

Supporting Children and Young People's Emotional Wellbeing (Sam Sidney EP)

It is understandable that many of our children are anxious at this time. There have been lots of pressures and changes that have been out of their control over the last year including worries around COVID and the health of themselves and loved ones, restrictions meaning they're not seeing friends, pressures of virtual learning, family financial concerns, and lack of clarity when their lives will return to 'normal' to name a few.

Life is stressful! And a little bit of stress can be a positive thing as it motivates us to work/make a phone call/book an appointment/prepare for an upcoming exam. We actually perform better when we experience a little challenge/anxiety as it makes us more alert and task focused. However, when the challenge outweighs our coping, and the anxiety builds to the point that we are feeling overwhelmed, this impairs our thinking and ability to reason rationally and cope with the challenges that life throws at us. This is a cumulative effect and it can take one stressor to 'tip us over the edge' to a point where we are no longer coping and feeling overwhelmed. An analogy frequently used is a bucket filling with individual stressors and when it is full/overflowing we are overwhelmed.



Anxiety can present in many ways depending on the person and severity.

Anxiety presents itself in many different ways...

The desire to control people and events 	Difficulty getting to sleep 	Feeling agitated or angry 
Defiance and other challenging behaviors 	Having high expectations for self, including school work & sports 	Avoiding activities or events (including school) 
Pain like stomachaches and headaches 	Struggling to pay attention and focus 	Intolerance of uncertainty 
Crying and difficulty managing emotions 	Over-planning for situations and events 	Feeling worried about situations or events 

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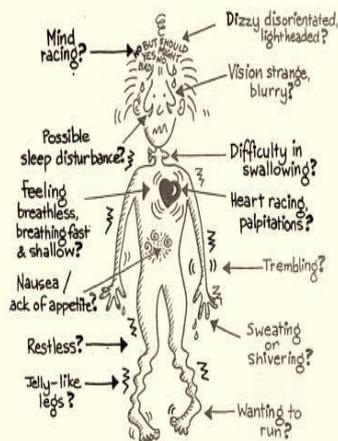
Avoidance

The most common way of managing anxiety is **avoidance**. When we avoid the anxious situation, we get an immediate relief. However, this is only a short-term solution, as when we face the situation the next time the anxiety reaction is much greater, due to the increased anticipation of the event.

We need to support children and young people to recognise the triggers of their anxiety and have ways they can calm themselves when they are starting to feel anxious, so they are able to deal with stressful situations throughout life and not become overwhelmed.

Anxiety can be quite a scary feeling for children and young people and can be mistaken for physical illness. Some individuals will have such a strong reaction to anxiety that they are physically sick.

What anxiety does to our mind and body...

