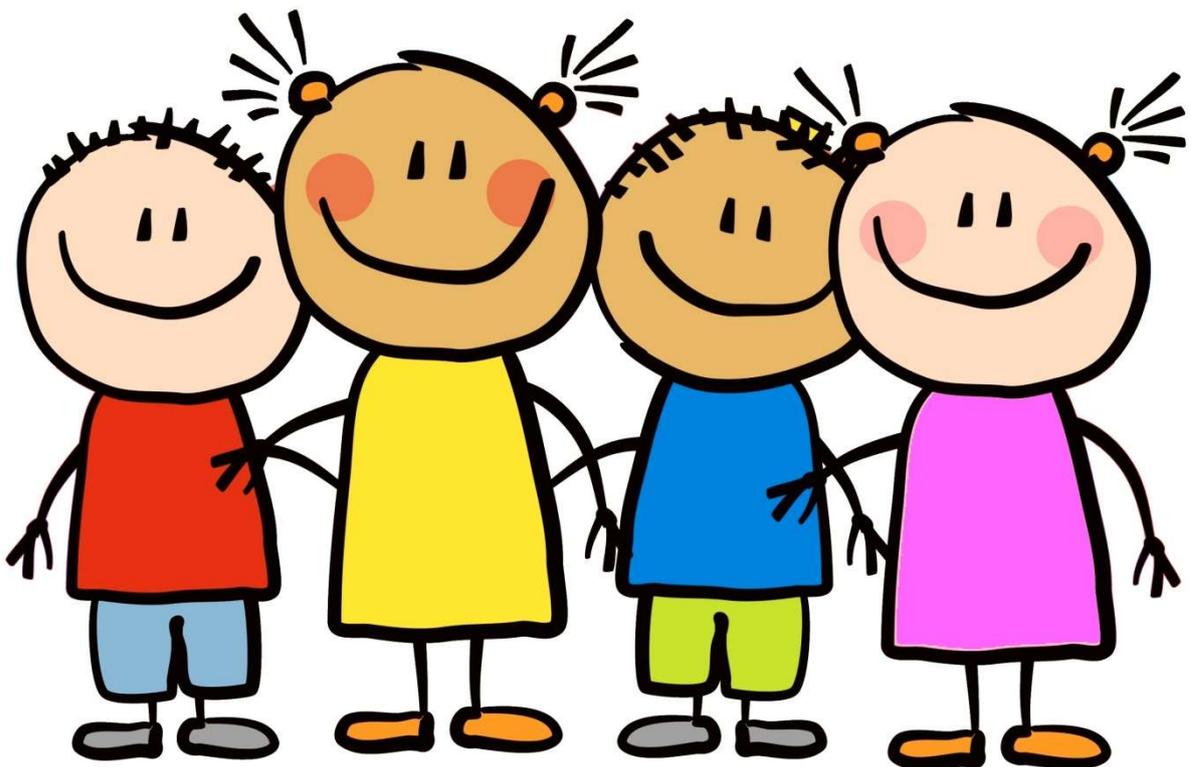




South West London and  
St George's Mental Health  
NHS Trust

# Child Anxiety Workbook for Parents



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Providing services on behalf of the NHS

**This table shows common worries children typically have a different stages of development. This is linked to brain development and life experiences.**

Age	Developmental stage	Fears and worries
0-6 months	Sensory	Strong sensory stimuli (e.g. loud noises); loss of support
6-12 months	Sensori-motor: cause and effect; object-constancy	Strangers; separation from care givers
2-4 years	Pre-operational thinking: imagination, but limited distinction between fantasy and reality	Imaginary creatures; potential burglars; the dark
5-7 years	Concrete operational thinking: Concrete, logical thinking	Natural disasters; injury/illness/death; animals; media-based fears
8-11 years	Self-esteem based on academic and athletic abilities	Poor academic and athletic performance
12-18 years	Formal operational thinking: meta-thinking and anticipation of future dangers. Self-esteem based on peer relationships.	Peer rejection; world issues

\*Table taken from 'Building Confidence and Managing Anxiety in your Child' workshop by Curry and Picciotto, 2016

## **Books to help you talk to children about death and dying:**

- Michael Rosen -The Sad Book
- Oliver Jeffers - Heart in a Bottle
- Judith Kerr - Goodbye Mog
- Marge Heegaard - When someone very special dies
- Susan Varley - Badger's parting gifts
- Doris Stickney - Water Bugs and Dragonflies
- Also look at the Winston's Wish website

## **How can we work out whether a child's anxiety is normal or has become a problem?**

### **Normal worry:**

- The worry doesn't last for a long period of time.
- It is related to something in particular e.g. starting school.
- It doesn't interfere in your child's life much or if it does, not for a prolonged period.
- Your child can be moved on from their worry.

