

Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing Anxiety

Thank you for watching the MHST's presentation about how you can support children and young people who may be experiencing anxiety. We hope that the session was valuable and has given you some insight into what anxiety is, how it can present and the practical ways in which you can reduce symptoms of anxiety. This handout is designed to complement the information provided, offer further details where necessary and give you some resources that you can use for both yourself and your children. It could be helpful to use the worksheets at a time when children can reflect. Try to revisit these worksheets, so the ideas that you or your child come up with are reinforced and used as much as possible.

Just a reminder – who are the MHST and how can you access support for a child you are concerned about?

The Mental Health Support Team (MHST) launched in January 2020 and aims to support and promote mental health within schools. Your child's school is one of 27 schools across the local area that the MHST works with, as part of a larger Government initiative across England. The MHST provides early intervention, evidence-based treatments for mental health concerns, such as anxiety and low mood. We work in variety of ways, including individual face-to-face work, group work and parent and school staff support. The team consists of different professionals, who all are experienced in mental health and are friendly and easy to engage with. If you have concerns, then speak to your SMHL, who can make a referral to the MHST. Parents can also speak to their GP or school staff to request a referral. The MHST will then explore how they might support the CYP. The SMHL can refer about any concerns you, they or other staff may have. It is the MHST's responsibility to decide whether the CYP needs support. So, don't be hesitant! Remember that early intervention is key.

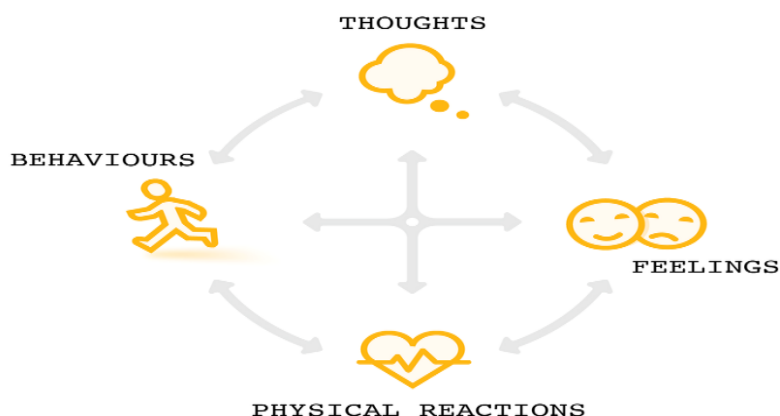
Anxiety is not new!

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (65AD): *'We suffer more in imagination than in reality'*

Epictetus (70AD): *'Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them'*

What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is the term used to describe feelings of fear and unease
- Anxiety is the emotions and physical sensations we experience when we are worried/nervous
- It is completely normal and something that we all experience from time to time and when faced with situations that are difficult or threatening.
- Anxiety helps to keep us safe – The fight or flight response is an automatic physiological reaction to an event that is perceived as stressful or frightening. The perception of threat activates the sympathetic nervous system and triggers an acute stress response that prepares the body to fight or flee.
- Whereas stress is something that will come and go, just as the external factor causing it (e.g. school work, relationships or home life) comes and goes, anxiety is something that can persist whether or not the cause is clear to the sufferer. Anxiety can make a person imagine that things in their life are worse than they really are, and prevent them from confronting their fears.
- It's when feelings of anxiety overwhelm us and impact our lives in negative ways that we may start to consider that it is becoming an issue that needs addressing.

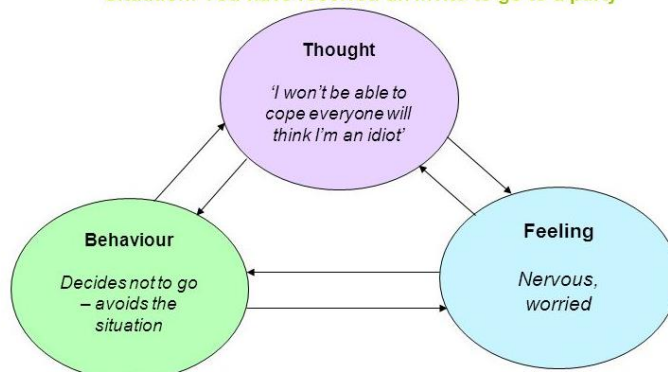


Thoughts	Feelings	Physical Reactions	Behaviours
Worrying, muddled thinking, negative thoughts, indecisiveness, experiencing nightmares	Sad, low mood, low confidence, irritable, fussy	Nausea, thumping heartbeat, elevated blood pressure, feeling dizzy, fast breathing, sweating, hot flushes, insomnia, more frequent bathroom trips, stomach churning	Change in eating habits, unable to sleep, self-harm, restlessness

