# 5 Things You Need To Know About Anxiety

Recognising anxiety in children isn't always easy.

Think about it: do you always know how to quickly pinpoint exactly how you're feeling and why? For many adults, the answer to this question will be no - so it's only natural to want more information on how to spot when a child might be feeling anxious.

These points can help you to understand what anxiety can look and sound like, and support your child with coping with it.

## Anxiety presents itself in different ways

Anxiety can look different from one person to another. There are immediate physical symptoms that might be recognised easily - like shaking, sweating and going red - but there can be other symptoms that aren't obvious, like difficulty sleeping, restlessness and stomach aches that can come and go.

Other signs - like racing thoughts, finding it difficult to concentrate and wanting to withdraw from social situations - are harder to spot and might not be obvious to a child.

## Children need help to identify their anxiety too

In fact, some children (and Adults!) can find it hard to identify thoughts (and distinguish them from feelings) altogether. However, it's important to be aware of thoughts to be able to identify anxiety.

Anxious children tend to express their anxiety in their thoughts. They may jump to negative conclusions about situations. For example, if a parent is late coming home one day, they might worry that this is because there's been an accident. Anxious children are also more likely to have negative thoughts about themselves and may think they're not good enough, not well liked enough or bound to fail - which can lead to them avoiding certain situations.

Getting them talking about their thoughts is so important.

## Talking about anxiety can help

Communication is vital in getting to the root of a child's anxiety. Gently asking the right questions can help them to find the thought that is troubling them. For example, if they suddenly show signs of being scared or worried, ask them to describe what they think might be happening to make them feel this way. Talking it through can help lead them to finding the thought at the root of the anxiety.

Once you've identified this, you can work together to discuss how helpful these thoughts are, or how likely a potential outcome might be.

### Experiencing anxiety is normal

Anxiety becomes an issue when it impacts a person frequently and when worries are difficult to manage, but anxiety itself is normal and common. Most adults will be able to recall a time or a situation which made them feel anxious. It might have been down to an exam, a ride on a rollercoaster or speaking in front of lots of people. It's totally normal to experience it at some point in life. This is important to remember and can help children feel better about dealing with their own anxiety.

### There are ways to manage anxiety and anxious thoughts

Your child doesn't need to feel they're alone in trying to cope with anxiety. And it can be helpful to remind them that while anxiety can feel overwhelming and very uncomfortable at the time, it will pass and will not harm them.

Different exercises can help young people control their anxiety as and when it appears and you can use these too.

These are life lessons you will be helping your child understand.

## Coping with Anxiety

### Traffic lights

It can be beneficial to explain to your child that there are helpful thoughts and unhelpful thoughts. Try using a Traffic Light system to discuss the difference between them:

**Red:** the red traffic light symbolises unhelpful thoughts that we need to learn to **stop**.

**Amber:** this refers to thoughts that could go either way, so we need to remember to **slow down** and think about whether it's helpful or unhelpful.

**Green:** the green light symbolises helpful thoughts that we should **go** with. These are thoughts that make us feel brave and strong.

Once your child can identify unhelpful or 'red' thoughts it may be useful to introduce the idea of challenging these thoughts, as often our unhelpful thoughts can be untrue.

Some examples of thought-calling questions could be:

- Is this true?
- Is this thought helpful?

• Is this thought rational?

## The breathing method

One of the most common physical symptoms of anxiety is a difference in breathing - it tends to become shallower and quicker. This can sometimes lead to hyperventilation.

This kind of breathing can make anxiety feel worse, so a simple breathing exercise can help.

- Slowly breathe in through the nose for around four seconds
- Hold this breath for one or two seconds
- Exhale slowly through the mouth over about four seconds
- Wait two or three seconds before taking another breath (for teenagers, five to seven seconds)
- Repeat for at least five to ten breaths

## Grounding

This technique can help children to use their environment and senses to help them focus their attention on something other than a trigger for anxiety.

Try helping them to identify:

- Five things they can see
- Four things they can hear
- Three things they can smell
- Two things they can feel
- One thing they can taste

These are just a couple of the kind of techniques that can be used to support your children.

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