

Summary Notes

Spot and Support: Anxiety

INTRODUCTION?

- We will look at the signs, risk and protective factors, how we can support both in school and at home.
- Anxiety does refer to a number of different disorders so I have selected strategies which can help many young people across these.

What do you think a young person with low mood or depression needs in an adult? How could you now tell the difference between someone with low mood and someone with depression?

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- Astonishingly, the way that we cope when presented with a stressor, that is something that makes us worried or anxious, hasn't really evolved since the beginning of man!
- Even sometimes the little things in life our brain treats as though we are running away from a tiger! It causes a rush of adrenaline which is the chemical needed to prepare us to fight but the problem with adrenaline is that it stops a lot of our normal biological functions, speeds up our breathing, makes our muscles more tense or perhaps our hands and legs tremble as we are supposed to use that extra chemical energy to tackle that tiger!
- Anxiety refers to intensive fears, thoughts and feelings which can be both physical and psychological as our brain perceives things as threats.
- Feelings of anxiety can span from mild to intense and when we are experiencing the most intense levels of anxiety, we call this the fright stage where we are almost in a state of paralysis and struggle to function.
- Almost one in four children and young people show some evidence of mental ill health (including anxiety and depression) so this knowledge is crucial to you being able to be appropriately available to a young person.

Now that we have started to outline what anxiety disorders are, what do you expect to see in the next section of how to spot anxiety disorders?

HOW TO SPOT ANXIETY

Anxiety can become a problem when

- there isn't a clear reason for it
- it disrupts a young person's life at home or school on a regular basis
- the problem has gone but the feeling of fear or panic has not
- it interferes with their ability to take part in activities
- they struggle to complete tasks that other children or young people do easily
- their fear or worry seems out of proportion to the problem
- they become anxious or fearful more easily, or more often, or more intensely than other children or young people
- it leads to unhelpful and unrealistic thoughts about themselves and others.

A child or young person with an anxiety disorder may display physical and emotional symptoms including

- headaches and stomach aches or just feeling unwell
- dizziness/faintness/palpitations/breathlessness/sweating
- not sleeping
- not eating properly
- restlessness
- being clingy/feeling panicky/tearful
- seeming to be worried or anxious and needing lots of reassurance
- feeling down or depressed
- having difficulty concentrating
- wanting things to be perfect and getting frustrated if they're not
- expressing a sense of impending danger, panic or doom
- lashing out at others
- hyper-alertness and difficulty keeping still
- withdrawing or isolating themselves – including not wanting to go to school, be in social or group situations, be away from parents or try new things
- repeating certain behaviours, actions or rituals (often called 'obsessive compulsive behaviours')
- eating more or less than usual
- self-harming

How will this knowledge aid you in supporting young people with anxiety?

RISK FACTORS

- Experiencing lots of change in a short space of time, such as moving house or school
- Having responsibilities that are beyond their age and development, for example caring for other people in their family
- Being around someone who is very anxious, such as a parent
- struggling at school, including feeling overwhelmed by work, exams or peer groups
- Experiencing family stress around things like housing, money and debt
- Going through distressing or traumatic experiences in which they do not feel safe, such as being bullied or witnessing or experiencing abuse.

Should young people be educated in the risk factors for anxiety? If so, how?

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Having a safe base at home with non-judgemental, nurturing parents which are reliable and consistent in their approach can decrease the impact that anxiety may have on a young person.
- Increased time spent in school with a consistent friendship group.
- There is also a lot of value in the safeguards of young people being armoured with coping strategies and those who have already identified who their 'go to' adults are.

What might some healthy coping behaviours be for those experiencing anxiety?

SUPPORTING IN SCHOOL

- When a young person is the midst of an anxious moment, experiencing a panic attack or on the verge of one, it is not the time for longer term planning or big conversations. At this point, the brain is in panic and survival mode, trying to get the young person literally and metaphorically to a place of calm is important. You need them to focus on grounding themselves and controlling their breathing. You can count slowly to five as you breathe in, and then five as you breathe out. If this is too much, start a lower number and gradually build up. Offer calm reassurance and help them to understand that whilst unpleasant, this feeling will pass - it won't last forever. When the height of the panic passes, you could help to distract them by
- Asking them to think of a safe and relaxing place or person in their mind and having them describe this to you- this is another way of centring the child or young person. It also works well on adults too!

Which strategy do you think you will try first with an anxious young person?