Negative Automatic Thoughts

Vicious Cycle of Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

Situation: You have received an invite to go to a party



When we are stressed and anxious, our Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) assault us involuntarily. The thoughts go round and round and they become more and more unhelpful and **destructive**. NATs cause us to 'feel' **distressing emotions** – this prevents us from doing things we wish we could/would – and of course **procrastinating** gives us even more time to think about all the NATs – this helps to confirm the NATs – and so it goes on and on and on in a vicious circle...

CALM

In the moment a CYP is upset or distressed, stay CALM:

- **C**atch your breath: Pause to think or move away briefly to become calm and plan what to do
- **A**ccept negative feelings: Wait patiently and respond to angry or worried comments
- **L**abel Emotions: Show that you can cope with the child's feelings and you are confident they can too
- **M**odel coping skills: Don't say anything about what to do. Show the young person through your behaviour how to be calm and collected.

Safety Behaviours

Particular behaviours (aimed at keeping us safe) can keep anxiety going by encouraging us to:

- Avoid
- Check
- Look out for danger
- Over prepare
- Seek reassurance
- Focus on the worry

What we need to do is help a young person to...

- Recognise that their thinking may not be true
- Recognise that they may be doing things to stay safe, despite the situation not posing a threat or danger (e.g. avoiding social situations for fear of people saying mean things about them)
- Expose themselves to situations where they can drop safety behaviours and test out their predictions
- Help them to distinguish between what they **fear** is happening and **what is actually happening**

Sometimes, when anxious, we underestimate our ability to cope whilst over-estimating the impact a situation may have on a young person. As a result, the gap in 'being able to cope' is seen as too large to manage. Therefore, we need to encourage children and young people to take small, manageable steps, alongside scaffolding situations for them. This helps a child or young person to realise that they can manage.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Sensory Strategies



Self-squeeze - wrap your arms around yourself and hug yourself tightly. When we hug, it sends a message to our brain that we are safe. If someone is hurt/upset, your instinct is to pick them up and hold them. From this, we learn that a hug is safe, reassuring and comforting. Need to do it for at least 10 seconds to allow message to be sent to the brain. Hugging self can quickly enable yourself to feel better – hug hard for 10 seconds or more. Can couple this with self-talk e.g. remind yourself 'it is okay, you're safe, it is going to be alright' – use affirmations and positive self-talk.

Massage – encourage pupils to massage their own hands. Use different smelling moisturisers to add to the sensory experience! Hands are full of different pressure points and there is something about having your hands held/touched/massaged/rubbed that feels good! Right now, our hands are suffering a lot of abuse – we are washing them more and for longer! The other thing is that each time we wash our hands, we are being reminded of the difficulties around us – there are lots of campaigns about the spread of germs, so there is a little spike of anxiety each time we wash our hands. When you've washed your hands, massage a cream or lotion into them. This will help physically look after your hands but also acts as a self-soothing method. Focus on your hands and try not to think about anything else, other than how your hands feel/smell. Be kind to yourself whilst doing this. Rub hands together and massage away how you are feeling. This helps to balance anxious thoughts with self-care – every time we wash our hands, we feel anxiety, so we can couple that with relaxing, self-soothing hand massage which helps to relax us. Act of self-calming neutralises the anxiety that hand washing causes and also has a positive effect – you will be calmer after massage than before. In general, it is a really quick self-soothing technique. You don't have to use cream if you don't have any. A piece of imagery that is helpful is to imagine that your worries are inside you and you are working the worries out through the tips of your fingers.

Stress balls/play dough – fill balloons with rice/flour and encourage the CYP to squeeze it hard when anxious. This offers deep pressure and a fiddle toy at the same time.

Mindfulness Strategies



Complete a daily gratitude diary – this encourages someone to 'be in the present'. It can only take a few minutes if you want! It doesn't have to be written down if this doesn't suit. Pupils can do it whilst standing in line/whilst waiting for their dinner/during quiet time.

