

A Self-Help Workbook for Young People (aged 11-18) Experiencing School Based Anxiety



Emotional Wellbeing
Service

Cardiff and the Vale



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Adapted by the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Resilience Project, from the guided workbook by the Emotional Wellbeing Service.

This is a self-help workbook for young people who may be experiencing anxiety which is based around school. It explains what anxiety is, and what it feels like, but mainly it gives practical advice and activities that you can do if you are struggling to attend school due to anxiety.

For some young people this workbook can be used simply by reading each chapter and completing the activities for each. But it may be helpful to work through it (or parts of it) with an adult you trust so they are able to support you.

It is helpful to work through this workbook slowly, completing small bits at a time. Give yourself some time to practice the strategies and activities before moving onto the next.



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

Contents

Anxiety is.....	3
Fight, Flight or Freeze	3
Anxiety about school	4
How do I know I am anxious about school?	5
When does anxiety become a problem?	6
Grounding	7
Breathing exercises.....	9
5 finger breathing	9
Square breathing	9
Belly breathing	10
Tiptoe breathing.....	10
Practice, Practice, Practice	10
Progressive muscle relaxation.....	12
The vicious cycle.....	13
Example 1.....	14
Example 2.....	15
Your turn!	16
Challenging anxiety helps it pass, avoiding makes it worse.	17
Challenge yourself: Behaviour	17
Top tips for challenging behaviour	18
Behaviour challenge trackers	19
Challenge yourself: Thoughts	21
The Worry Time Technique	21
The Worry Tree	23
Challenging thoughts templates	25
Positive self talk	26
Distraction	27
Take a break activities	28
Websites and Apps	29

Anxiety is...

...a natural human response when we perceive that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours.

Everyone experiences certain levels of anxiety from time to time. It is a normal response to situations we perceive as threatening or stressful. For example, taking an exam or trying something new for the first time. Some level of anxiety can even be helpful; like needing to deal with an emergency or to help us perform in difficult situations.

Fight, Flight or Freeze

Imagine you are in a forest. Happily minding your own business. It's a lovely day and the sun is shining. When suddenly you come up against a bear. A big bear. A big bear with big teeth, and big claws.



Your muscles tense up ready for action. Your heart beats faster to carry blood to your muscles and brain and you breathe faster to get oxygen to where you need it for energy. You start sweating to stop your body overheating. Your mouth becomes dry and you feel sick.

What do you do?

Most will run (flight). Some may try and fight off the bear (fight). Others may stay really still and hope the bear doesn't notice them (freeze). All are natural reactions to something that is really big and really scary.

Once you are safely away from the bear you may feel a little bit shaky and weak, but everything starts to calm down; your heart rate and breathing reduce, you stop sweating, you stop feeling sick. You go back to normal.

Your body is programmed to respond in this way. This reaction is caused by adrenaline being released in response to the threat. In a freeze response, it is endorphins being released which numb and work to conserve your energy. This reaction is also known as 'fight, flight or freeze'.

Unfortunately, the brain does not differentiate between a bear attack, and the other non-life threatening situations we find stressful... like having to go to school when we are worrying about something like friendships, or school work. The fight, flight, freeze reaction is the same regardless.

What is really important to remember is that no matter what the cause, the reaction passes once your brain registers that you are safe again.

Anxiety about school

Many children and young people worry about school. This is a normal feeling and is often a part of growing up. However, sometimes these feelings are so strong that you may feel like you really don't want to go to school, and start to avoid it.

When you think about school how do you feel? Can you put your feelings into words? Such as nervous, sad? Write your feelings below:

You are not on your own. We all feel like this from time to time because of things that happen in our life at home, at school or elsewhere.

There may be some things at school or outside school that can make you feel this way. Here are some common reasons why children and young people start to avoid school. Circle ones that apply to you, or write your own ideas:

