

# Anxiety

## What is it?

Anxiety is a typical part of childhood and a normal reaction to stress. Anxiety can be beneficial in some situations: it can alert us to dangers, help us prepare and pay attention.

Anxiety can become problematic when we are constantly noticing dangers all around us, and it involves excessive fear or worry. For an anxiety disorder to be diagnosed, the anxiety must interfere with normal functioning and be out of proportion to the situation or age inappropriate (APA, 2017).

There are many forms of anxiety: generalised anxiety, or lots of worries about different things; social anxiety and shyness in relation to social situations; panic attacks; phobias, or anxiety about something specific; obsessive compulsive disorder, or reoccurring worries (obsessions) which drive the young person to do something (compulsions); and post-traumatic stress disorder, which can follow on from a traumatic event. Exam stress and separation anxiety related to being separated from a caregiver are also common in children and young people.

## Signs and Symptoms

### Cognitive and Psychological

- Excessive worrying - this could be out of proportion to the situation, or something that goes on for a long time.
- Unpleasant thoughts - these can include thoughts of dying, of being different to others, not managing or coping.
- Feeling on edge e.g. you may notice them being jumpy or very alert.
- Worrying about judgement from others e.g. your child may be oversensitive about comments from peers, may not put themselves in situations that could lead to judgement.
- Difficulty concentrating e.g. you may notice them struggling to focus.
- Problems with memory e.g. your child may have difficulty completing tasks from school if he/she is forgetting instructions.
- Indecisiveness e.g. can't decide when giving a choice of activities, struggle with friends to agree on social plans etc.

### Behaviour

- Avoiding social situations/excessive shyness e.g. you may notice them withdraw from their friends or avoid social gatherings, or not want to leave you/become clingy.
- Difficulty to get out of bed in the mornings and struggling to sleep at night.



- Lack of interest in hobbies e.g. have they stopped participating in activities that used to enjoy?
- Distracted and behaviour that may challenge.



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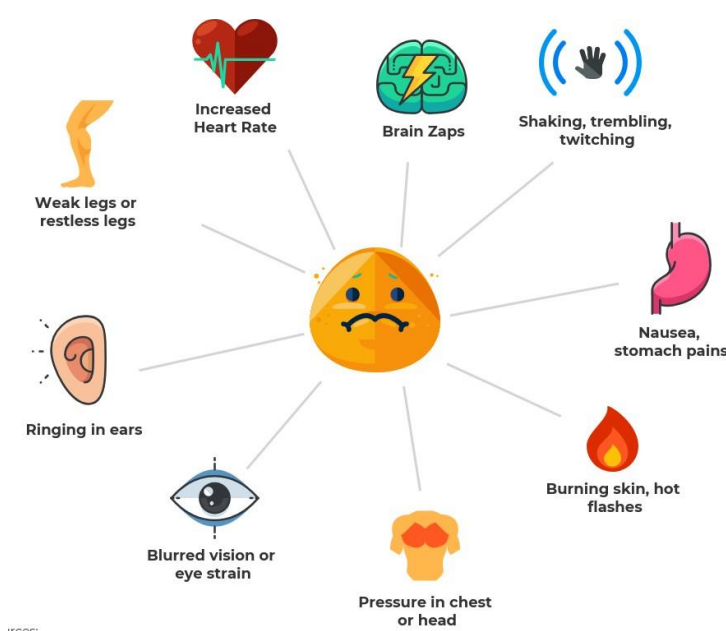


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- When these feelings get really strong and intense, it may lead to a “panic attack”. This is when a person’s body goes into survival mode (also called ‘fight flight freeze’). Panic attacks are frightening to experience, but are short lived.
- Anxiety is different from panic attacks - it is longer lasting and when it affects a young person’s daily life they may need some interventions from a children’s mental health service.

## Physical Sensations

Physical symptoms of anxiety may include:



## Suggestions for Parents

- **Acknowledge that anxiety is completely normal:** It is something that we all experience from time to time.
- **Help your child identify the physical symptoms of anxiety:** “What happens when I am anxious?” (I get butterflies in my stomach, sweat a lot, breathe heavily, and feel dizzy or lightheaded). This is important to help children identify that they are experiencing anxiety and to understand what is happening in their body. Understanding anxiety can allow them to ask for help.
- **Help your child recognise anxious thoughts:** this can affect how a person may think, feel and behave. Anxious thoughts usually include a fear of something bad happening in the future.
- **Listen to your child and let them know you are there to listen:** try to avoid minimising or dismissing their feelings or worries. Comments like “you have no reason to be worried, you have everything you want” are unhelpful and may discourage your child from speaking with you.

- **Practise relaxation:** such as five finger breathing, belly breathing, grounding techniques and other relaxation techniques. Keeping a diary can also be therapeutic.



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- **Make time for activities:** this can reduce levels of stress hormones. Try going for a walk together, doing activities they enjoy, spending time with their pet, watching their favourite movie/TV show. These are all best utilised if practised when your child is not in an anxious state.
- **Encourage a healthy diet:** try to reduce caffeinated drinks and encourage your child to get the recommended amount of sleep.
- **If you are concerned about your child you should contact your GP.** Your GP can discuss options with you and your child. If your child is old enough, they might want to discuss how they are feeling with the GP in private. Try to understand that your child may struggle, feel embarrassed and want to protect you from hearing how they may feel.
- **Make time for self-care:** This may be a stressful time for you and your family. It is important that as a parent you include self-care into your routine. This can also help manage any stress you may be feeling about your child's situation. Speaking with your child in a calm manner is much more helpful than becoming frustrated and stressed.

This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn

## Useful websites / Resources

Graded Exposure: a method that works well with anxiety/simple phobias, the basic idea is to help your child become exposed gradually to a feared situation etc. in a controlled step by step approach. This is one example of how to approach graded exposure: [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/graded\\_exposure.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/graded_exposure.pdf)



Young Minds Parents Helpline  
<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Child Mind Institute  
<https://childmind.org/guide/separation-anxiety-disorder/>

Hands on Scotland  
<http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/relaxation/>

Successfully Managing Anxiety. A Guide for Parents and Carers:  
<https://cchp.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Managing%20anxiety.%20Information%20for%20parents%20%26%20carers.pdf>

Sleep Tips  
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm>

Sleep Tips for Older Children  
<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/sleep-tips-for-teenagers/>

“Huge Bag of Worries” book



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