, slowly and evenly.

Notice the stretching sensation as you breathe in. As you breathe out notice the relaxation that follows.

Count in your mind, letting each count last about a second.

- 1. Rest your hand on your belly button. Take a normal breath and hold it as you count to 5.**
- 2. Breathe out slowly, relaxing your shoulders, face and body, as you count to 4.**
- 3. Breathe in slowly, letting your hand move outwards with your stomach, as you count to 4.**
- 4. Breathe out slowly and let your hand and stomach move inwards, as you count to 4.**
- 5. Breathe like this for 5 more breaths, focusing on your hand and stomach as they rise and fall, relaxing more with each breath.**
- 6. Hold your breath like you did at the beginning and repeat the whole exercise again.**

What's this good for?

- Helping panic attacks
- Boosting concentration
- Preparing for difficult tasks
- Relaxing
- Sleeping better



Muscle relaxation exercise

Sit or lie down and make yourself comfortable.

As you do this exercise use the comfortable stomach breathing from above.

1. Breathe in, clench your right hand, notice the tension in your hand and arm. Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.

2. Breathe in, clench your left hand, notice the tension. Breathe out, relax, notice the difference. Notice how comfortably heavy your hands and arms feel when you let them relax.

3. Breathe in, clench your thighs and buttocks, notice the tension. Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.

4. Breathe in, bend your feet up, notice the tension in your legs and feet. Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.

5. Breathe in and point your toes, notice the tension in your legs and feet. Breathe out, relax, notice the difference.

What's this good for?

- Soothing aches and pains
- Letting go of tension

Worry Box

Writing your worries down and placing these in a box, bag or worry monster can help you move past these worries which can sometimes become extremely overwhelming



Regulate

- 5 Things I can **SEE**
- 4 Things I can **HEAR**
- 3 Things I can **TOUCH**
- 2 Things I can **SMELL**
- 1 Slow deep **BREATH**

Regulate



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

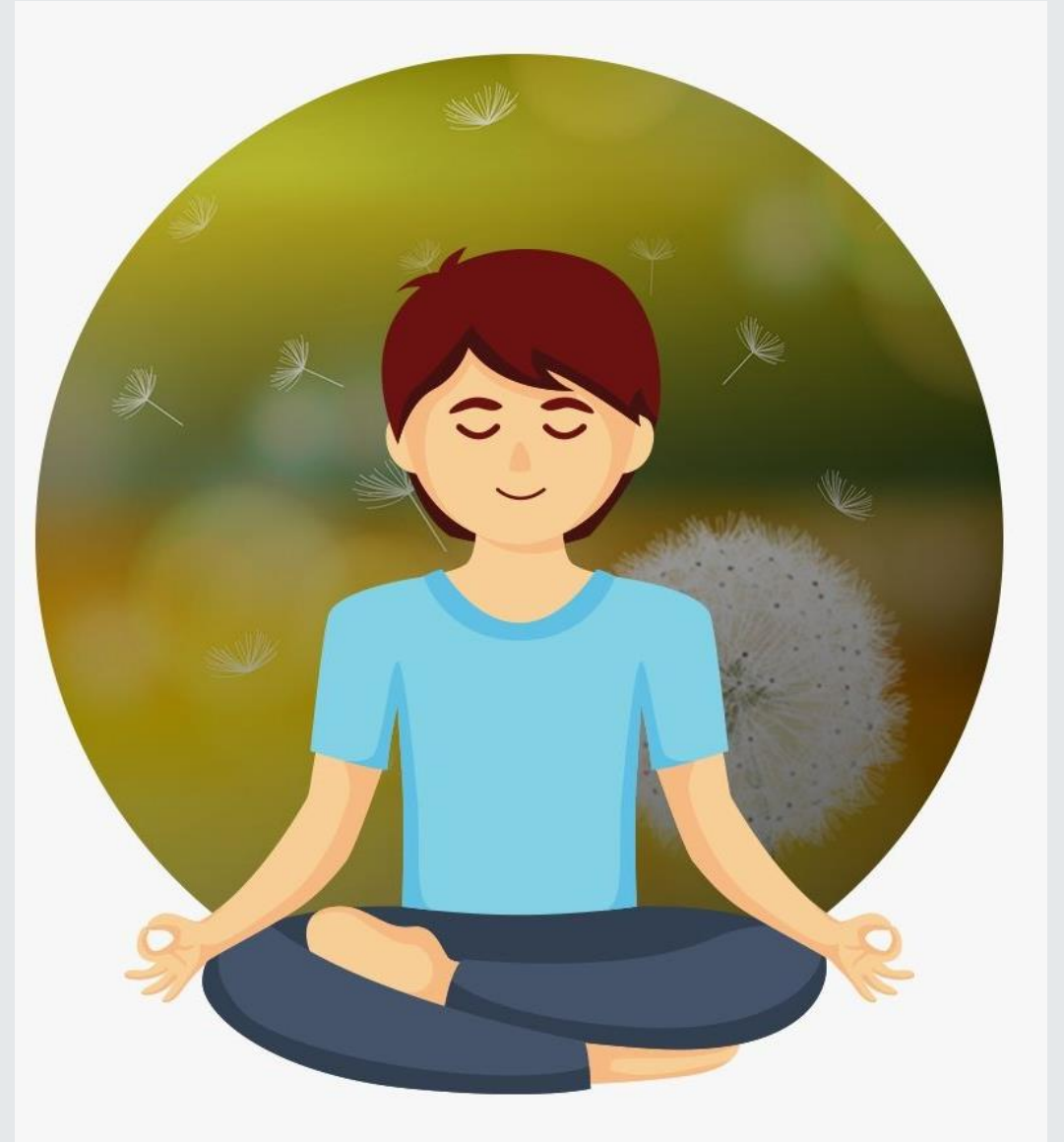
- This is a great way to relieve tension in our bodies. You can do it anywhere either sitting or lying down.
- Start at your feet and end at your face.
- Focus on tensing that part of your body for 5 seconds
- Release and wait for 5 seconds.
- By the time you have scrunched and relaxed your face you should feel relaxed and ready for anything.