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO GENERALLY MANAGE THEIR ANXIETY

Nurturing

- Open culture of mental health awareness and talking about how we feel and why might go a long way to understanding the way they are feeling and help us to put strategies in place.
- Recognise the damage that forcing a conversation can have. The first suggestion is to ask open questions to avoid putting thoughts into the child's head. For example, are you stressed? Might make the child think they should be stressed because you are asking. However, wording the question as 'talk to me about how you are feeling when you are ready' signals to them that you are ready to listen. If we do this on happy days too, it will demonstrate that it is always important to discuss our feelings.
- Some schools have had great success with anxiety thermometers too where everyone regularly checks in or out of the classroom, indicating where they are on the thermometer as you can see on the screen. This makes talking about mental health and feelings part of everyday life and helps to normalise.

Visualisations & Mindfulness

- Younger children could create a portable sensory toolbox to reduce sensory sensitivities and improve tolerance to stressful, noxious situations.
- Each child's sensory toolbox will look different, but it may include things like bubbles which can help to calm down our breathing, headphones to provide an escape in loud situations, body socks or weighted lap pads which can be really comforting or some fidget toys.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation is also becoming more and more popular for younger and older children alike. This is where you will teach them to tense and relax the major muscle groups while using calm breathing. You might start for example with the feet and legs, instructing them to tense and relax the muscles in their feet and legs for a few seconds, before moving up to the stomach, chest, arms and so on. Accompany this with some long, deep breaths. It essentially provides distraction as well as relaxation.
- Search the internet for 'progressive muscle relaxation script' and age, you will be able to get an actual script that you can read to do this with. There are some really fun ones for younger children such as seeing a turtle swimming past them and tensing their stomach muscles so that the turtle can lie on their stomach.

Emotional Literacy-finding the right words

- We can help them find the words to explain themselves, we can also help them to self-regulate and take control back.
- They need to be able to put a label on what they describe. For example, I feel like tears are going to start rolling down my face... we could suggest that the child calls this sadness. Or, my heart is beating very fast and I can't sleep well we might call worry.

- There are feelings guessing games which are also fun but will help you to show your child how other people might look or feel when they are experiencing a certain emotion.
- It is important we differentiate between a mild feeling of anxiety in times of stress and the levels of anxiety which start to affect an individual's quality of life.

Stress can be our friend

- It is true that low level anxiety or stress can actually be our friend but it is important that we recognise the varying degrees of severity.
- We should also make the most of learning opportunities such as exams where they can understand what it is like to be worried or anxious in the safe confines of school.
- Also, what we might do in the anxious moment or perhaps if a young person is having a panic attack is different to how we might support them in managing their anxiety as a whole.

Recognise consistency

- If we can help the school environment to be as consistent with an element of predictability, young people with anxiety can feel safer and find that they can just focus on the task at hand without having to worry about what else is going on.
- You will also find that planning a calm school environment for which young people can thrive in will also help the learners that you may not be aware are actually struggling.
- Many people with anxiety are very good at something called masking which is essentially hiding their outward display of emotion and so we may not always be able to pick up on it easily. This is why a whole school approach to mental wellness is important because we don't know who might not be on our radar and who could be silently suffering.
- If you can have some visual schedules which you communicate with them in advance (when practical), this will help them to feel much more prepared, therefore decreasing the chance of anxiety levels escalating.

Safe spaces

- Have you thought about providing a safe space or an escape plan? Sometimes those with anxiety, like all of us, just needs to leave the area, compose themselves and have some quiet time.

Reframe the definition of success

- Fear of failure and looking stupid can be paralysing, meaning that some young people are even terrified of trying things just in case.
- The more we can help to reframe success and how we perceive it the better.
- This might be through increasing their self-belief through setting smaller goals and targets, again celebrating every achievement in a sincere way.
- Remind them that the only person who matters is them-not other people's perceptions of their success.

Albert Einstein, "A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new"

How will you change the way you support an anxious student from this learning?

SUPPORTING THOSE WITH ANXIETY AT HOME

- Try Belly-breathing: Ask the child to lie comfortably and place their hands on their stomach (if they use a stuffed animal, they can hold it on top their stomach if they lie down). As you count to three, ask them to inhale deeply through his nose. Tell them to fill his belly with air as they inhale; they should feel it get bigger and bigger and bigger throughout the count to three. If the stuffed toy sits atop their belly, they might see it rise as their belly “fills with air”. Ask them to exhale to a slow count to four. Tell them that they might see the toy fall as they feel their belly shrinking and shrinking throughout the count to four.

Do five to ten rounds of belly-breathing to get started.

When ready, ask your child how it felt.

Is there a difference in how they feel now?

What did they notice about the stuffed animal as they inhaled and exhaled?

How did they feel when they released the breath?

Repeat the process as many times as they like.

