



Understanding children's anxiety



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Uncertainty=anxiety

- We all struggle with uncertainty
- It's common to feel some anxiety during periods of change and uncertainty.
- Stressful adapting to change
- Bombarded with information can cause incredible overwhelm and fear of the unknown
- Weeks of restrictions and bans, has created lots of disruption to our daily live and continued uncertainty.
- Theme emerging of COVID-19 no end in sight

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COVID and lockdown fatigue

- Wearing a mask
- Contamination / germs phobia
- Working from home/ studying from home
- Not able to work right now
- Work/ home / family
- Concern about people we love
- Home schooling
- Finance worries
- Children school and peers
- Restrictions
- Everything

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DOES THIS LOOK FAMILIAR?

Mind racing? Dizzy, disoriented, "high-headed"? Vision strange, blurry? Possible sleep disturbances? Difficulty in swallowing? Feeling breathless, fast & shallow? Heart racing, palpitations? Nausea / Lack of appetite? Trembling? Restless? Sweating, shivering? Jelly-like legs? Wanting to run?

and overall, a feeling of fear and dread that seems to come from nowhere?

- ❖ Anxiety is a normal protective reaction that our body produces to alert us to danger.
- ❖ Our amygdala protects us from danger. It acts like our "guard dog" it senses when something that can make us feel like we're in danger when really were not which sets off the fight, flight or freeze response.
- ❖ Which one occurs depends on how the brain interprets the situation.
- ❖ A barking "guard dog" then confuses our prefrontal cortex "the wise old owl" (in charge of thinking, planning, reasoning, solving problems part of our brain)

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When anxiety becomes a problem . . .

- If the constant worrying lasts for a period longer than six months
- When it significantly interferes with the enjoyment of life i.e.

Participate in activities Attend school Enjoy relationships

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What causes anxiety disorders?

No single known cause of anxiety disorders, there are a number of risk factors or triggers that may contribute.
In general, the following factors may play a role:

- o **Genes:** certain anxiety disorders appear to have a genetic component, with some anxiety disorders running in families.
- o **Physical health:** Poor physical health can increase a person's vulnerability to developing symptoms of anxiety.
- o **Thinking style:** patterns of thinking characterised by anticipating the worst, persistent negative self-talk, low self-esteem, and unhelpful coping strategies (e.g., avoidance) are linked to problem anxiety.
- o **Stress:** stressful events such as public speaking, work or school deadlines, financial hardship can act as a trigger for anxiety.

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Red Flags

- o Excessive need for reassurance or praise
- o Absenteeism
- o Low self esteem
- o Behavioural problems
- o Inability to retain information
- o Identifying people to talk for them
- o Excessive slowness / perfectionism
- o Frequent need to go to the toilet / sick bay
- o Irritability / anger if pushed into an anxiety provoking situations
- o Sitting in the back of the class
- o Isolation
- o Inability to make decisions
- o Frequent somatic complaints or illness (headaches/upset stomach
- o Excessive need to do everything perfectly

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Generalised Anxiety Disorder

- ✓ Experiencing excessive anxiety and worry more days than not for a period of at least 6 months
- ✓ Anxiety about a number of events and exhibit difficult in controlling their worry.
- ✓ Generally also experience restlessness, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, irritability

Someone living with Generalised Anxiety may experience

- Worry about health, school, natural disasters, personal harm, health and personal health and safety of others
- Catastrophize everything
- Feel the need to be perfectionists
- Unsure about themselves- look for reassurance
- Redo tasks – feel the need to get things perfect
- Find it hard to perform in tests
- Afraid of new or unfamiliar situations
- Seek constant reassurance
- Complain about feeling sick when worried

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Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Things that we need to be mindful of...