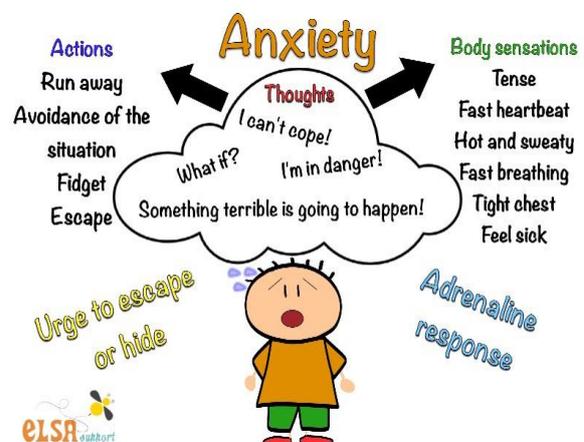


The physiological reaction

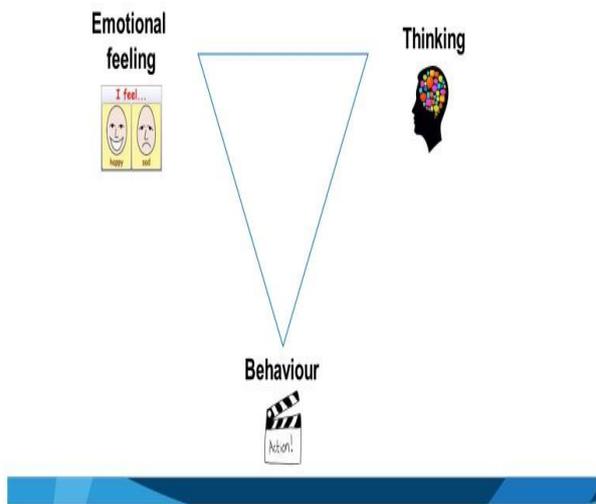
A worried thought activates the amygdala in the brain (the fight/flight/freeze area of the brain). Cortisol and adrenaline are released, and we can't think clearly as we are in a heightened state. If it builds to a peak, it is a really uncomfortable, and in some cases a truly frightening feeling, and one which we need to support our children and young people to recognise as it's building, so they can manage it and reduce it and they don't become overwhelmed.

The Interplay between thoughts, feelings and behaviours

Anxiety is an interplay between our thoughts and feelings. How we think about things has a direct impact on how we feel about it. It is worth examining our thinking styles and those of our children to see if we can catch ourselves getting into negative thinking styles as this has a direct impact on how we view and feel about situations.



What's behind the behaviour?



Excessive anxiety is characterised by:

- **Thinking**- negative thoughts, with tendency to notice possible threats too easily and to interpret situations negatively
- **Feelings**- frightened, fearful, out of control
- **Behaviour**- avoidance and rituals (safety and comfort behaviours)

Many anxious children overestimate the danger involved in a situation and underestimate their ability to cope. This leads to behaviours and thoughts which reinforce the fear. It's easy to get into a cycle where anxiety and fear lead to more anxiety and fear.

There are some key thinking patterns which amplify feelings of anxiety and an inability to cope.

Negative Thinking Patterns

- ALL-OR-NOTHING**
EVERYTHING HAS TO BE PERFECT OR ELSE IT'S A FAILURE!
- CATASTROPHIZING**
I GOT A B+ ON THE TEST. I'LL PROBABLY GET HELD BACK A GRADE!
- NEGATIVE SELF-LABELING**
I GOT THAT QUESTION WRONG. I'M SO STUPID!
- MINIMIZING**
I SCORED THE GAME WINNING GOAL, BUT ANYONE COULD HAVE DONE IT!
- PERSONALIZATION**
I'M PRETTY SURE HE HATES ME! I CAN JUST TELL BY HOW HE SAID MY NAME!
- JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS**
NO ONE IS LOOKING AT ME. THEY MUST HATE MY NEW SHIRT!

