

Anxiety Part 3

In this session we will look at coping strategies in managing anxiety. Let's have a quick reminder of our objectives. When we are looking at taking control of our anxiety, you need to remember that we're not born knowing how to manage our feelings. Like anything else in life, we have to learn how to do this.

One of the ways that we can do this is by creating an anxiety toolkit. The Anxiety Toolkit consists of three things. It needs to consist of ways to calm anxious, bodily, feelings. It needs to look at ways to challenge our unhelpful thoughts and to include practical strategies for us to be able to take control of our anxiety. Let's look at each in turn. Firstly, how can we help our children to calm anxious feelings? One of the most important strategies to learn is regulating our breathing. When anxious, our breathing becomes more rapid, which in turn makes our hearts pound faster. By calming and regulating our breathing, we can calm our heart rate and in turn, other bodily feelings associated with anxiety such as trembling, and restlessness. We have different techniques that we can use to help regulate our breathing. Here are some of them.

The 4-8. This encourages children to extend their out breath in order to regulate breathing. Breathe in through the nose for a count of four and out through the mouth for a count of eight. In school we use imagery to help. We ask children to imagine a flower in their favourite colour and their favourite cake with candles and we then asked children to pretend to smell the flower and blow out the candles.

This also encourages an extended out breath. Another simple technique is hand breathing, where we use our hand as a tool to help us. Using a finger of one hand, we can trace up and down the fingers of the other hand, breathing in going up the digit and out for down. When anxious, we are more likely to have shallow, rapid breathing. This is also known as chest breathing, and when we chest breath we do not fill our lungs to the full capacity. Tummy breathing, however, helps us to fill our lungs more fully and our tummy should move with the breath, rather than our chest. Ask your child to lie down on the floor with their favourite toy on their tummy. By gently and deeply breathing in and out, the child will see their toy rise and fall. Now calm breathing takes time to learn, so keep practising. Practise for a maximum of five breaths at a time and go back to your normal breathing.

Other ways to help our children calm anxious feelings include being mindful, or mindfulness. Being mindful about being in the present and not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. One technique is to simply focus on our breath, but not to change or alter it, just to focus our minds constantly on it. We can also use our senses to help stay in the present moment. Ask your children to name things they see, hear, smell or touch around them. Maybe on the school walk you can say 'how many things can you spot that are the colour of red?'. Another thing you can do is create a welcoming and safe space for your child at home, where they can go to calm. Feeling anxious, angry or sad can be unsettling and a calming space in their bedroom or in your living room will offer security in Security in containment. Make it inviting but comforting It can be easy and cheap to set up with cushions, blankets and sensory or cuddle toys.

Another thing you can do is make a calming box with your child and fill it with sensory or fiddle toys. Giving your child something to do with their hands can offer distraction from anxiety and help them calm, some good item ideas are twist and lock blocks, tangles and squeeze balls.

Secondly, we can help our children to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts. When we are anxious, our thought patterns can become negative. By first recognising a thought as unhelpful or making us feel worse, we can then ask ourselves questions to challenge the thought we have. Is this true? Where is the evidence to back it up? Am I putting realistic expectations on myself or setting myself up to fail? Am I actually just putting myself down? What would I tell someone else to do if they had this thought? What's the worst thing that might happen? Is it actually not that bad? And can I change this thought to a more balanced and helpful and realistic one? Don't worry if you can't do this all the time, it takes practise.

The third aspect of our toolkit is thinking about what I can do right now to help my child. There are several strategies that parents can utilise on a regular basis which are proven to help anxiety. Playing with your child every day. It only needs to be as little as 10 minutes. Try to be led by an activity or game that your child enjoys. Work on being present in the moment to give your child your full attention. This will help to build confidence. Praise your child ensure sure this is specific and targeted, for example, you did a great job of putting your toys away. This ensures your child knows exactly what the praise is for. Try and do this as often as you can, even for the small things. Set aside some talking time to discuss worries, maybe 10 to 15 minutes maximum. Ensure your child is not hungry or tired. A good time is usually after tea.

Use this time to try and listen and help the child problem solve, rather than trying to fix the issue for them. You may want to set up a worry box or a notepad by the bed and address these worries at a good time for everybody. You may find worries crop up near, or at bedtime.

If your child is struggling with separation anxiety at the start of the school day, try and keep drop offs quick, positive and light tone. Prolonging separation can lead to increased anxiety. Trying to stick to the same short ritual everyday will give the child a sense of security.

As we know, anxiety feeds on negative thinking. So we can help our children to focus on things that go well each day, or even just go okay. We can help them build positive thoughts. It doesn't matter how small this is, ask your child to draw about it, or write about it. Some anxious situations we're able to do something about. If a child is anxious about an upcoming test, for example, then we can help make an action plan to tackle it. What are they going to do? When are they doing it? How and who will support them? This helps the child to take control of their anxiety rather than in controlling them. However, if an anxious situation is not within a child's control to change, use distraction to focus your child's mind on other things. Avoidance of the thing we think fear makes anxiety grow. For example, if our child is anxious about school and is not attending, then the longer the delay in returning, the harder it will be. Breaking the pattern of avoidance is important, but if a fear seems too big to face, then break it down into achievable steps. Each step is likely to cause a little bit

of anxiety, but if you use your anxiety toolkit, it can be manageable. Practise. Practise calming techniques. Practise challenging negative thoughts.

In school we promote our Pick & Mix for your mental health. Looking after our child's mental health is just as important as looking after our own mental health. Choosing two or three activities from the 10 choices for mental health can help everybody. This may be something that could be discussed as a family. What two or three activities can each individual commit to in order to maintain good mental health?

At the end of our sections on anxiety, we're going to look at some resources which may help. The following websites are useful for further information on anxiety.

Sometimes it can be tricky to sit down and talk about anxiety or worries. This is where sharing a story with your child could help. We recommend trying the following books, some of which can be found on YouTube.

Finally, thank you for watching our presentation. For further support please bear in mind our parent courses which will be up and running in the new year.