<p>Not Helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing too many choices • Providing excessive reassurance to the What if ? • Large groups initially • Long term avoidance is not helpful and can lead to withdrawing more and more..can feel more alone 	<p>Helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validate the child's feelings and experiences • Understanding and Empathy • STOP technique • Reduce the reassurance • Step Ladder approach • Modify / adapt our expectations provide options • Problem solving • Building self esteem / decision making ability • Acknowledging progress • Create a safe space
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Social Anxiety

- ✓ Characterised by an extreme and persistent fear of being looked at and judged negatively by others.
- ✓ Highly anxious about humiliating or embarrassing themselves in social situations
- ✓ The anxiety must be present when interacting with peers / adults and the symptoms for at least 6 months

Someone living with Social Anxiety may experience

- Believe that others will think badly of them
- Can be shy or withdrawn
- Have difficulty meeting other peers or joining in groups
- Have limited number of friends avoid social situations- talking on the telephone etc
- Avoid eating ,drinking, or writing in front of others
- Performance related
- Experience blushing, tremors, sweating, upset stomach, diarrhoea, muscle tension

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Social Anxiety

Things that we need to be mindful of...

<p>Not Helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To read out loud, talking to peers • Presentations in front of a group or class • Drawing any attention to them in class or in front of their peers • Large groups initially • Any situations that could be embarrassing • Long term avoidance is not helpful and can lead to withdrawing more and more..can feel more alone 	<p>Helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Empathy • Gradual exposure etc. working in pairs rather than large groups • Respect in may be difficult • Modify / adapt our expectations provide options • Provide perspective • Gradual exposure vs avoidance • Practice / role play /experiment
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Panic Disorder

- ✓ Panic Disorder is characterised by the experience of repeat panic attacks - sudden surges of overwhelming fear and anxiety and physical symptoms in the absence of real danger
- ✓ Repeated and unexpected

Children with panic disorder may experience

- Choking sensations
- Racing heart
- Tingling sensations
- Chills and hot flushes dizziness
- Nausea
- sweating

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Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Characterised by

- ✓ Obsessions which are recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses or images that are intrusive, inappropriate and cause anxiety or distress
- ✓ Compulsions which are repetitive behaviours or mental acts that the child feels driven to perform.
- ✓ The behaviours hand washing, checking, counting, repeating words – aim is to reduce the distress or prevent something bad happening
- ✓ Onset typically can occur between 6-15 years in males 13-29 in females

Young people with OCD may experience

- Realise that the obsessions and or compulsions are excessive or unreasonable
- Obsessions common fears of contamination, personal safety, safety of other need for symmetry
- Compulsions- washing, checking, ordering, aligning objects
- Will become extremely distressed if they are prevented from carrying out compulsions
- May demand family members become engaged in their compulsive rituals
- May exhibit a gradual decline in schoolwork due to concentration difficulties
- May be secretive or ashamed

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The impacts on our mind and body

It can be common to try to hide or mask anxiety but in doing so, the condition is often exacerbated.

Acknowledging, paying attention to what is underneath, behind the thoughts and behaviours can help us manage anxiety.

- How we feel in our physical bodies (muscle tension, nausea, dizziness etc.)
- How we think (over thinking, what if, constant doubt, worry)
- How we feel / our emotions (fear, anger, sadness, dread)
- How we behave (performance, avoidance, act out)

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How does this impact on their learning...

The prefrontal cortex of the brain is offline, making high-level tasks such as problem-solving, rational thinking, and decision-making challenging.

- Procrastination
- Perfectionistic
- Catastrophizing
- Impact on our ability to think clearly
- Ability to retain and recall information is challenged

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Watch out for common thinking traps

- **Black and white thinking**-all or nothing approach deciding that things are all good or all bad
- **Catastrophizing**- everything is a disaster based on minimal evidence
- **Emotional reasoning**- in the heat of the moment can't think clearly and rationally.
- **Perfectionism** feel as though anything they can't do perfectly is not worth doing

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Understanding emotional experiences

Emotional experiences often come with important information about what can cause harm. The emotional memories of these experiences lay themselves down in the amygdala. (role to respond to threat)
What we need to do is acknowledge and pay attention to what is underneath, behind the thoughts and behaviours.

Children need support to understand their feelings often they can not recall the memory of the event or experience that triggers they anxiety. This is because emotional memories are not stored as images or words but rather experienced as an emotional state.

So helpful if we can ...

- Learn to identify emotions
- Understand why they happen
- Learn how to manage them

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Working with thoughts and feelings

Thoughts and feelings can be powerful

Encourage your child to name their feelings. Saying it out loud actually decreases the intensity of the feeling inside.