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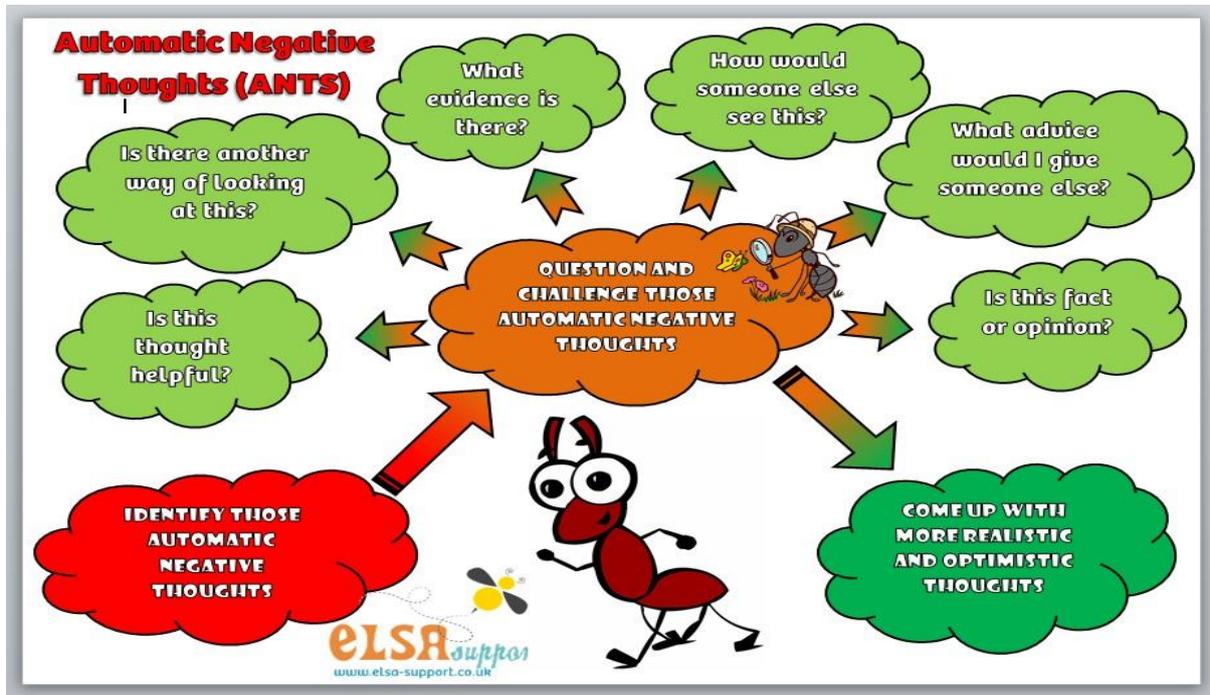
Many of these thoughts occur subconsciously. We all tend to use these thinking patterns at some time, but some people can get used to an unhelpful thinking style and automatically viewing the worst possible scenario.

It's important whilst we empathise with our children that they are feeling worried and overwhelmed that we also recognise these negative thought patterns in ourselves and our children/young people

so we can gently challenge them, as this will help them reframe the situation and their ability to cope with it.

Stamp out those ANTS!

We need to remember that many of these thoughts are **NOT** reality; they are just thoughts and we need to support our children and YP to stamp on the ANTS!!! (Automatic Negative Thoughts). I am obviously not supporting cruelty to insects in any way!



Stress bucket

We can also support our children/YP to identify when their stress bucket is filling and find ways to lower the 'bucket level' by finding outlets for their stress as well as increasing their coping skills.

