



## Advice and information for parents

# Anxiety

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### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is our body's reaction to stress. The release of the hormone adrenaline causes a 'fight or flight' response so that we are alert and ready to react to the stress. While anxiety can feel unpleasant, it is also useful and helpful when we face new or challenging situations.

### How much anxiety is 'normal'?

All children and young people get anxious at times. This is a normal part of their development as they grow up and develop their 'survival skills' for facing challenges in the wider world. Some people are just naturally more anxious than others, and are quicker to get stressed or worried.

Don't underestimate the impact of anxiety on your child, nor overlook the effect of their anxiety on your whole family.

If you think your child's anxiety is **getting in the way of their day to day life, slowing down their development, or having a significant and negative impact on their schooling or relationships**, it is important to help them tackle it.

### What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety causes a number of **reactions in the body**, which can feel very unpleasant: They include:

- Feeling shaky, feeling sick or having stomach cramps, or feeling dizzy or faint
- Breathing fast or finding it hard to breathe
- Heart beating fast (palpitations), sweating, tense muscles
- Feeling like you might die

These reactions are designed to make us feel uncomfortable so we are alert and able to respond quickly to situations.

However, anxiety that happens often, or at the wrong time, can affect the **behaviour and thoughts** of the anxious person in negative ways.

These can include:

- Feeling scared, panicky, embarrassed or ashamed a lot of the time
- Not having the confidence to try new things, face challenges or even carry on as normal
- Finding it hard to concentrate, or having problems with sleeping or eating
- Angry outbursts, getting furious very quickly and feeling 'out of control'
- Worries or negative thoughts going round and round the person's head
- Thinking that bad things are going to happen all the time. If someone is very anxious, they may feel they have to do or say certain things, or bad things will happen.

### **What causes anxiety?**

The causes of anxiety can be complex and it might not be just one thing. We all have different levels of stress we can cope with.

- Worriers can run in families. Many parents whose children are anxious also remember being anxious in their own childhoods. Some children are simply born more nervous.
- Difficult or stressful events in childhood can cause anxiety; frequent house or school moves, divorce and separation, adoption/ fostering, being a young carer, having a new step-family, seeing parents arguing or fighting, abuse, neglect.
- Bereavement, physical illness or injury, or having someone in the family who is ill or disabled can cause anxiety around health (see obsessions and compulsions overleaf).
- Other causes of anxiety include: school work or exams, bullying, friendship problems, money, housing, involvement in crime, gangs or drug culture, refugee or asylum seeking experiences, concerns around body image or appearance.

### **Mental health disorders and anxiety**

Some conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can have increased anxiety as part of the symptoms. This may be due to neurological differences in the way the brain functions. Children and young people with these conditions can really benefit from help to recognise and manage their anxiety, although the underlying condition will remain.

### **What problems can anxiety lead to?**

A child or young person's anxiety can affect the whole family. Parents and siblings of anxious children often find they become very anxious themselves, as they try to protect the child from stressful situations or worry in advance about how they will react.

Anxious young people may not want to go out in public, they can find it hard to see friends, take part in activities or meet new people.

Anxiety can prevent children from doing their best at school or even attending school or college at all. This may affect their learning and opportunities later in life.

### **Different Types of Anxiety**

**Generalised Anxiety:** If a child or young person is anxious, worried or stressed about things all, or most, of the time, with no particular or obvious reason, and this has a severe or negative effect on their day to day lives, they may have 'generalised anxiety'. This usually requires some professional help.

**Separation anxiety:** Many children go through stages of separation anxiety between the ages of one and three, when they are more aware of their surroundings. They may cling to mum, dad or their carers, cry a lot and get upset with new people or in new situations, such as starting with a childminder or going to nursery or playgroup. This is a part of normal development but it can be difficult for the child and the parents.

If older children are experiencing separation anxiety, they might be reacting to changes in their home life, such as moving house, a new sibling or someone in their family who is ill or has died. Their worries may focus on something bad happening to their parents or carers and their insecurity can make them feel unable to leave the house or try new things.

**School-based anxiety:** Many children and young people become anxious about school, or things that happen there. This may be about academic pressures, schoolwork, bullying, friendship issues or just the school environment, which can seem very overwhelming. Anxiety can happen when changing schools or moving up a stage, particularly from primary to secondary.

Younger children who are anxious about school may get headaches and tummy aches, feel sick or cry in the mornings. They may feel too anxious to go into school at all. It can have a serious effect on the child's education and friendships, and can be extremely difficult for their parents. If a child is not able to go to school due to anxiety, professional help may help to support them.

**Health anxiety:** Children can become extremely fearful about their health and develop obsessions (see also Obsessions and Compulsions overleaf) about 'symptoms' that they feel indicate a serious illness, such as cancer. They seek constant reassurance from family and GPs but such reassurances often don't work in the long term. If you are aware that your child's health anxiety is starting to rule their lives or interfere in family life, it is best to seek professional help.

**Social anxiety:** Children or young people might feel exceptionally nervous of social situations, dread being in groups, and find it hard to talk to people they don't know, or even friends. They might feel very self-conscious and think people are looking at them or judging them negatively. They may have physical symptoms such as shaking, breathing fast or sweating in social situations. They might dwell on past social incidents and stress about how they might have come across.