Position yourself as a compassionate listener – rather than problem solver or disciplinarian. When your child sees you as a "safe" place to explore thoughts and feelings, they will feel empowered, rather than controlled or overwhelmed by them.

- Be mindful of our own emotions and body language.
- Try to avoid judgement
- Validate and acknowledge
- You can diffuse the intensity just by listening
- Provide them with strategies to help them.

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Acknowledge and validate thoughts

We all have random thoughts that we think and then we dismiss them. We don't express them, or act on them, and we quickly forget about them. Thoughts are often driven by emotional states.

Children with excessive anxiety can get upset when these ordinarily fleeting thoughts get "stuck" and they are unable to dismiss them and move on. This results in them placing value on themselves based on the thoughts they're having.

How do we explain this to children?

- ✓ The goal is to help kids recognize that their thoughts are just thoughts.
- ✓ But the only way to stop the cycle of getting stuck on intrusive thoughts and asking for reassurance is to learn to tolerate the distress
- ✓ Understand that a bad thought doesn't make you a bad person—it just means you're having that thought. "

Language how can we respond...
Sounds like this is really distressing for you ...

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Acknowledge and Validate Feelings

- There is nothing wrong with having big feelings. All feelings are valid and it's okay to feel whatever they feel.
- What's important is how those feelings are managed. **The key is to acknowledge and express what they're feeling, without causing harm to themselves, their friendships or other people.**
- Feelings can be felt both emotionally and physically as a result of a situation and or experience.
- Talking about feelings allows relief and allows them to process what's going on.

How to Validate Someone's Feelings

- Listen and Respond. Give verbal responses to show you're listening.
- Empathizing with the Person. Help them elaborate on their feelings.

Language how can we respond...
✓ Ok so it sounds like everything is really overwhelming and your feeling stuck can you tell me more...

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Helpful Hints

- Acknowledge listen to the child's concerns and validate them
- Express confidence in the child's ability
- Assist and encourage the child to develop a vocabulary around their thoughts and emotions...understand triggers
- Create a safe place
- Assist them to develop a toolbox
- Identify a constant approach .
- Acknowledge coping skills or good management.
- Teach and model balanced and appropriate responses to stress
- Try to lessen the focus on competition
- Where possible, allow our child to feel as though they have choice to give them a greater sense of control.

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The role of story telling?



- Anxiety affects people differently
- Everyone needs to be validated and heard
- Story telling helps them process and express their inner thoughts and feelings out loud
- We can support our children in their story telling by expressing empathy
- We can express empathy by using active listening skills

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Challenge our Perspective

Anxiety has a habit of encouraging us to jump the worst-case scenario.

- Taking imagination to be real
- Making something bigger than it actually is
- Not seeing what is there because we aren't looking


Although we might not be able to change the situation, you can challenge our perception. We can choose how we respond... our behaviour even if this is not responding.

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Gently challenge perspective

Are there alternative explanations?

- Are there other ways that we could look at this situation?
- What else could the situation mean?
- If we were being positive, how would we perceive this situation?



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Listen to the internal chatter

The anxious mind can get quite creative...the more we feed it the stronger it becomes

Example: I'm going to fail

- ✓ Your thoughts are consumed with "I'm going to fail" I feel like I don't know anything.
- ✓ Ask yourself "Is this thought serving me well? (How is this impacting my learning or do well?"
- ✓ How can I challenge this thought in a gentle way?
- ✓ What could help you let go of worrying about it so much?

Helpful tip...

- ✓ Don't believe everything you think.
- ✓ We are not our thoughts.

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Good sleep... why because this improves mood, concentration and performance

- Create a good sleep routine
- Reduce caffeine/ sugar intake early afternoon
- Avoid drinking alcohol (impairs our thinking)
- Try going to bed and getting up same time
- Do something with the worries- write them down
- Try to relax for about 30 minutes before going to bed
- Avoid naps in the day
- Toss and turning -get up after 15 minutes if you can't sleep and restless return to bed when you feel more relaxed and sleepy
- Get active every day

