

# Supporting Anxious Children

Acknowledging anxiety and supporting tamariki to find healthy ways to cope will build resilience

Anxiety disorders develop as our cognitive ability develops. Caregivers play an important role in the lives of children at this stage of development, and can support kids to find healthy ways of coping with anxiety in their lives

Childhood Anxiety Often Goes Undetected

• Anxiety is normal, and all children will experience it

But sometimes it becomes something more serious

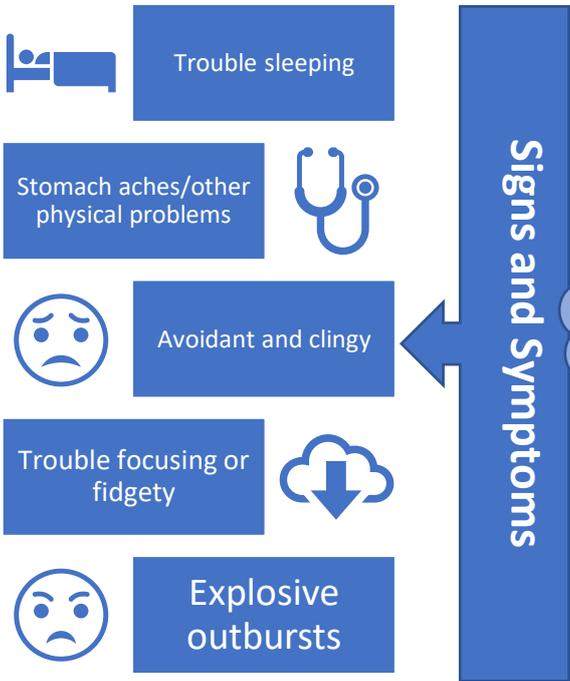
• If a child is feeling overwhelmed by feelings of intense fear or worry that are out of proportion to the situation, they are at risk for developing...

an anxiety disorder

• Fear, and the avoidance fear inspires, can be seriously impairing for a child:

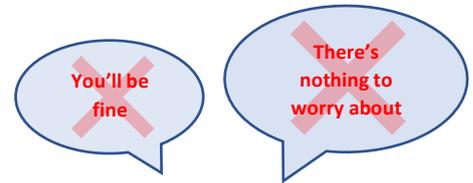
A lot of kids are basically happy and enjoying life but may be struggling with certain situations. This makes their anxiety easy to overlook

- Common triggers**
- Separation
  - Physical illness
  - Poor performance
  - Embarrassment
  - Specific things eg dogs



Often non-specific or indirect

## What kind of support can caregivers offer?



1. **Don't** talk them out of it. We automatically want to give reassurance by saying that everything will be OK.

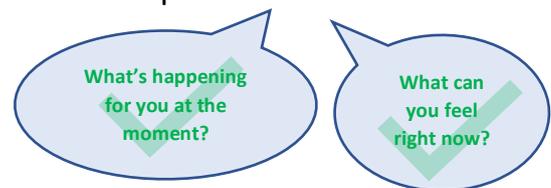
As much as your child wants to believe you, their brains won't let them

We also often end up allowing them to avoid the fearful situation. Unfortunately, this response will keep the anxiety going.

Avoidance reinforces anxiety. It is a coping strategy for dealing with anxiety, but it is short term and reinforces triggers instead of allowing resilience to develop

**Do** ask them what it feels like for them. Give them time and space to answer in their own way. An anxious child needs to hear that you get it

2. Name the anxious behaviour for them.



3. **NORMALISE**. Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in their life. Sometimes it happens for no reason at all. This is okay.



4. **EXPLAIN**.

"Anxiety feels different for everyone. It happens because there's a part of your brain that thinks it needs to protect you from something. It switches on when it thinks you're in danger, like having your own little superhero in your brain ready to protect you. It gets you ready to run away from danger, or to fight against it: fight or flight."

Get your child to give the superhero in their brain a name [eg Maui, Batman, Captain Underpants, Dave]. This externalising process can make it easier for the child to think about cause and effect, and also what to do about it

"The superhero in your brain sometimes makes mistakes like all of us. Sometimes the superhero thinks you need to run away, but actually there's nothing to run from. You need to do the thinking for your superhero sometimes. As soon as you realise your superhero wants you to run but there's nothing to run from, you can take charge"...

5. **BREATHE**. "Your superhero tells your body to get lots of oxygen to the muscles in your arms and legs so you can fight or run away. It gets your body to do this by going from breathing normally with slow deep breaths, to breathing fast and shallow. If your superhero stuffed up and there's nothing there to run away from, you need to think about how to tell your body to slow down."