**Panic attacks:** Panic attacks are overwhelming feelings of extreme anxiety that come on suddenly and can typically last between 5 to 20 minutes. Some people may experience panic attacks multiple times a week, others may only experience them once or twice a month. During a panic attack the person may have difficulties breathing and feels very unwell, overwhelmed and out of control. The feelings gradually calm down and go away but can leave the person feeling shaken and nervous. Having panic attacks can be very frightening, and can affect the child or young person's confidence and hold them back in their ability to go to school and take part in activities.

**Fear and Phobias:** It is normal for younger children to go through stages of being scared of particular things. There is often no obvious reason for their fear but the child can get very upset and seem irrational about it. Most children gradually grow out of these fears.

If your child does not grow out of their fear or it starts to affect their daily life and their ability to cope, it may have become a phobia. Common phobias in older children include germs, lifts, dogs and social situations. The child or young person may go to great lengths to avoid the thing that they are worried about, which can be very disruptive. They may need to have some professional help to overcome it.

**Obsessions and Compulsions:** It is fairly common for young children to want to have very fixed routines or to play the same game repeatedly if they are feeling anxious. However, some very anxious people get stuck in a negative cycle of thoughts and behaviours. **Obsessions** are negative thoughts that are very strong and hard to ignore. **Compulsions** describe the feeling that the only way to stop bad things from happening is to repeat certain actions or check things over and over again. If it is severe, this behaviour can develop into what is called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), an anxiety-related disorder. Examples that can fit into this category are the obsessions around health anxiety and trichotillomania, a compulsion to pull out one's hair.

**Selective Mutism:** An anxiety disorder which is diagnosed when a child or young person is unable to speak in one or more social settings (for example, at school, in public places, with adults), but is able to speak comfortably in other settings (for example, at home with their family). People who have selective mutism understand language use but their anxiety stops them from speaking. It is more than 'shyness'.

## Treating Anxiety

One in six young people will experience anxiety at some point in their lives. It is a fairly common mental health condition and one that can be treated with psychological therapies such as talking/counselling, relaxation techniques, medication or a combination of these. What works for one person might not work for the next. The GP can explain the different types of treatment that are available, what might be the best option for your child and why.

**Medication:** Your GP may suggest medication could help. Our website provides information on mental health medication commonly prescribed to young people listing how it works, how you should take it and how you might feel. For more details you can go here:

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/medications](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/medications)

# What can help? What to do.

These are things that may really make a difference:

1. Talk to your child about anxiety, what is happening in their body and why it happens. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack.
2. Help them to recognise anxious feelings so they can tell when they are becoming anxious and can ask for help.
3. Tell the child it will be ok, and the anxiety will pass. It can be helpful to describe the anxiety as a wave to ride or surf that gets smaller after it peaks.
4. Get the child to breathe deeply and slowly, in through their nose for three counts and out through their mouth for three counts. Breathing into a paper bag can help (if you can find one!).
5. Distract them by focusing on something else, and get them to apply distraction techniques, which older children may be able to manage themselves
6. Give them a cuddle or hold their hand if they will let you, as touch can be soothing.
7. If possible, use relaxation techniques. It can help to talk to the child or young person about finding a safe place in their mind – visualising somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be a grandparent's or friend's house or a holiday beside the sea etc. which they can picture when 'wrong thoughts' come into their head or they are feeling anxious. Sometimes holding a memento like a seashell or pebble can help.
8. If the child or young person is feeling the need to check things or repeat certain actions, suggest they count up to 10 before doing the checking action as a delaying tactic. The following website has some good ideas: <http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/relaxation/>
9. Encourage the child to notice what things make them anxious. Talking it through can help but the child can also keep a diary or a 'worry book' if they are old enough to do this.
10. Use a Worry Box where the child can write the worry down and post it out of sight. Small children will enjoy decorating the box, too. They can post their worries every day if it helps, or leave the worries in there for, say, a week to see if they were worth worrying about (if not they can be torn up). Alternatively, designate a specific Worry Time for around 10 or 20 minutes in the evening (but not too close to bedtime or when the child is in bed), so worries can be saved up for that time. This will give the message that the child is in control of the worries and not vice versa.

11. You can try to help your child put their worries into perspective by re-labelling them according to who needs to worry about them e.g. worries about finances are for parents.
12. Help the child measure how anxious they are on a scale of 1-10 and notice this at different times, to see how it gets better or worse.
13. Notice what things help them relax or feel better and work with your child to find strategies - they will often know best what works for them.
14. Work on positive-thinking. Name their worst case scenarios and think through together how to sort out the situation if it happens, e.g. 'I'm worried that we'll miss the bus.' 'What do you think we could do if that happens?' 'We could get the next bus'.
15. Help them maintain a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones, good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen or computer time in the evening, a healthy diet and limited sugar, additives and caffeine, involvement in art, writing or listen to music regularly.
16. Get professional help if you feel your child's anxiety is not getting any better or is getting worse, and efforts to sort it within the family have not worked

# Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations. Please let us know about any anomalies you find.