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Good food ...feeds the mind

- Eating regular meals with some pit stops in between if you delay a meal you end up with brain fog
- Meal plan to include nutrients from fruit, vegetables, nuts and lean protein
- Research supports fish is brain food can assist in concentration and learning ability (omega 3 and 6)
- Avoid sugary foods and drinks because this dramatically impacts on our energy levels and our mood swings
- Low GI foods
- Avoid processed foods that provide quick sugar hits
- Try to drink glasses of water a day

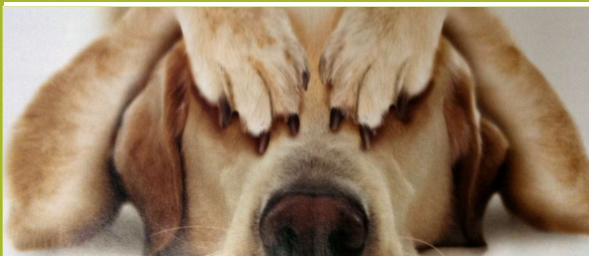
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Self care

We can be our worst critic (the way we treat ourselves the way we talk to ourselves)

- Be kind to yourself
- Be gentle
- Be compassionate
- Be a good friend to yourself
- Accept your having a bad day
- Not everyday is the same
- Give yourself permission

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SO.... WHAT DID WE JUST SAY

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Helpful Hints

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- Create a safe place
- Assist them to develop a toolbox)
- Identify a constant approach .
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Lockdown fatigue what you would like to do differently


- What did we learn from previous lockdowns .
- What worked and what do I need to do differently?
- Where do I start?
- Routine- find your new normal
 - ✓ Establish firm boundaries for work, home, family time- designated spaces
 - ✓ Eating healthy, hydrated- routine
 - ✓ Schedule exercise of choice- try to get outside to the letterbox, park, garden
 - ✓ Limit screen time – time out from technology be firm
 - ✓ Staying connected – letters, virtual catch ups, lunches, family trivia nights
 - ✓ Establish a new interest- learn or try something new
 - ✓ Schedule some self care "me-time" and "family time"
 - Good sleep routine- getup and go to bed same time

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"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf."

Jon Kabat-Zinn



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S	STOP ✓ Focus on the breath ✓ Aim to slow down ✓ Try breathing slowly and deeply
U	UNDERSTAND and acknowledge your thoughts and feelings ✓ Our thoughts are just thoughts ✓ Feelings will come and go ✓ Acceptance is the key "Resistance is futile"
R	REFLECT and remember you have a choice how you respond ✓ Ask yourself ✓ What do you have the power to change about this situation? ✓ What can you do to change this situation for the better? ✓ What could help you let go of worrying about it so much?
F	FOCUS on a way forward ✓ You have the power to choose your path ✓ Think of 2-3 options to try ✓ Select the best option for you and just do the best you can

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STOP technique

- **STOP** what you are doing
- Take a breath
- **Observe** what is happening externally and internally
- **Plan and proceed** what actions can you take to improve the situation (proactive rather than reactive behaviour)

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HALT technique ... self care tips

- **Hungry**
- **Angry**
- **Lonely**
- **Tired**

If you answer yes to any of those, think of a healthy way you can respond to those needs?

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Helpful Relaxation techniques


- Breathing Techniques
- Progressive Muscle Exercise
- Visualisation techniques
- Guided meditations
- Mindfulness activities
- Exercise
- Affirmation cards
- Cue cards



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Resources



First point of contact:
 Child parents GP school counsellor, child health nurse to discuss your concerns
Anxiety Recovery Centre Helpline on 9830 0533 or 1300 269 438 or 1300 ANXIETY
 Data-based psychologists & psychotherapists who work with children.

Australian Catholic University
 Provide assessment and counselling services to both anxious children and their parents (clinic for children)

Websites
www.kidsmatter.edu.au
www.zestandcalm.com.au
www.anxietycentre.org.au (ages 2-25 years)
www.mindspace.org.au (15-18 years)
www.theyogamind.com
www.mindfulness.org.au
www.mindspace.org.au
www.mindspace.org.au/expandable-information/cool-kids-program

Apps
 MindSpace (developed by ARCC and BGSU)
 MindSpace
 MindSpace Guided meditation and Mindfulness

Early intervention is a critical factor in combating the negative impact of anxiety on children.

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