



What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid - particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we perceive that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings physical sensations. Most people feel anxious at times. It's particularly common to experience some anxiety when coping with stressful events or changes, especially if they could have a big impact on your life.

When is anxiety a mental health problem?

Anxiety can become a mental health problem if it impacts on your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, it may be a problem for you if:

- Your feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time
- Your fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation
- You avoid situations that might cause you to feel anxious
- Your worries feel very distressing or hard to control
- You regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which include panic attacks
- You find it hard to go about your everyday life or do things you enjoy.

What is the 'fight, flight or freeze' response?

Like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from danger. When we feel under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones:

- Make us feel more alert, so we can act faster
- Make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it's needed most.

After we feel the threat has passed, our bodies release other hormones to help our muscles relax. This can sometimes cause us to shake. This is commonly called the 'fight, flight or freeze response'- it's something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it.

What are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety can be experienced in lots of different ways. Some commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders are.

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**- this means having regular or uncontrollable worries about many different things in everyday life.
- **Social anxiety disorder**- this diagnosis means you experience extreme fear or anxiety triggered by social situations.
- **Separation anxiety**- this is common in babies and young children. They worry that you their main caregiver won't come back to them or that something bad might happen to them whilst they are not together.
- **Panic disorder**- this means having regular or frequent panic attacks without a clear cause or trigger.
- **Phobias**- a phobia is an extreme fear or anxiety triggered by a particular situation or particular object.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**- this is a diagnosis given if you develop anxiety problems after going through something traumatic. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like your re-living all the fear again.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**- you may be given this diagnosis if your anxiety problems involve having repetitive thoughts, behaviours or urges.
- **Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)**- this means you experience obsessions and compulsions relating to your physical appearance.

It is very common to experience anxiety alongside other mental problems.

First Aid for Anxiety

Approach - Try to pick a time and place that is quiet, private and comfortable. Consider the best approach, e.g. is there an activity they enjoy and find relaxing? Speaking to them may give them a sense of relief even if this is not readily apparent. If the young person is experiencing a medical emergency, then follow physical first aid guidelines and seek medical attention / ring 999.

Listen and Communicate Non-Judgmentally - Discuss your concerns with them in an open and honest way. Try to use statements such as 'I am worried about you'. Ask how they're feeling and how long they've been feeling that way. Discuss what you have noticed but be sure to be non-judgmental. Be patient and engaged while they speak. Ask clarifying questions and mini prompts - like "I see"- to keep them talking.

Give Support and Information - Your support can have a huge impact. Don't use phrases like 'That's silly' or 'Don't be silly'. The child will feel like their views or feelings don't matter and not open up about their worries. Maintain positive language.

Encourage the Young Person to get Professional Help- School nurses, practice nurses and GPs can support a child who is experiencing anxiety. Refer back to the box 'When is anxiety a mental health problem'. If your child meets the criteria, then suggest going to the Doctors.

Refer to the 'How to help' box for ideas and suggestions to support your child with anxiety. Please do contact the school if you have worries or concerns about your child's mental health. We have qualified Mental Health First Aiders in school who can offer further support and information.

Symptoms

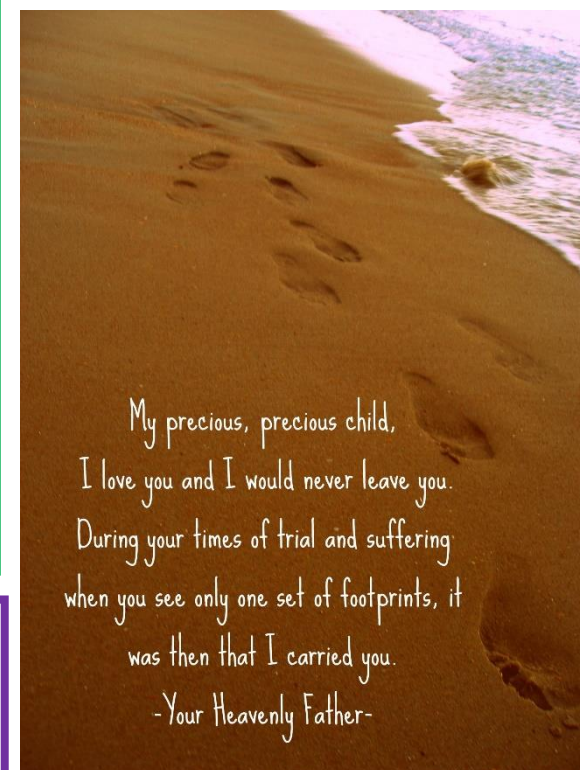
- A churning feeling in your stomach
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy
- Pins and needles
- Feeling restless or unable to sit still
- Headaches, backache or other aches and pains
- Faster breathing
- Grinding your teeth
- Sweating or hot flushes
- Problems sleeping
- Nausea (feeling sick)

Tips for Separation anxiety

- **Talk about what you'll do together later-** reassure your child that you will see them later and discuss what you are going to do so they have something to look forward to with you.
- **Make saying goodbye a positive time-** when you leave your child, however sad or worried you may be feeling, smile and wave goodbye confidently and happily, otherwise they will pick up on your tension.

How to help

- Ensure your child has *someone to talk to*.
- *Talk to your child about their worries and discuss how to manage them-* Remember a worry to them may look something small to you but to them it might be all they think about.
- Look after their *physical health* - walk to/from school.
- Learn different *breathing exercises*
- *Keep a diary-* monitor their worries and talk through them. This could help see patterns.
- *Keep a worry jar-* encourage your child to write it down so that it is off their mind.



For more information and helpful resources, go to:

<https://childmind.org/article/what-to-do-and-not-do-when-children-are-anxious/> <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/>

A booklet for parents and carers wanting to know more about anxiety in children -

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/anxious_child.pdf