## Anxiety UK

[www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

Anxiety UK is a national charity with local services all over the UK. The website includes resources for parents concerned about their child's anxiety.

Open Monday–Friday 9.30am – 5pm  
(excluding Bank Holidays)

Phone: 0344 477 5774

Email: [support@anxietyuk.org.uk](mailto:support@anxietyuk.org.uk)

Text: 07537 416 905

Live Chat advisory service: Available during office hours via the website.

## No Panic

[www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

Support for people suffering from panic attacks, OCD, phobias, and other issues related to anxiety. Also provides support for carers of sufferers.

Helpline (open daily 10am-10pm):  
0844 967 4848

Youth Helpline: 0330 606 1174

The Youth Helpline is for 13-20 year olds. It's open Monday-Friday from 3-6pm, and also from 6-8pm on Thursdays and Saturdays.

Email: [info@nopanic.org.uk](mailto:info@nopanic.org.uk)

Having a panic attack? Call the Crisis Number to listen to a recording of a breathing technique (24h): 01952 680835 or listen to it here: [www.nopanic.org.uk/panic-attack](http://www.nopanic.org.uk/panic-attack)

## OCD Action

[www.ocdaction.org.uk](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk)

The national charity providing support and information to anybody affected by OCD. They have an advocacy service too.

Open Monday–Friday from 9.30am-8pm.

Helpline: 0845 390 6232

Email: [support@ocdaction.org.uk](mailto:support@ocdaction.org.uk)

Advocacy: [www.ocdaction.org.uk/advocacy](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk/advocacy)

## OCD Youth (part of OCD Action)

[www.ocdyouth.org](http://www.ocdyouth.org)

OCD Youth aims to increase awareness and access to support for anyone under 25 affected by OCD. OCD Youth is run by young people with OCD, for young people with OCD.

Email: [youthhelpline@ocdaction.org.uk](mailto:youthhelpline@ocdaction.org.uk)

## The Mix

[www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk)

If you're under 25 you can talk to The Mix about anything that's troubling you over the phone, email or webchat. You can also use their phone or online counselling service.

## Childline

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

<p>Helpline open daily 4-11pm: 0808 808 4994</p> <p>Email: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us</a></p> <p>Webchat open daily 4-11pm: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team</a></p> <p>Counselling service: <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service</a></p>	<p>24/7 helpline: 0800 1111</p> <p>Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat">www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat</a></p> <p>To email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/registration">www.childline.org.uk/registration</a></p> <p>Tips on managing anxiety: <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/managing-your-anxiety">www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/managing-your-anxiety</a></p>
<p><b>YoungMinds Crisis Messenger</b></p> <p>Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.</p> <p>Text YM to 85258</p> <p>Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.</p>	<p><b>Mee Two app</b> <a href="http://www.meetwo.co.uk">www.meetwo.co.uk</a></p> <p>A free app for teenagers providing peer support and resources. Young people can share what's going on for them and send supportive messages to others. All messages are fully moderated.</p> <p>Download from Google Play or App Store.</p>
<p><b>Youth Wellbeing Directory</b> <a href="http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing">www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing</a></p> <p>Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.</p>	<p><b>Youth Access</b> <a href="http://www.youthaccess.org.uk">www.youthaccess.org.uk</a></p> <p>Offers information about advice and counselling services for young people aged 12-25 years.</p>
<p><b>Triumph over Phobia (TOP UK)</b> <a href="http://www.topuk.org">www.topuk.org</a></p> <p>An OCD and Phobia charity that runs a network of self-help therapy groups.</p> <p>Office phone: 01225 571740</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:info@topuk.org">info@topuk.org</a></p>	<p><b>Finding a private counsellor or therapist</b></p> <p>If this is an affordable option for you, you can find accredited private child and adolescent therapists and counsellors living locally to you by searching the following directories.</p> <p>Counselling directory: <a href="http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk">www.counselling-directory.org.uk</a></p> <p>BACP: <a href="http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists">www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists</a></p> <p>UKCP: <a href="http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist">www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist</a></p>

## YoungMinds

### Information on mental health medication

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/medications](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/medications)

Information about various mental health medications commonly prescribed to young people.

### Parents Lounge

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge)

Our Parents Helpline experts answer questions about anxiety.

### #Take20

[www.youngminds.org.uk/take20](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/take20)

Ideas and suggestions to help parents find 20 minutes to do something together with their child to support confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

## Mind

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Provides guidance on mental health conditions, where to get help and different treatment options, and an information line for over 18s.

Open Monday to Friday from 9am-6pm.

Phone: 0300 123 3393

Text: 86463

Email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

## Royal College of Psychiatrists

You can download an anxiety factsheet, *Worries and Anxieties, Helping Children to Cope: Information for Parents*, at

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsand-youthinfo/parentscarers/worriesandanxieties.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsand-youthinfo/parentscarers/worriesandanxieties.aspx)

## NHS

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/anxiety-disorders-in-children/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anxiety-disorders-in-children/)

Provides an overview of anxiety symptoms, tips that can help, treatment options and details of anxiety specific support services.



MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

[www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html](http://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html)