### **A problem:**

- When it's been going on for a longer period of time and is not shifting.
- It feels like the worry getting worse.
- When it feels unmanageable for both child and parent.
- It is having an impact on your child's life – preventing them/or you from doing something or causing a great deal of distress.

## Worry and Anxiety

- Everyone, children and adults alike, experience worries, fears, and anxieties some of the time.
- What all worries have in common is a belief that something bad is going to happen that we will not be able to cope with. This is seen as a 'threat'.
- If we are worried about something, all our thoughts become focussed on the 'threat' and how to escape it.
- When we have these fears, our bodies respond in a number of ways which is the body getting ready for action.
- This is often called the 'fight or flight' response as we are getting ready to either fight against the 'threat', or get away from it.
- This link between our thoughts, feelings, and actions is often very helpful and can help us to get out of dangerous situations. But there are times when our worries can get in the way.

Anxiety = Overestimation of danger  
Underestimation of ability to cope

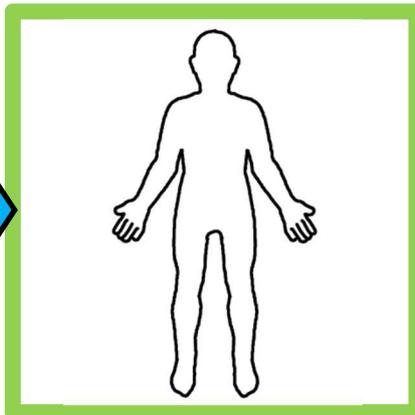
# The fight or flight response

Sometimes, we will be in a situation that we find scary or makes us nervous, when this happens we have two reactions; fight or flight. Fight means we are going to stand up against what makes us scared, flight means we are going to run away. These are helpful reactions when there is a real danger, but unhelpful when the level of danger is overestimated or has passed.

## Flight



If we saw a bear we might be in danger.



Our body would feel scared and we would decide whether to 'flight' or 'fight'.

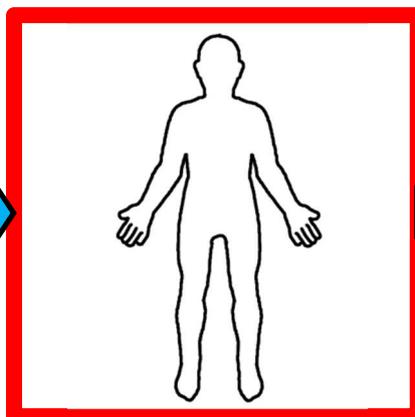


In this case we decided to 'flight' which means run away. To do this our body needs to prepare to run and releases a hormone called adrenaline.

## Fight



If we saw a bear we might be in danger.



Our body would feel scared and we would decide whether to 'flight' or 'fight'.



In this case we decided to 'fight' which means we stood up to the bear. Adrenaline also gets released here too.

## Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

### Thoughts racing

Quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be very difficult to concentrate on anything apart from the danger (or escape routes) when the fight or flight response is active

If we don't exercise (e.g. run away or fight) to use up the extra oxygen then we can quickly start to feel dizzy or lightheaded

### Dizzy or lightheaded

### Changes to vision

Vision can become acute so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice 'tunnel vision,' or vision becoming 'sharper'

### Breathing becomes quicker and shallower

Quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles. This makes the body more able to fight or run away

### Dry mouth

The mouth is part of the digestive system. Digestion shuts down during dangerous situations as energy is diverted towards the muscles

### Adrenal glands release adrenaline

The adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger

### Heart beats faster

A faster heart beat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to run away or fight

### Bladder urgency

Muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress

### Nausea and 'butterflies' in the stomach

Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or 'butterflies'