Don't like the
noise in school

Pressure to achieve
or worrying about
exams

Looking after
family members

Bullying

Worried about
your appearance

Problems with
friendships

Feeling
different to
other people

Returning to school
after being absent
for a long time

Birth of a new
brother or sister

Not understanding
or coping with
school work

Parents arguing or
splitting up

Not getting on
with some
teachers

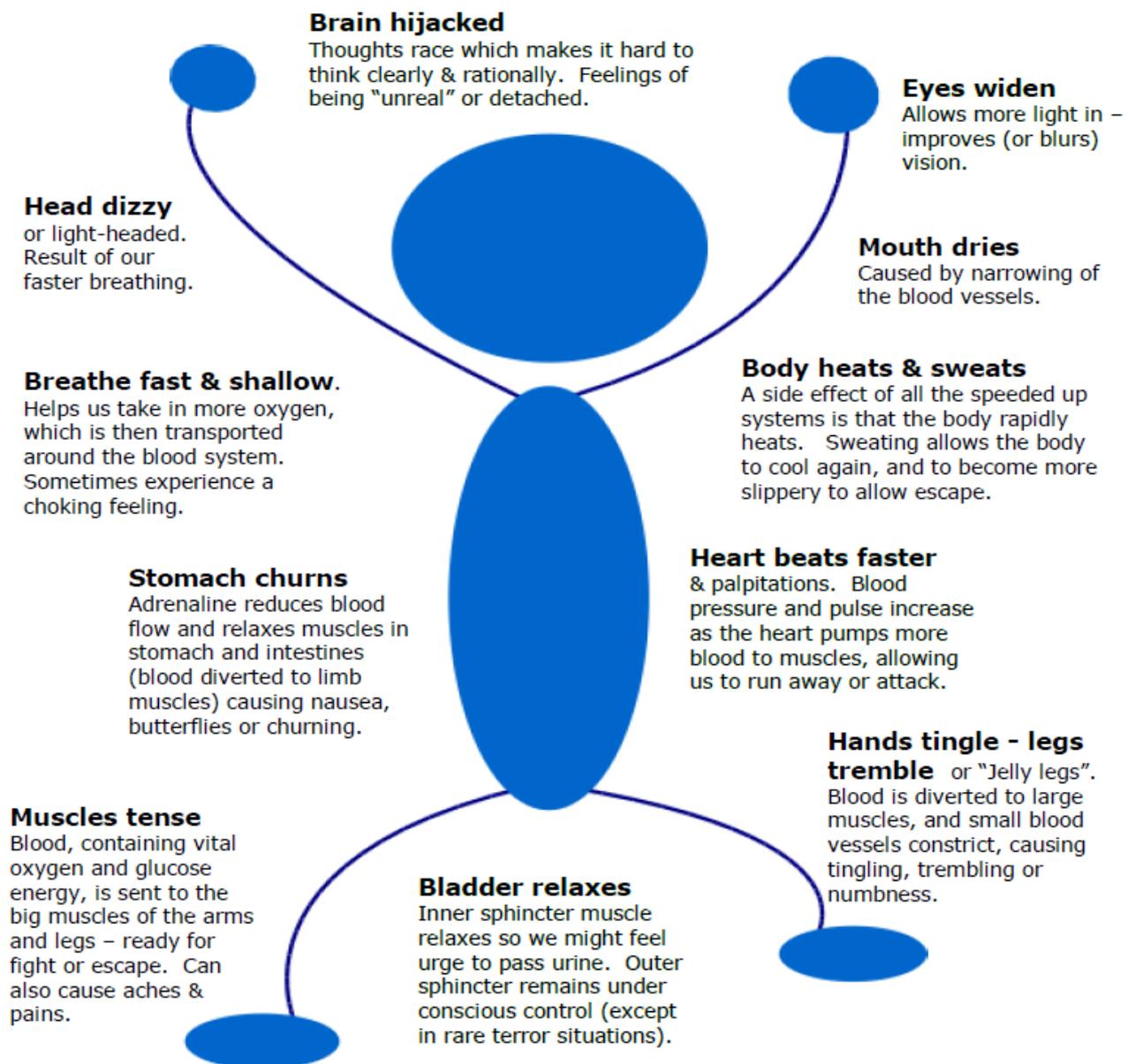
Don't like the
noise in school

Issues with
transport

How do I know I am anxious about school?

Below is a list of ways your body may respond when anxious – not everyone will experience all of them. Try to notice when you start to feel any of the signs below, and pause. We have some suggestions on pages 7-11 that you can practice and then use when you are feeling anxious.

Circle the ways in which *your* body responds when you think about or go to school:



After the adrenaline has died down, we can feel exhausted, shaky and weak.