- Mindfulness or being aware of our senses and the present moment helps too. It is about being self-aware. When we are mindful, we are less stressed and better able to attend to our thoughts, giving both our bodies and brains what is needed.
- Children, especially worried ones, tend to act out their difficulties rather than share them in words. When words are unavailable or not coming fluently, it helps to show your child that our thoughts and feelings influence our behaviours.
- A mindful jar or glitter jar is one of the most powerful visualisations of this and also shows what it means to be mindful. It shows the stillness in what is a busy world around us.
- Take any normal jar or even a water bottle that you have at home and use glitter that sinks not floats. If you have some Glycerin, this helps to slow the speed the glitter falls which makes it easier to demonstrate your point. A more eco-friendly version is to use coloured beads. We fill the jar to the top with water and choose three colours. One for thoughts, a second for feelings and a third to represent behaviours or urges. Drop some of each into the water. Seal the jar! A very important step! Now run through this activity with the children. Say something like this. “We start our day and all is settled and calm just like the water in the jar”. Then, ask the children to think of something that someone might be afraid of or worried of or something bad that might happen. Then swirl the jar, noting that the event they have just thought of so perhaps going to back to school makes the colours swirl. With each event they think of, swirl the jar more and more...pointing out how hard it is to see the colours clearly.

Point out that happy events also shake the jar and make us lose some focus. For example, going into school to find out we have done really well in a test and running around in circles to celebrate. Then say something like:

“what is the one thing we can do to get the glitter to settle and see clearly again?”

Be still! And what happens when we are still? We can see clearly again.

We can't push all the glitter down to the bottom. We just have to watch and wait. No amount of effort will make it settle sooner. We just have to be still.

- Another fun way is going on a mindful safari...the idea here is to find as many animals as we can...but we must switch on all of our senses...touch, smell, see, hear, taste... really be still and visualise what is in your imagination. You will need to talk your child through this for the first couple of times...but with practice the child will be able to use this a visualisation technique when they start to feel their ‘colours spinning’, that is their thoughts, feelings and behaviours getting in the way of their task.

During the activity, you can be the tour guide.... Can you feel the stony ground beneath your feet...can you hear noises...what can you smell? The trees?

Tell your child that this is practising your mindfulness. If they can do this just for a couple of minutes a day, we are strengthening our minds.



- Another one is the heartbeat exercise. If your child is able to, have them jump up and down on the spot or jog around somewhere safe for a minute. Then have them put their hand over their heart and pay attention to how hard and fast it is beating...this is also a useful way of helping children to understand that if their heart starts to do this when they are doing schoolwork or trying to get their picture perfect, it might be time to pause or go and get glass of water.
- There are lots of other ways of being mindful that you will find online too. You may like to look at tense and release muscle relaxation or breathing colours as some other activities.
- These might be a fun way to centre their child.
- Mindful Walks might also be beneficial for children and teenagers of all ages. Depending on your child's age and ability, you could maybe focus on other sensations too like the breeze on their face or the squelchy mud on the ground. You could also ask them to jog or skip if they can and feel their heart beating harder and their breathing quicken.
- Parents and carers can have their young person draw or write down their worries so that these can be considered. They can help with problem solving, what do if scenario planning and suggesting who they can talk to.
- With teenagers, we can advise them to limit their social media or try not to interact with certain people that increase their anxiety. Instead, keep their intimate social circle positive and switch off mobile phone notifications during down time.
- Help them to remind their child of the basics. These are physical exercise, sleeping well, eating healthily, drinking water and spending quality time with loved ones. Exercise can also have a calming effect too.

Which strategy are you most likely to recommend for home use? Will it depend on the young person?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

- There is a lot that we can do to help those with anxiety.
- Encourage an atmosphere for all that has clarity, consistency and calmness.
- Teach positive coping strategies.

What are your next three steps going to be following this training?

CONTINUE YOUR LEARNING

Courses

Using stories to support anxiety:

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/using-stories-to-support-anxiety-ideas-for-working-with-children-aged-3-to-11/>

Understand anxiety: 10 things you need to know:

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/anxiety-10-things-you-need-to-know/>

Anxiety: Supporting teens to support themselves:

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/anxiety-supporting-teens-to-support-themselves/>

Websites

Royal College of Psychiatrists have a range of useful tools and information: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/young-people/worries-and-anxieties>

National Institute of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders>

Anxiety UK: <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

Books

Coleen Wildenhaus: Helping children to manage anxiety at school

Elizabeth Herrick and Barbara Redman-White: Supporting children and young people with anxiety: A practical guide.

Pooky Knightsmith: The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook: Practical Tips, Ideas, Action Plans and Worksheets for Making Meaningful Change: Practical Tips, Ideas and Whole-School Strategies.

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