### Palms become sweaty

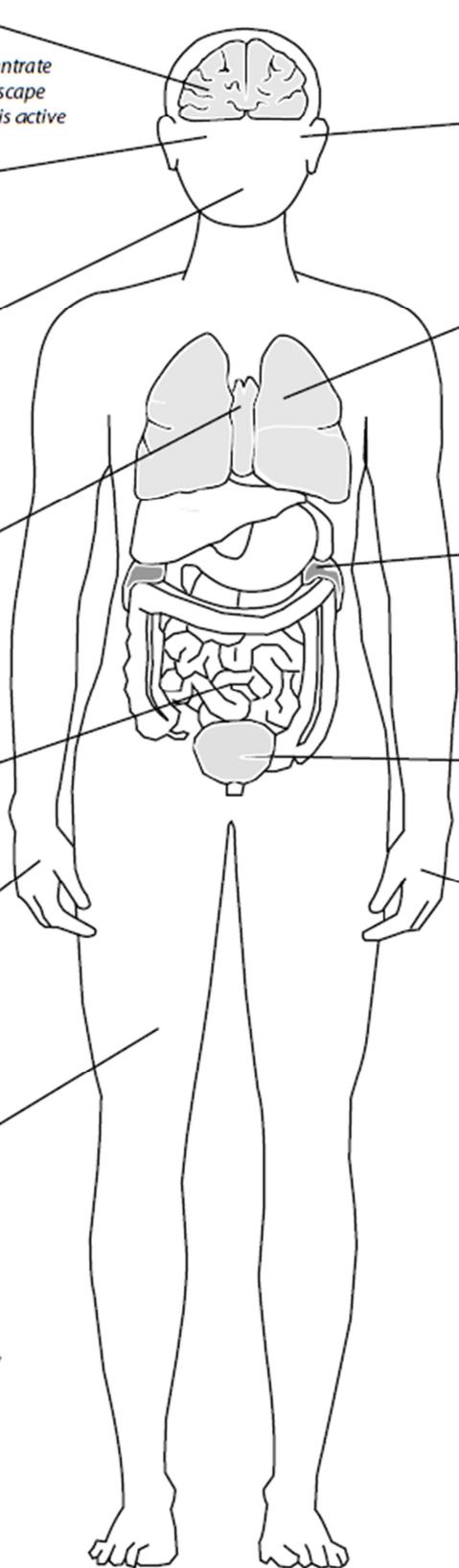
When in danger the body sweats to keep cool. A cool machine is an efficient machine, so sweating makes the body more likely to survive a dangerous event