Direct pupils to think about what happened today/what they enjoyed/what they ate that they liked/who they spoke to/what sounds they heard/what challenge they achieved/what new thing they tried/what they learned/what they are thankful for/something that made them laugh.

Square breathing - A square breath is a breath that is even on all sides, and it can be useful as a mindfulness exercise for children. It is a really simple breathing strategy to take control and take a mindful moment to soothe a little bit. For younger children you can talk them through it if needed. When anxious, our breathing becomes unregulated and breathing is a simple thing to take control of. Slow it down and focus in on our breath. This can be used in response to anxiety, or as a proactive calming measure. A minute or 2 of box breathing throughout the day is a good thing to do to maintain a sense of calm. Here's what to do:

Breathe in, to the count of four.
Hold the breath for four seconds.
Breathe out to the count of four.

Wait for four seconds before taking in your next breath.

To help children keep track, show them how to draw a square in the air with their finger, taking four seconds on each side.

Cloud spotting – go outside and see what shapes you can see. Try and stay as still as you can – encourage pupils to lie down on the grass if possible.

5 sense exercise – use all your senses to focus on the moment. Note 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.

Mindful colouring – you do not need a special book, just give pupils some pens and paper and tell them to be quiet and present whilst colouring.

Body squeezing - Have children sit or lie down in a comfortable position and ask them to squeeze and relax each of the muscles in their body one-by-one. They should hold each squeeze for about five seconds. After releasing the squeeze, ask them to pay attention to how it feels when they relax. Children understand this exercise better if you help them visualize how they can squeeze a particular muscle using imagery, such as the following:

Curl your toes tight as if you are picking up a pencil with your feet.

Tense your legs by pretending that you are standing on your tippy-toes, trying to look over a fence.

Suck in your stomach as if you are trying to slide through a narrow opening.

Make fists with your hands and pretend that you are trying to squeeze all of the juice out of an orange.

Pretend a bug has landed on your nose, and you're trying to get it off without using your hands.

Try to scrunch your face and move your jaw to make it fly away!

For older children, you can use other Body Scan scripts - there are plenty available on the internet if you do not like the one we have here.

Guided imagery script

Get into a comfortable position where you are. Close or lower your eyes and focus your attention on your breath. (Pause). Breathe in and breathe out. (Pause) Now imagine that you are walking down the beach. It is a beautiful, sunny day, and you enjoy the sound of the sea. You feel the warmth of the sand under your feet and notice that your body starts to relax. As you walk along the beach you spot a small door partly hidden in the sand, you brush the sand away with your foot and open the door. You notice a winding staircase leading down under the sand. You walk down the stairway, feeling perfectly safe, and find yourself in a tunnel with a bright, sparkly light shining in from the tunnel's end. You walk along the tunnel until you reach a glass room with a huge bubble window. You realise that you are in a glass room under the sea. Brightly coloured fish are swimming by, you see a turtle in the distance. You notice a comfy chair if you want to sit and watch and in the corner there's a diving suit if you want to venture out. You now have a minute of clock time equal to all the time you need to enjoy and explore the sea. (After a minute) Now it is time to return. (Pause). You walk back along the tunnel to the stairs and up through the door in the sand. You close the door and know that you can return whenever you want. You leave the beach and become aware of sitting here, fully alert and relax. I am going to count to ten. Join me at the count of six, opening your eyes at ten, feeling fully awake and alert and able to remember your experiences. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

Cushion stacking – To view this video to learn how you can lead this activity with your class, you can access this via 'Future Learn'. It is entirely free to sign up and do a course. The cushion stacking video can be found under the course 'Anxiety in Children and Young People During COVID-19'. It is in Week 2, under 'Mindfulness'. It is a very useful group exercise to show young people how their anxious thoughts can build up and accumulate.

Creative Activities



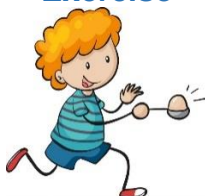
Rock painting – collect pebbles and rocks, clean them and paint them. Pupils could design them for family/friends as an act of kindness

Postcard activity – create a postcard template (one side blank, one side with lines), ask pupils to think about a time they felt anxious (think about how they felt, reflect on what happened), on the blank side, ask your child to draw how they felt about the situation. On the lined side, ask your child to write what words they would use to describe how they felt. Then spend time thinking about how they could feel better. 'Post' the letter – this creates distance between the problem situation and acts as a way of the child letting the situation go.