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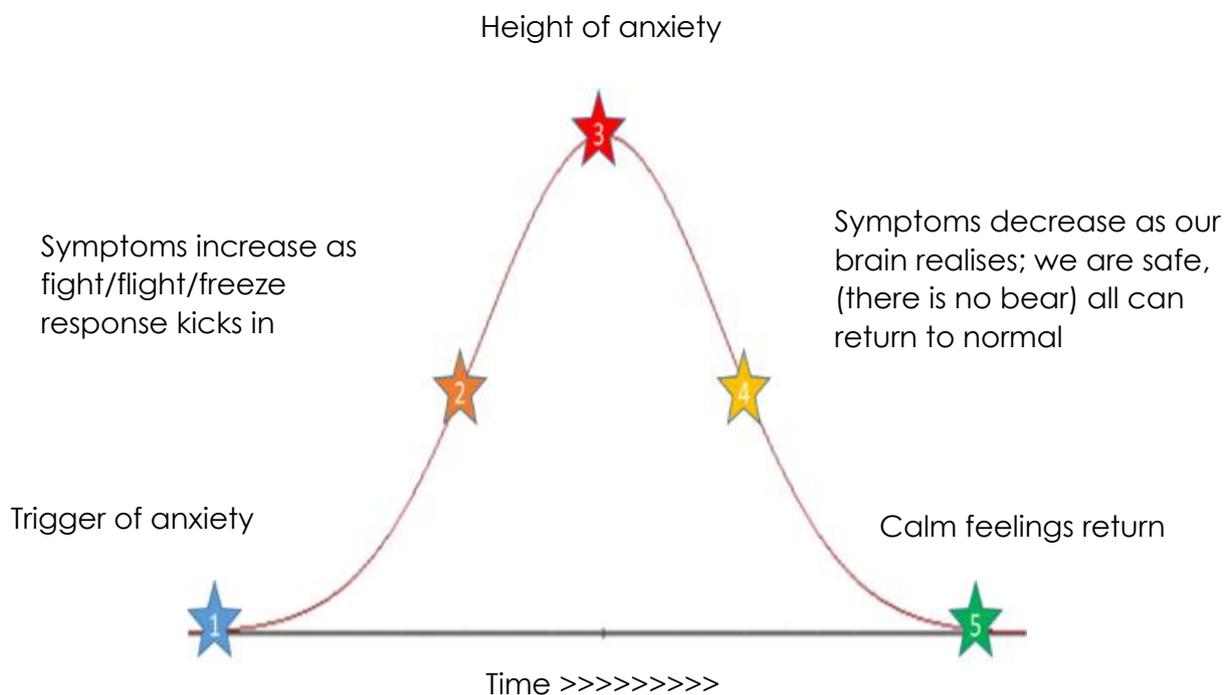
When does anxiety become a problem?

A lot of the time the things that make us feel anxious aren't literally life or death situations (like a bear attack). Our brain just *thinks* they are because the part of the brain responsible for sending signals to our body about danger has stayed the same even though dangers in society have changed a lot over time.

It is the same fight, flight or freeze response that kicks in (for example when we are anxious about meeting a new group of people) but we are not *literally* needing to fight or run for our lives. In fact the physical symptoms preparing us to fight, flee or freeze are not very helpful –, they often make things worse.

No matter what the trigger is, it is still true that the fight, flight or freeze reaction passes once your brain registers that you are safe again.

The diagram below is what's known as the '**anxiety curve**'. You'll come back to the anxiety curve later in the workbook. It starts with a trigger - a thought or situation that causes feelings of anxiety (1), then anxiety levels rise (2), until you reach your peak feelings of anxiety (3). Anxiety levels then decrease (4), until you reach a state of calm (5). The time it takes to move between each stage of the curve will be different for everyone, and for you it might vary each time.



Anxiety can become problematic when we are not able to help ourselves realise we really are safe. When this happens, symptoms might interfere with you being able to live life as fully as you would like to.

Possible signs that anxiety might be becoming a problem:

- Your feelings of anxiety are particularly strong and long-lasting
- Your reactions may be out of proportion to the situation
- You start to avoid certain situations that may make you feel anxious such as going to school
- You do not feel in control of your feelings or physical sensations
- Your anxieties stop you from going about your everyday life

You have already started working on noticing what the fight, flight or freeze reaction looks like for you. The rest of this workbook will share ideas to help manage anxiety around school and remind you that **you are safe (there is no bear)**.

Grounding

When we are anxious, our thoughts are often racing into the future, or stuck on repeat of past events, which can make us feel like we are in danger right now. We can also become very emotionally overwhelmed and feel out of control, which can feel quite scary. Grounding can help us stay in the reality of the present moment, acting to take back control of how you are feeling and remind the brain that you are safe.

Here are some grounding activities you can practice. It is best to practice these each day, when you are already calm. Once you've practiced them you'll be more likely to remember them in times where you are anxious and need to remind yourself you are safe, like before school or before a certain lesson.