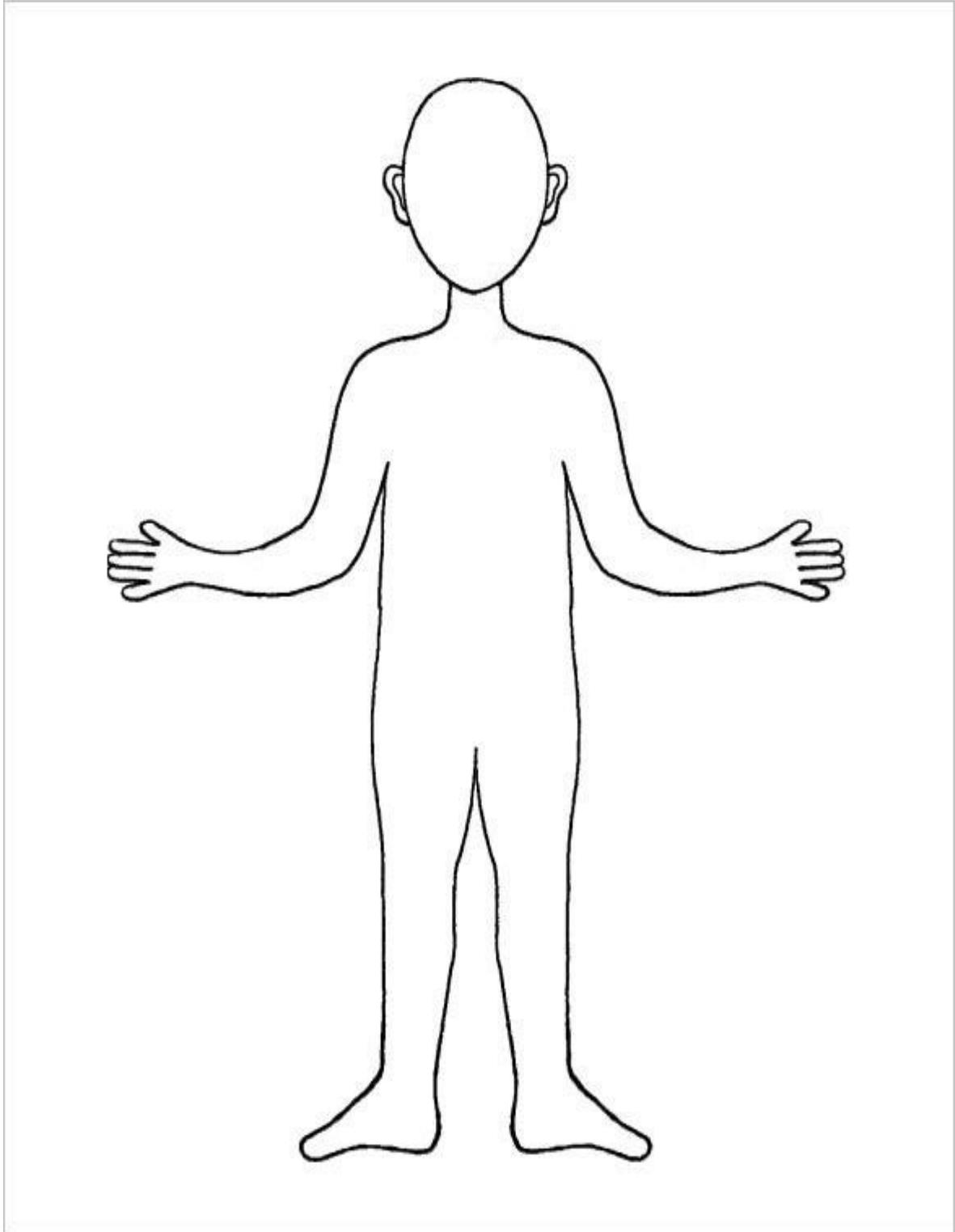
### Hands get cold

Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

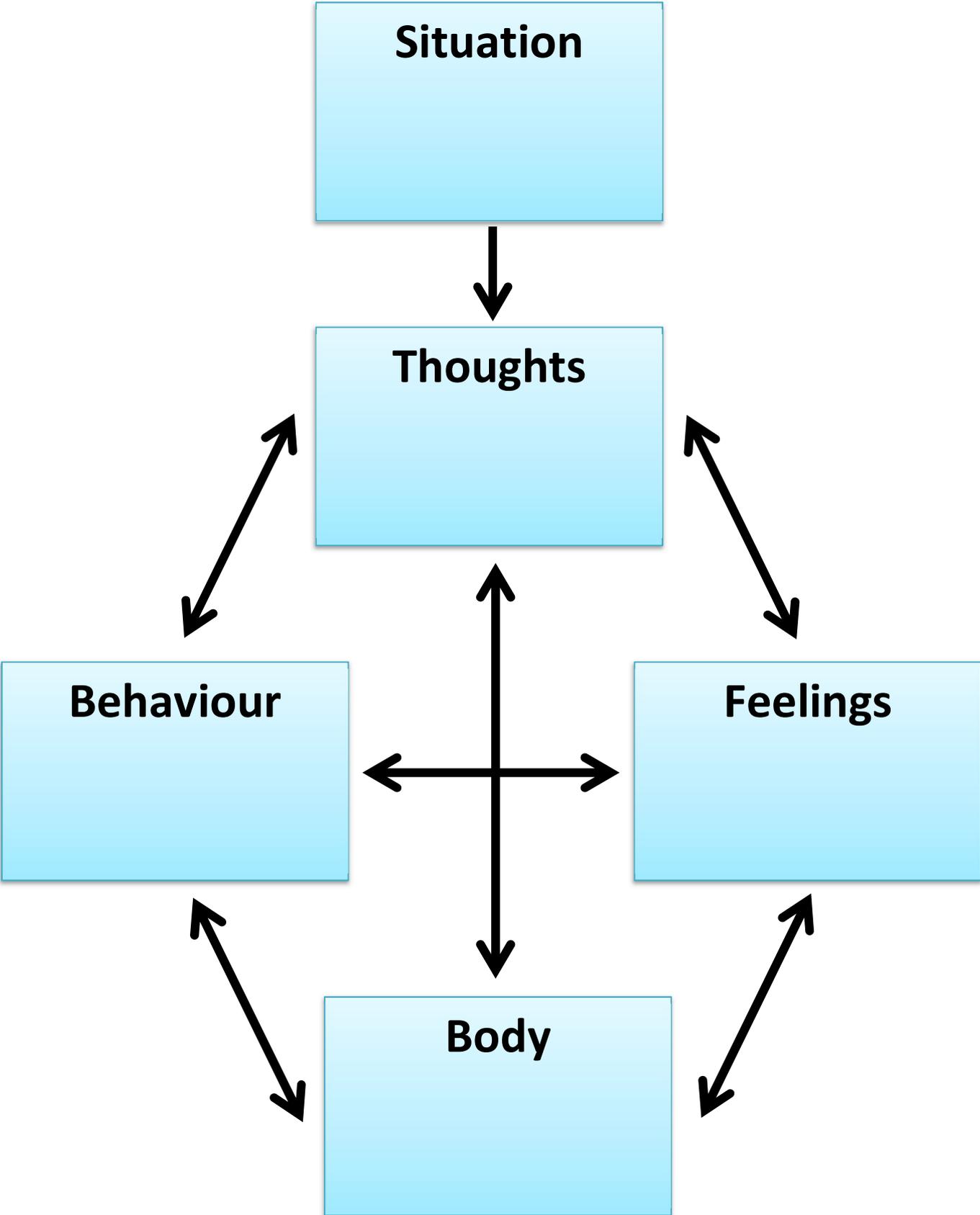
### Muscles tense

Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of staying 'ready for action'





**Worry Cycle**



# How to find out what your child is worried about

Explore their worries by asking questions such as:

- ❖ “I notice you are worried...”
- ❖ “What worries you about this situation?”
- ❖ “What do you think will happen?”
- ❖ “What is it about this situation that is making you worried?”

Give your best guess: share what you might be scared about.

- ❖ “If I was starting a new topic, I might be scared about getting it wrong, is that something you are worried about?”

Use active and reflective listening.

- ❖ Attend to the emotion behind the child’s action
- ❖ Validate their emotions e.g. “I can see why that would be frightening if you think that..”

## Thought Balancing

Thought balancing is a skill that you can teach your child to evaluate their worries without seeking reassurance. This technique can support your child to reflect on their immediate worry thought and balance this out with other ideas. At first it might feel like you’re having to do this a lot, but we want this to eventually become habit so that when they come across a difficult situation they can respond with balanced thoughts.

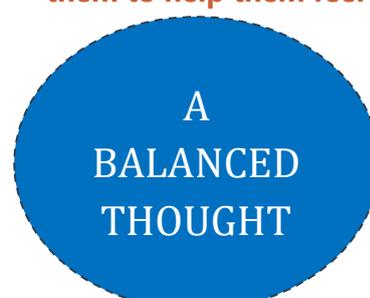
**Has this ever happened before?**



**Have you ever seen this happen to someone else?**



**If (another child) was worried about this, what do you think you could say to them to help them feel better?**



**What makes you think this will happen?**

## Reassurance – what shall we do instead?