Create a memory jar - Keep memories safe by collecting treasures in a glass jar. Label the outside (or draw a picture) and collect special objects and put them in the jar for safe-keeping. These could be messages, drawings, pebbles or stones from daily walks, pressed flowers, autumn

leaves or even cake toppers from a birthday party. Once the jar is full talk about the special memories and stick them into a memories book, so that the jar is free to be filled again.

Exercise



Make your own sports' day – egg and spoon race, relay, toss the welly

Dance – the sillier, the better!

Walk like an animal – can you hop like a frog, walk like a bear, shuffle like a gorilla and jump like a kangaroo? Put some music on and spend a few minutes seeing who can do the best impression of each animal.

Yoga - Introducing yoga to young children at an early age, through playful activities, is a great way to boost healthy living, helping them to become calmer and better able to concentrate and focus.

SUN SALUTATION FOR KIDS

Look up at the sky
Stand tall with your legs hip width apart, feet facing forward, arms alongside your body. Inhale deeply, look up and reach your arms to the sky. Say, "Hello, sun in the sky!"

Pretend to be a jellyfish
Exhale, bend your upper body, reach for your toes and pretend your arms are jellyfish tentacles. Say, "Hello, jellyfish in the sea!"

Pretend to be a sand castle
Place your palms flat on the ground, inhale and step your right foot back. Keep your back flat and your chest open, pretending to be a sand castle. Say, "Hello, sand castle on the beach!"

Pretend to be a dolphin
Exhale and step your left foot back to create an upside-down V. Straighten your legs, relax your neck and look down between your legs. Imagine being a dolphin gliding through the waves. Take 5 deep breaths. Say, "Hello, dolphin in the waves!"

Pretend to be a crab
As you inhale, shift forward, drop your knees, and come to an all-fours position. Imagine you are a crab scuttling across the sand. Say, "Hello, crab on the sand!"

Pretend to be an urchin
As you exhale, sit on your heels, keeping palms flat in front of you, rest your head on the mat. Bring your arms back alongside your body and imagine being an urchin floating. Say, "Hello, urchin resting on a rock!"

Reverse the steps back to standing. Then repeat the sequence on the left side.

Wellbeing Action Plan

This is a positive promotion tool for mental health. You can use it yourself (remember your own mental wellbeing!) and use it with pupils. Creating the plan is just as important as implementing it. Working through the plan with pupils is a really useful tool to think in more detail about things that help them. It provides a framework for helping to stay well – it is also important to consider what will happen during crisis because when pupils are at crisis point, it is even harder for them to figure out what to do next. Adapt the plan to suit the pupil/you, but in each section there are some useful questions that can act as a starting point to think about. It is all about what works for the individual – don't write something if it doesn't help, or if pupils won't/can't use the technique! See the worksheet below and have a go at completing one – either for yourself, or for pupils.

Wellbeing Action Plan

Coping Recipe Book:

Here, write down the things that you know work. What helps you to stay well and keep calm? Consider the 5 senses e.g. what smells, or sounds help you relax? Consider techniques you know help e.g. breathing exercises. Think about hobbies you engage in. Reflect on who helps you.

Healthy strategies:

Think about what things you can do every day to promote your wellbeing. Consider what your routine looks like – ensuring this is regular is helpful. How much sleep should you get? What foods could you eat? Could you engage in exercise? Consider what you are grateful for. Are you taking care of yourself? Self-care is showing yourself kindness! Can you build on your relationships/connections? Could you find a new hobby or activity to do? What things could bring you joy?

Unhealthy strategies:

What things should you NOT do, to promote your wellbeing? Do you isolate yourself and avoid making connections? Do you engage in negative self-talk? Do you use drugs/alcohol/self-harm? Does social media affect how you feel about yourself?

Trigger and warning signs:

It is important to recognise when things aren't going quite right. Understanding your warning signs means you can more easily put your WAP into place to prevent things from getting worse. Being proactive is key. Do your eating habits change? Is your sleep affected? Do you feel more irritable or angry? Are there certain anniversaries or times of the year that are more difficult? Do you have more hopeless thoughts?

Next steps and support:

If things are becoming too difficult, it is important to realise this and seek help. Think about who/what/where you can go if you are in need of extra support. Is there anyone at home or school? Your GP? Are there certain places you should avoid? Do you know how to access a crisis helpline?