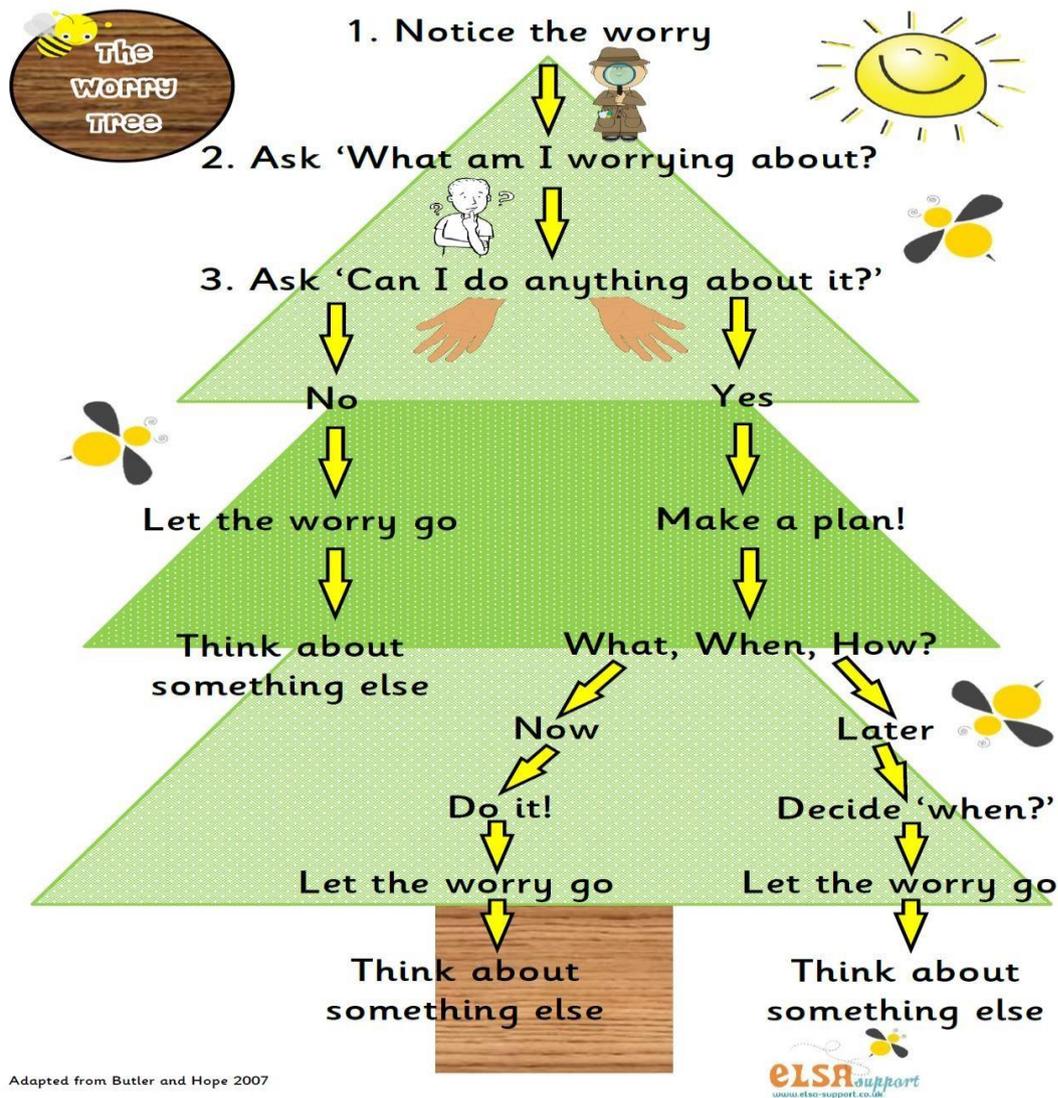
Individual Buckets

Every individual will have different stressors and different outlets for their stress. Some useful ones have been identified as sport and exercise, walking outside, drinking water, playing with pets, art and craft, talking to friends and trusted adults, writing in a journal, listening to music, baking, watching a film, enjoying a hobby etc.

Control

Supporting our children and YP to identify which stressors they can control and which they can't is helpful. The ones they can, make a plan to manage them e.g. revising for a test or calling a friend they have had an argument with. If the stressor is out of their control, finding ways to manage the feelings of uncertainty and supporting them to know that as horrible as it feels now, the feeling will eventually pass. Support them to find ways of managing their feelings by using relaxation techniques, breathing techniques and/or exercise and finding outlets which are distracting and so take their mind off the stressor.

A useful way of supporting children and YP to identify what to do about their stressors/worries is shared below. Worries are particularly difficult when they are out of our control and this last year has brought many situations which are out of all our control. Finding ways to recognise and manage these feelings and know that they will pass in time will help.



Here are some of the relaxing/grounding mindful activities which you can use to support children and YP to calm when they're feeling anxious:

1. Anchoring

Teach them to direct their attention to something eg. their feet or big toe! I know it sounds strange but teaching them to tune into one thing and exclude everything else is a really key mindful approach... Getting them to notice how their feet feel when touching their socks, get them to tune into how their feet feel when they wiggle them, can they feel each toe individually? This technique is called anchoring and helps divert attention away from anxious thoughts and calms body and mind.

2. TLC (Textures, Lines and Colours)

Direct their attention to all the textures they can see in the room, all the lines and then all the colours. This helps to distract the mind and helps calm them down.