Anxious children often ask for lots of reassurance from the people around them, and it's completely natural that parents would want to reassure their child to make them feel better- this seems like the right thing to do and is often instinctive. A little reassurance is sometimes helpful, but if we do it too much because: -

- ❖ It can lead to children thinking that there is something to worry about
- ❖ Children can become reliant on it – e.g. they won't try unless an adult says it's ok
- ❖ They might not learn to manage their worries on their own.

## So, what shall I do?

Ask questions instead: help your child work out whether their worry is realistic or not.

- ❖ What are you worrying about?
- ❖ What else might happen?
- ❖ What could you do to help yourself feel braver?

Show them that you believe you can do it

“I know it feels scary, but I think you can do it.”

Try to respond calmly!



## Avoidance – what shall we do instead?

When children are really fearful of something, they naturally want to avoid the thing that makes them feel anxious. Parents sometimes allow or encourage their children to avoid anxiety provoking situations because they want to protect them from feeling scared. However, avoidance maintains anxiety in the following ways:

- ❖ The child never learns if the feared thing actually happens or if it was as scary as they thought it would be, for example, if they always avoid dogs, they never learn that most dogs don't bite.
- ❖ The child never learns how to cope with the situation, so if they never go to sleepovers. they never learn how to manage feeling homesick.
- ❖ They may miss out on things that they might really enjoy once they've gotten over their initial fears.