Wellbeing Checklist

This is a tool you as a teacher can use. This could also be used by older children. It is a quick and simple way to highlight what things you are currently doing and what things might need a little work. Realising what areas need a little work is a useful way to start finding new things to help improve your wellbeing and reduce anxiety. The less stressed and anxious you are, plus the more you ensure your own personal wellbeing = the less stressed and anxious your pupils will be. Have a go at completing one now.

Wellbeing Checklist

Personal Wellbeing	I do this	I do this sometimes	I don't do this
I maintain a healthy, balanced diet			
I keep a regular sleep pattern			
I look after myself e.g. showering/dressing/brushing teeth			
I keep active			
I keep in regular contact with friends and family			
I spend time doing things I enjoy			
I use effective coping mechanisms when I am stressed			
I reach out for help if needed			

Mug of Positivi-tea

PERMA - PERMA is a concept developed by a psychologist who argues that there are 5 key elements of psychological wellbeing and happiness – Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement.

This comes from positive psychology that aims to enable individuals to flourish – by focussing on positive (rather than negative!), emotions experiences and traits, someone's wellbeing can increase.

By looking at these 5 areas, it means pupils can focus on strengths, rather than difficulties.

This concept helps your child to identify aspects in their life that they can do to relate to each letter of the acronym and should be based around what pupils like and enjoy.

Here we will explain each section and think about some questions you can talk with pupils about to develop their positivity

Positive emotion = related to optimism, enjoyment, happiness, satisfaction

What is going well? What makes you happy? What positive experiences can try? What can you do/eat/drink/see to make you calm/excited/healthy?

Engagement = activities that help us find our 'flow', being totally absorbed, being immersed, developing skills.

What are your strengths? What activities will keep you concentrated? What can you explore?

Relationships = meaningful connections we make with others, emotional interactions

Who are your close relationships with? How can you connect with people? E.g. new hobby/online/phone/park. Who else could you connect with? How can you show an interest in another person?

Meaning = feeling fulfilled, having a purpose, actions that contribute to larger goals, belonging to something bigger than oneself

What's your purpose? How can you pursue that purpose? What are your values? What do you help contribute to?

Achievement = feeling accomplished, achieving goals, reaching personal success

What are your goals? What challenge can you do today/this week/this month/this year? How can you develop?

Create your 'Mug of Positivi-tea' –

Write in each box things that relate to each aspect of PERMA – things they already do and/or things they want to do in the future to increase these aspects.

Mug of Positivi-tea

Positive emotions

Engagement

Relationships

Meaning

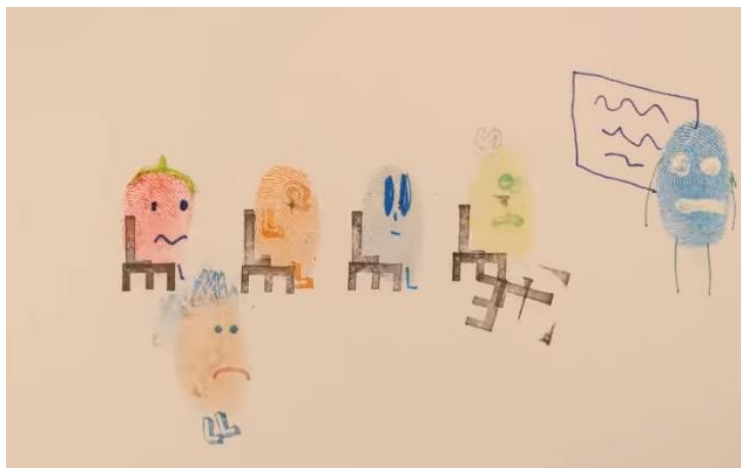
Achievement

Finally, here is the link to the video shared at the end of the session, which summarises and highlights that we can all do something to help, by just listening to our children and young people. We can all make a difference and we should all feel confident to talk about things we are struggling with.



<https://youtu.be/DxIDKZH3-E>

Another video that could be useful for younger children is the 'Small Feelings, Big Feelings' video. We encourage you to share it with your children to encourage them to talk about how they are feeling more.



<https://youtu.be/nCrjex3-Js>

Thank you for watching the MHST's "Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing Anxiety" presentation. Should you have any concerns about a child or young person's wellbeing, remember to speak to your child's school Senior Mental Health Lead who can initiate a referral for our support. We look forward to continuing our work with you during the next academic year.