Count in slowly for 4, hold for 4 and out for 8. This helps focus their attention and calms them down by slowing the breathing. The longer exhalation breath helps to release more CO2 and the slower breathing helps to slow heart rate and calm body and mind.

3. Belly Breathing

This helps to get much more oxygen into the body, slows the breathing and calm the body and mind. It also helps focus the attention away from any anxious thoughts. Breathing deeply and slowly into the belly. Put a hand or soft toy (for younger children) on the belly and watch rise and fall.

4. Finger Breathing

Get your child/YP to use one of the fingers on one hand to trace around each finger on the other hand, breathing in and out slowly as they do so. Concentrate their attention on the sensation as this will distract the mind and the breathing will calm your body and mind.

5. Visualisation

Picture blowing worries away in bubbles or them floating away on leaves in the stream. Encourage your child to picture putting all their worries into a balloon, blowing the balloon up, tying it up and watch it float away.

6. Positive affirmations

Encourage your child to practice saying to themselves a positive phrase such as 'I am focused, I am calm, I can do it', on a regular basis. This will help with a positive mindset.

7. Body Scan

Get your child to start at the top of their body and tune into and notice how each part of your body is feeling as they tense and relax.

Key points supporting our children and young people

- **Normalise** - Help your child understand that worry, fear and anxiety are all normal emotions that they can learn to manage. Every time they confront a fear, they will get better at doing it and the thing will be less scary over time. Recognise and celebrate their achievements in facing their fears.
- **Empathise** - It's good to talk – listen to them, validate their feelings, empathise and contain their anxieties and frustrations. Be truthful about the current situation but remember your child's age and answer questions accordingly. Be mindful of younger siblings when talking to older children. It is important to acknowledge that you and your child are concerned about the situation without causing undue panic. Children pick up on adult's anxieties and learn a lot from how the key adult's in their lives are responding. Try to remain as calm as possible.
- **Encourage and Reassure** – show them you feel they'll be ok. They look to you for guidance and whether they are safe and have the skills to cope. "I know you're scared and that's okay. I'm here and I'm going to help you get through this". 'This feeling will pass'.
- **Don't ask leading questions** – Encouraging your child to talk about their anxiety is important, but avoid asking questions that put further anxious thoughts in their head (e.g.

“how are you feeling about the school trip?” rather than “are you worried about the school trip?”)

- **Model how to stay calm** – if you are anxious your child will pick up on it and this will make them more anxious. Model to your child how you successfully manage anxiety with a coping skill (e.g. “I’m feeling a bit nervous about that, I’m going to take a few deep breaths before I do anything else”)
- **Teach self-awareness and self-regulation** – support your child to recognise their triggers and the things that help them calm such as sport and exercise, walking outside, playing with pets, art and craft, talking to friends and trusted adults, writing in a journal, listening to music, baking, watching a film, enjoying a hobby. etc.
- **Breathe** – Breathe slowly and deeply together. Teach them to slow their breathing to get more oxygen to their brain and calm their nervous system. Useful breathing techniques include:
 - [Belly breathing](#) – breathing slowly and deeply whilst hand on tummy and watching hand rise and fall. Small children can do this lying on their back with a small toy on their tummies.
 - [4.8.4 breathing](#) – breathe in for 4, hold for 4, out for 8, repeat.
 - [Candle breathing](#) – teach your child to pretend their fingers are candles and blow out their fingers one at a time.

Safe place – visualisation can be very powerful and if you can encourage your child to picture their ‘happy calm place’, this can help them calm and distract their mind from what is upsetting them.