My calm box

What would you put in your box which makes you feel happy?

What would you put in your box to make you feel safe?

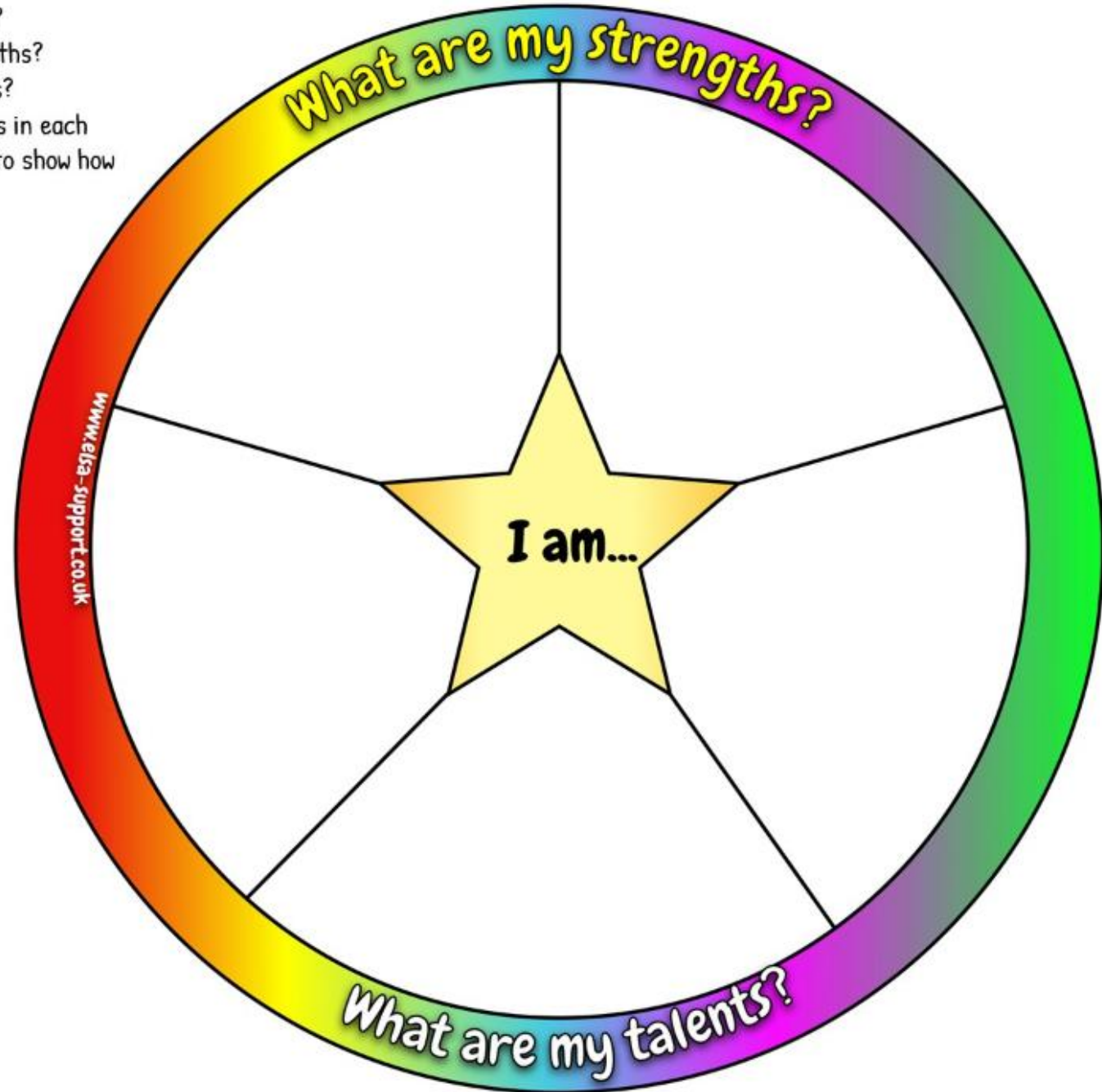
What would you put in your box to help you feel calm?



ELSA resources

[Resources for Emotional
Literacy Support Assistants
- ELSA Support \(elsa-
support.co.uk\)](http://www.elsa-support.co.uk)

What are you good at?
What are your strengths?
What are your talents?
Use words or drawings in each
section of the circle to show how
amazing you are!



Further information

Further Information

NHS - national health service providing information, diagnosis, and treatment.

Anxiety UK - charity providing information and support for people with anxiety.

Young Minds - leading mental health charity for young people in the UK.

Counselling Directory - connecting you with professional counsellors and psychotherapists, providing articles written by experts and further information on anxiety

Recommended Resources

If you need any more help, support or advice, please do not hesitate to contact either Ms Walker or Mrs Schneider via the school office.

