

Supporting a young person with anxiety

Children and adults of all ages experience anxiety from time to time. It is important to normalise worry as being part of the range of human emotions. Some young people will be able to vocalise their worries which will allow you to support them. For others, even being able to identify that they are feeling anxious is hard and so being able to express and communicate this to others can be a real challenge. Below are some signs and symptoms that a child or young person may be experiencing anxiety. This information is not exhaustive and should not be used to make a diagnosis; it should be used as a guide only.

Signs and symptoms that a young child may be experiencing anxiety

- Not wanting to go to school or being left alone (even in a different room at home)
- Complaints of physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, upset stomach or feeling sick
- Appearing distressed, agitated and/or irritable
- Not sleeping well; trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking early in the morning
- Nightmares or night terrors
- Regressive behaviour such as wetting themselves
- Becoming more clingy or needing a lot of reassurance or encouragement
- Not wanting to be separated from a parent/carer
- Requiring 'safety' items such as cuddly toys, dummies, soothers and pacifiers which are inappropriate for the age of the child or environment
- Refusal to speak, particularly if they previously communicated without difficulty
- Aggressive behaviour, both physical and verbal, towards others or "tantrum" behaviour
- Difficulties concentrating and appearing fidgety or restless
- Avoidance of certain situations or refusing to participate
- Asking a lot of "what if" questions and repeating them without apparent satisfaction of the answer
- Developing rituals or routines and becoming distressed if these are interrupted or stopped

Signs and symptoms that an older child or adolescent may be experiencing anxiety

- Refusal or avoidance of going to school or college, seeing friends or engaging in social activities
- Needing repeated reassurance - they may text or call a lot for reassurance
- Sleep disturbance - either sleeping too much or not able to sleep
- Strong physiological symptoms, including loss of appetite, complaints of feeling sick, having stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, palpitations and sweating
- Appearing distressed, agitated, irritable, sensitive and/or emotional (tearful)
- Reduced performance at school due to difficulties concentrating
- Reports by the young person that they feel anxious or worried

Top tips on how best to support an anxious young person

- 1) Remain calm yourself. Try to remember that young people often look to the adults around them for guidance. Your behaviour will reassure them that they are safe and do not need to panic.
- 2) Give them opportunities to explore and express how they feel. Children may not use the words 'anxiety' and 'worry' but their own descriptive words such as 'fizzy' or 'wobbly'. If a child cannot describe how they feel, encourage them to draw or paint how they feel or point to where in their body they are experiencing discomfort.
- 3) Explain that everyone worries from time to time and that although the physical sensations are not pleasant, they will pass. Using distraction techniques and activities, such as playing games, seeing friends, reading or watching TV, may help them to manage distressing thoughts and feelings.
- 4) Acknowledge how they feel rather than minimising or dismissing their worries, whilst providing a clear message that they can and will cope.
- 5) It is important that they do not avoid the situations that make them feel anxious. The more a situation is avoided, the greater the anxiety becomes. Help them to break down their fears into smaller steps and take each one at a time. Find motivators and rewards to encourage them to take small steps to achieve each goal. Keep persevering as the more they face their fear, the easier it will become.
- 6) Try to identify the source of anxiety. Some young people become particularly concerned when they hear or witness worrying things. For example, ensure they are only accessing age appropriate material on TV.
- 7) Let your child's school or college know about the difficulties being experienced so that they can support them using the same strategies and techniques for a consistent approach.
- 8) Remember that anxiety is a problem when it is extreme, excessive and interferes with everyday life. Please see your GP or school nurse for support in this instance and they can refer you to appropriate services. You can also self-refer to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) by calling 0300 304 0050.
- 9) Access the resources below for details of anxiety management techniques that you can use with your child to help them to manage and overcome their worries.

Useful Resources

- Books:
- Overcoming your Child's Fears and Worries by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts
 - Helping your anxious child: A step by step guide for parents by Ronald Rapee
 - What to do when you worry too much by Dawn Huebner

Website: www.youth.anxietybc.com