- **Visualise** – a powerful technique is to visualise the worries floating away. Each worry on individual clouds and the child can blow them away.
- **Senses** – teaching your children to focus on their 5 senses helps distract them when they are anxious... what can you Smell? See? Hear? Taste? and Touch?
- **Teach self-care** – make a self-care box with your child that can include things to calm them that they can go to when they are feeling stressed, such as sensory toys, scented oils, squashies and squeeze stress toys, slime, positive quotes, a nice book, breathing ball, CD, bath bubbles etc, is all helpful.
- **Worry Box/book** – if your child tends to dwell on worries at the end of the day before sleep time, encourage them to write them down in a book so it gets them out of their head. Reassure them that they can talk to you about what they’ve written in the morning if they want.
- **Limit the news.** If children and young people are watching the news with you, try to focus on the community support, people helping, key people that are working hard to keep us safe. The media may focus on the tragedies but try to give a more balanced perspective about the people who have contracted COVID 19 who are now fine and that the current restriction that are in place to limit the spread and keep us safe.
- **Heathy routines help children feel safe** - Try to keep routines and try to factor in some exercise and fresh air daily. Be mindful of too much electronic use, however enabling them to have links to their friends at this time is also crucial. Have a time that is free from electronics before bed.
- **Help your child learn coping strategies** – practice regularly relaxation, breathing and distraction techniques. Relaxation CD’s and Relaxation Apps are useful.... some are specifically designed for children and teenagers.

- **Encourage your child to engage in activity and exercise** – this helps distract them and soothe some of the anxiety. Try to also encourage good eating and sleeping routines too.
- **Reduce the time the child has to anticipate an event they are worried about** – provide distractions to stop them catastrophising about the upcoming event.
- **Model healthy thinking patterns...** be really careful of thinking patterns such as sensationalising and catastrophising, (focusing on the worst-case scenario), as these can make us and our children more anxious and create panic. Recognising them in ourselves and supporting our children to identify if they are using these thinking patterns and trying to give a more balanced view. Sometimes asking ‘what would your best friend say?’ is helpful... We often talk to ourselves in a much more unkind/harsh and negative way than we do to others or our best friend would say to us.
- **Look after yourselves** - When we are stressed and anxious, we are less equipped to support our children with their emotions. Be kind to yourselves.....we are all doing the best we can in this challenging situation.



Here are further links to supportive books, websites, helplines and organisations:

Some Books to support children managing worries For children

What to do when you worry too much by Dawn Huebner

No worries by Dr Sharie Coombes

My hidden chimp by Prof Steve Peters

The Huge Bag of Worries by Virginia Ironside

Hello Happy by Stephanie Clarkson

Helping you child with their fears and worries by Cathy Creswell

You are awesome by Matthew Syed (book and journal)

Rewire your anxious brain for teens by Debra Kissen

You are awesome by Matthew Syed (book and journal)

Websites and helplines

Here is a psychologist talking about anxiety during COVID-19 and ways to support

<https://youtu.be/6RZDNWKinkE>

Mindline - 01823 276892 open 24hrs 7 days a wk. open to children and people of all ages who need mental health support.

Childline 08001111 - for children under 19. It's available 24/7 for counselling.

Family Counselling Trust (www.familycounsellingtrust.org) is a registered mental health charity providing counselling support to children up to 18yrs and their families

Emotion Coaching - www.mindfulemotioncoaching.co.uk is a website with useful info and links on supporting children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The Educational Psychology Service in Somerset have lots of useful information and resources about supporting your children and your own mental health at this challenging time. We also have a helpline for parents. 01823357000 EPShelpline@somerset.gov.uk

Our [website](http://www.supportservicesforeducation.co.uk) (www.supportservicesforeducation.co.uk) also offers a dedicated COVID - 19 folder with resources and information for supporting CYP and staff. Issues covered include:

- Discussion and planning around communicating difficult information
- Explanation of CYP's likely reactions to change and loss
- Answering difficult questions from CYP
- Signposting to resources
- Ideas around how parents can support CYP
- Explaining Coronavirus to children of different ages
- Explaining Coronavirus to those with Special Educational Needs
- Continuing to support vulnerable pupils attending schools/colleges
- Maintaining resilience in children and young people in light of COVID-19