What is anxiety?

We all experience feelings of anxiety. It is a ‘normal’ response. Everybody gets anxious at times and some anxiety actually helps us to function well in many situations for example before an exam, interview or first date.

However, anxiety can become a problem when we experience it too often, it goes on for a long time or it stops us from doing things that we want to do. Anxiety can become intense or worsen if we avoid situations. This is when anxiety becomes unhelpful or causes problems.

Types of anxiety

Specific phobia

This is a type of anxiety that causes fear of a specific object or situation.

Social anxiety

This is a type of anxiety that causes fear of social situations.



OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)

This is recurrent thoughts or compulsions that are time-consuming.

Generalised anxiety

This is excessive worrying about many things.



Panic

This is the experience of repeated uncontrollable panic attacks .

What makes Children Anxious

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

From the age of around 6 months to 3 years it's very common for young children to have separation anxiety. They may become clingy and cry when separated from their parents or carers. This is a normal stage in a child's development and should stop at around age 2 to 3.

It's also common for preschool-age children to develop specific fears or phobias. Common fears in early childhood include animals, insects, storms, heights, water, blood, fear of death and the dark. These fears usually go away gradually on their own.

There may also be other times in a child's life when they feel anxious. For example, many children feel anxious when going to a new school or before tests and exams. Some children feel shy in social situations and may need support with this.

What are the signs of anxiety in children?

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:

- become irritable, tearful or clingy
- have difficulty sleeping
- wake in the night
- start wetting the bed
- have bad dreams
- In older children you may notice that they
- lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- have angry outbursts
- have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or going to school

Strategies to help cope with Anxiety

Talk to someone you trust



Tell a parent, carer or friend. Saying out loud how you feel can help ease your anxiety



Distract yourself with something comforting



Make a note of positive thoughts you have!



Write about how you feel in a journal. Think of what is making you anxious and the evidence for this



Try listening to a calming playlist with some headphones on



Exercise is really helpful in using up the adrenaline anxiety can create!



Try a grounding technique to bring you into the present moment





- talk with your child to find out what makes them feel anxious. It could be certain times or situations
- think of ways to find solutions to make things better at home and school
- set up a meeting with your child's teacher or SENCO (special education needs co-ordinator)
- It's important to acknowledge their anxiety and find helpful ways of dealing with it. Do not force your child into a stressful situation without talking to them about what's making them anxious first. This could make the problem worse.
- If your child is really struggling and it's affecting their everyday life, it might be good to talk to your GP or school nurse.
- Other ways to ease anxiety in children

- teach your child to recognise signs of anxiety in themselves
- encourage your child to manage their anxiety and ask for help when they need it
- children of all ages find routines reassuring, so try to stick to regular daily routines where possible
- if your child is anxious because of distressing events, such as a bereavement or separation, look for books or films that will help them to understand their feelings and realise it's normal to feel sad or anxious in these situations
- if you know a change, such as a house move, is coming up, prepare your child by talking to them about what is going to happen and why
- prepare your child for change before they move from primary to secondary school and then give them extra support when they begin secondary
- try not to become overprotective or anxious yourself
- practise simple relaxation techniques with your child, such as taking 3 deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of 3 and out for 3
- distraction can be helpful for young children. For example, if they are anxious about going to nursery, play games on the way there, such as seeing who can spot the most red cars.
- turn an empty tissue box into a "worry" box. Get your child to write about or draw their worries and "post" them into the box. Then you can sort through the box together at the end of the day or week.

Seeking Help

- A visit to a GP is a good place to start. If your child's anxiety is affecting their school life, it's a good idea to talk to their school as well. Support from trusted adults who your child knows can really help them overcome these challenges.
- Find out how to get mental health support for children and young people.

- Parents and carers can get help and advice about children's mental health from Young Minds' free parent helpline on 0808 802 5544, from Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4pm.
- Young Minds: supporting your child with anxiety
- Health for Teens: practical advice about dealing with anxiety
- Anna Freud: let's talk about anxiety (YouTube video)
- Anna Freud: seven ways to support children and young people who are worried
- Mentally Healthy Schools: anxiety