### Step-by-step

Instead of avoidance, try the following: -

- ❖ Step back and let them have a go - encourage independence.
- ❖ Notice and praise brave behaviour.
- ❖ Model brave behaviour.
- ❖ Encourage your child to face their fears in small manageable steps.

Creating a step-by-step plan with the child can be really helpful:



1. Think of a situation that your child finds worrying
2. Encourage your child to face their fears in small manageable steps
3. Put these steps in order from the least anxiety provoking to the most
4. Begin the first step on the ladder
5. Repeat each step as many times as needed until you feel comfortable with it

After they have completed a step, invite them to reflect on what they learned from carrying out the step.

## Relaxation techniques



### Squeeze a lemon!

Imagine you have a lemon in your hand. Squeeze it really really tight. Think about how your hands and arms feel.  
Count to 5... and relax. How do they feel now?



### Stretch like a giraffe!

Imagine you are as tall as a giraffe.  
Stretch your neck, your arms and your legs as far as you can. Think about how they feel.  
Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



### Hide in your shell!

Imagine you are a little snail and have a shell on your back.  
Lift your shoulders up and pull your shell up as high as you can. Think about how your shoulders, your neck and your back feel.  
Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



### Wiggle your toes in the sand!

Imagine you standing on the beach and you have the sand under your toes.  
Wiggle your toes and push down into the sand as far as you can. How do they feel when you are wiggling them?  
Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?



### Squeeze through a tunnel!

Imagine you are crawling through a small play tunnel.  
You have to make yourself tiny to fit. Breathe in and hold your stomach. How does your stomach feel? How does your back feel?  
Count to 5..... and relax. How do they feel now?

## **Controlled breathing**

1. Put one hand on your tummy
2. Imagine you are sniffing some flowers; breathe them in slowly for 4 seconds. You will feel your hand rising
3. Hold the breath for 2 seconds
4. Release your breath slowly for 7 seconds
5. Practise and repeat

### **Other calm down techniques to try with your child...**

- ✓ Count back from 20 in 2s
- ✓ Describe something you can see in detail
- ✓ Spell the names of your family
- ✓ Make a time of the day to think about your worries or a time to write in a worry book

## Having a go – problem solving

It can be tempting to avoid situations that make us feel anxious. However, this can keep the worry feelings going, as we don't get a chance to find out whether our worries will come true, or if we can cope with them.

To stop this from happening, it is helpful to try to give things a go, even when they seem scary. Problem solving can help with this as it can help us to identify what is most scary about the situation, and how we might cope with that.

1. What is my problem?

.....  
.....



2. Write down all the possible ways you can solve this problem.

Solution	Pros 	Cons 	Is this plan doable?	Rate how good this plan is?

3. Pick a solution and try it out!

4. How did it go? If it didn't work, try another solution!

## Supporting your child to problem solve

When a child is very anxious, they may look to you to solve their problems, and it can be very tempting to try to help in this way. But if your child is going to feel confident that their problems can be solved, even when you are not around, they need to learn ways to do this for themselves. The step-by-step approach on the previous page can help with this. You may support them by:

1. **Helping them to identify the problem:** listen to what your child has to say and check you've got it right by repeating this back in your own words. Whether or not you think it is a genuine worry, it is for your child, so it deserves to be thought about.
2. **Weird & wonderful solutions:** encourage your child to come up with as many different weird and wacky ways of solving the problem as possible. Any solution deserves recognition and praise as what is important here is that your child is willing to think about how to overcome their problems.
3. **Which is the best solution:** you can help your child to arrive at a possible solution by asking:
  - a. What would happen if you did...?
  - b. Would it make any difference to what would happen in the future or would it come up again?
  - c. Is this solution possible?
  - d. So would you be able to try out this solution?
  - e. Is there anything that would make it difficult to do?

Once they've made a decision, the important thing is that you praise any steps they may take to put this into practice. Recognising and encouraging your child's attempts to solve their own problems will help them to try to do this for themselves in the future.

Make sure you also make time to check in with them how it went. Doing this will help them to reflect on what went well and what they could have done differently which might be useful information the next time a problem comes up.