



**Children's
Mental Health
Week 2019**
4-10 Feb #ChildrensMentalHealthWeek
ChildrensMentalHealthWeek.org.uk

Anxiety tips from the experts

For [Children's Mental Health Week 2019 \(4-10 February\)](#), Place2Be is taking steps to be 'Healthy: Inside and Out' and encouraging everyone – whatever age they are – to think about their physical and mental wellbeing.

In this free resource, Place2Be's Principal Educational Psychologist Julia Clements explains why we experience anxiety and how we can support our children when they feel anxious.

Why do we experience anxiety?

Did you know that anxiety is designed to protect us? It's a natural phenomenon that humans of all ages experience. When faced with a threat or problem, anxiety can help warn us and motivate us to do something about it. So, for example, when we're anxious about a test, we prepare. When we're anxious about getting our children to school, we leave early.

Normal anxiety

It is perfectly normal for children and young people to experience anxiety at different stages in their lives. We might expect a baby to be anxious when separated from their parent or carer and a toddler to be anxious in new surroundings. Pre-schoolers may be afraid of certain animals, older children, the dark or imaginary creatures. In adolescence, young people may become anxious about exams, family, relationships, death, terrorism and more.

When does anxiety become unhealthy?

Anxiety becomes unhealthy or problematic when it starts to cause significant distress and interferes with our everyday lives. For example, feeling shy is perfectly normal but social anxiety might cause a child to be overwhelmingly afraid of everyday activities like going out to see friends or speaking on the phone.

Children who struggle with anxiety may show it through their behaviour in a number of different ways, such as:

- worrying a lot or thinking negatively
- finding it hard to concentrate
- sleeping badly
- changing eating patterns
- becoming irritable
- looking tense or fidgety
- using the toilet often
- crying frequently

- being 'clingy'
- complaining of tummy aches or feeling unwell.

Children and young people might also resort to unhealthy coping strategies such as avoiding situations that cause them anxiety (e.g. school), using drugs or alcohol or self-harming.

Supporting your child when they feel anxious

1. Think about your own wellbeing

Your own mental health is important, so as a first step, it can be useful to think about how you manage anxiety yourself. If you think you may need support, don't hesitate to speak to someone, such as a friend, family member or professional, for example, your G.P. When you start by looking after yourself it not only helps your own wellbeing, but enables you to better support others.

2. Help your child understand what anxiety can look and feel like

We often experience feelings in a physical way. If a child is struggling with anxiety, they may have 'psychosomatic symptoms' – signs that we'd associate with physical illness, like tummy aches – and because children don't always use words to communicate *feelings*, we might spot these *physical* symptoms first.

Encourage your child to think about what they feel in their bodies and think in their minds when they feel anxious and share that with you. Naming the emotion and identifying the signs can help a child feel less overwhelmed. E.g. "You've told me your tummy is hurting – are you starting to feel a bit worried?" Remember, if at any point you aren't sure what to do, it's ok to seek help from a professional.

3. Practice anxiety reduction techniques together

Try having a simple chat with your child about what you do to look after your body and mind and how you manage feelings of anxiety and stress. Whether it's walking the dog or turning your phones off before bed, sharing the steps you take can set a good example. Don't be afraid to admit it if you've struggled, too - it's important that children know that dealing with stress and anxiety is a normal part of everyday life.

There are many ways to reduce anxiety and different techniques work for different people. You could try doing physical exercise, fun activities, breathing exercises or meditation with your child. Apps like Stop, Breathe & Think can be helpful too.

4. Help your child face fears gradually

Rather than completely avoiding the cause of the anxiety, you can encourage your child to overcome it at their own pace and praise each brave thing they do in their journey. Try making a 'worry ladder' with gradually trickier tasks on each step towards the biggest worry at the top. Positive feedback, recognition of progress and support through set-backs can help your child climb the ladder.

5. Challenge negative thinking

It can be useful to discuss negative, critical thoughts and test out how useful they are. E.g. if your child often says "I can't do this" you could ask whether they would consider saying this to a friend – the answer is probably not! So you could encourage the child to be kinder to themselves and repeat "I can do this!" in their mind or out loud. Stories like 'The Huge Bag of Worries' can help with this and let them know they are not alone.

Still worried?

If the symptoms get worse or you're still worried about your child for any reason, you can seek support from school staff like the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), talk to your GP, or call the Young Minds Parents Helpline on 0808 802 5544 (Mon-Fri, 9:30- 4 in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) for advice and information about local services.

Further reading:

- *Place2Be is a children's mental health charity that works to improve the emotional wellbeing of pupils, families, teachers and school staff. [Find out more about Place2Be](#)*
- *Place2Be launched the first ever Children's Mental Health Week in 2015 to shine a spotlight on the importance of children and young people's mental health. [Find out more about Children's Mental Health Week 2019 and how you can get involved](#)*
- *[Find out more about anxiety disorders in children on the NHS website](#)*
- *[Find out more about the link between mind and body on the Kings Health Partners website](#)*