## Belly Breathing

Place one of the child's hands on their chest and one on their belly. Breathe in through the nose for half their age in seconds, hold for half their age in seconds and breathe out for their full age in seconds. This method works well up to age 8. The structure would be: – 4 seconds breathing in, hold for 4s and out for 8. If your child or young person is over 8, use the following: – 4 seconds breath in, hold for 5 and breathe out for 8. (adjust this as per the needs of the child or young person).

## Bubble-breathing

Fill a glass to halfway with water. Place a straw in the glass and ask the child to take a deep belly breath (see Belly Breathing exercise for how to do this) and hold for 3 seconds, then blow into the straw slowly through their mouth. Repeat this 5 – 10 times (or as many as the child needs to feel less anxious).

## 6. PLAY A MINDFULNESS GAME.

### 5 senses

- name a colour you can see and focus on that for 10 seconds,
- name a sound you can hear and focus on listening to that for 10 seconds,
- hold something in your hand and name what it feels like, focus on that feeling for 10 seconds
- Think of the last thing you ate or drank and name the taste, spend 10 seconds thinking about that taste
- Breathe in slowly through your nose and name what you can smell. Keep breathing in deeply through your nose for 10 seconds focusing on that smell.

## 7. PLAY A GAME TO RELAX ARM AND LEG MUSCLES.

### Robots, Jellyfish and Towers

The aim of this game is to practice progressive muscle relaxation. You call out each of these names and your child mimics the behaviour of each one: – Robots, who are stiff and robotic in their movements. – Jellyfish, who are floppy and relaxed. – Towers, which are strong and stretch up high into the sky. The game begins with each person cycling through the actions a couple times. Try to keep mixing the order of the names up and ensuring there's a jellyfish movement after the tense movements.

## 8. GIVE PRAISE.

When the anxious behaviour has stopped, point this out and congratulate the child on how strong and brave they are.

**If you can see that your child is feeling overwhelmed by feelings of intense fear or worry on a regular basis, you can help by talking about where to get support:**

- Encourage the child to come along for a visit the GP to talk over what's happening
- We are very lucky in Auckland to have the Anxiety NZ clinic in St. Lukes providing a number of support options to the community:
  - With a GP referral, children/families can access help from a registered psychologist
  - Children/families can use the 24/7 national helpline for immediate support (0800 ANXIETY)
  - Children benefit from evidence-based resilience programs, see [anxiety.org.nz](http://anxiety.org.nz) for details of any current workshops and programs

## Check out these excellent online and phonline resources:

<https://www.anxiety.org.nz/> - 0800 ANXIETY

<https://www.whatsup.co.nz/kids/> - 0800 WHATSUP

<http://www.kidslines.org.nz/> - 0800 KIDSLINE

<http://www.commonground.org.nz/> - 0800 376633 (Youthline)

<http://www.parenthelp.org.nz/> - 0800 568856 (free parenting help and advice)

<https://www.skylight.org.nz/topics/15> - 0800 299100

### Some useful definitions from Anxiety NZ Trust website:

**Anxiety:** Moderate to severe anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses affecting children and adults. Feeling anxious to some degree is normal for everyone. Anxiety and fear are adaptive and helpful emotions which allows us to notice danger, keeps us safe and helps us adapt to our environment. However sometimes anxiety levels can become severe or longstanding and beyond our abilities to cope, which can pose a risk to our mental and physical health. It can also cause significant distress or impair your ability to function in important areas of life such as school or relationships.

**Generalised Anxiety Disorder:** An anxiety disorder characterised by chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it.

**Trauma and Stressor Related Disorders:** Disorders that are related to the experience of a trauma (e.g., unexpected death of a loved one, a car accident, or a violent incident) or stressor (e.g. divorce). See Dr Burke's Ted Talk, *How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime*.

**Separation Anxiety Disorder:** Excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or major attachment figures that is beyond what would be expected for one's developmental level. This can occur in children, adolescents, or adults, but is more commonly found in children.

**Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia):** Excessive fear of becoming embarrassed or humiliated in social situations, which often leads to significant avoidance behaviours. Includes school phobia, which is the sudden aversion to or fear of attending school.

**Selective Mutism:** A rare disorder characterised by a persistent failure to speak in certain social situations (e.g., with playmates or in the classroom), despite engagement in speaking in other situations.

**Panic Attack:** The abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes and includes at least four of the following symptoms: Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate; Sweating; Trembling or shaking; Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering.

**OCD:** Repeated and persistent thoughts ("obsessions") that typically cause distress and that an individual attempts to alleviate by repeatedly performing specific actions ("compulsions").

### Resources used to compile this information:

Anxiety.org.nz

childmind.org

Kidshealth.org.nz

Compiled by Ruth Williams, July 2021.