1. **Using strong smells or strong tastes** can help to 'snap out of' memories or imagined situations that are distressing.

Try to make a list of strong smells or tastes you have quick and easy access to.

For example: *the smell of coffee, the taste of a sour sweet or a strong mint*

Smells and tastes I like:

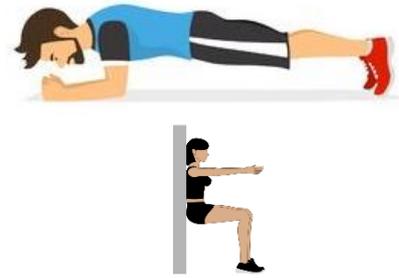
2. A photograph can help remind us what we have. **Focussing on a photo of a favourite place or people you love and who love you**, can help to ground you.

For example: *a photo of me and my class on our last day of school*

A photograph I like to look at:



3. **Planking.** We know it sounds crazy, but using your muscles and having to focus physical energy on something in the present moment, can a very effective grounding technique. You could also use a wall sit, or push ups.



An exercise I like: _____

4. The **5,4,3,2,1** grounding exercise below can be done anywhere and is really easy to remember. Some people find it helpful to write it down. Why not try this but filling in the spaces below!

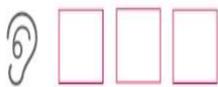
5 4 3 2 1 Grounding Exercise



Notice 5 things you can see right now- things close to you, further away, out of the window. Notice them in detail, name their shapes and colours in your head.



Notice 4 things you can feel- it might be the pressure of your back and bum on your seat, or feet on the ground (this can be helpful as it's a reminder that we are always physically grounded). You might notice the feel of clothes on your skin, or your temperature, or the feel of air moving in and out of your lungs.



Notice 3 things you can hear- again some things might be outside, some might be inside, some might even be in your own body.



Notice 2 things you can smell- this can be difficult, but often our own clothes keep a smell, or we might smell food or an air freshener.



Notice 1 thing you can taste- this can be very hard as we rarely focus on taste unless we're eating, but have a go at just focusing on your taste sense for a bit and see what you notice.

I can see:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

I can feel:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

I can hear:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I can smell:

- 1.
- 2.

I can taste:

- 1.

Breathing exercises

When fight or flight kicks in, our breathing speeds up, so to return to calm, we need to slow our breathing down. Here are some breathing exercises to try. It helps to practice them first, while you're already calm. First read them slowly a couple of times, and then have a go at practicing.

5 finger breathing

(Read through first, and then have a go at it yourself)



Stretch out one hand so you have space between your fingers.

Point your index finger from the other hand at the bottom of your thumb.

Use your index finger to trace up your thumb as you slowly breathe in through your mouth.

When you get to the top of your thumb, slowly breathe out your nose as you trace down the other side.

Repeat for all fingers until you have traced your whole hand.

Your go! How did you find that?

Square breathing

See if you can find something square to trace your fingers around (like a book). If not picture a square in your mind and trace your fingers in the air as if the square was in front of you.

Start at the bottom left of the square

Breathe in for four counts as you trace the first side of the square

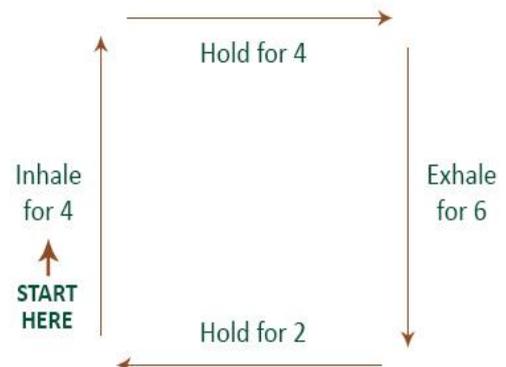
Hold your breath for four counts as you trace the second side of the square

Breathe out for six counts as you trace the third side of the square

Hold your breath for two counts as you trace the final side of the square

You just completed one deep breath!

Repeat the square breathing 3 times. Do you notice anything different?



Belly breathing

Once you've mastered the counting for square breathing, then focus on making each breath really deep.



Put your hands near the top of your stomach, just at the bottom of your rib cage where your diaphragm is and concentrate on making your belly expand as you breathe in, then as you breathe out relax to normal again. For each breath focus on this movement until you are naturally breathing slower and deeper.

Some people find it helpful to imagine you have a balloon in your belly that is inflating as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out.

Tiptoe breathing



If you find it hard to be still and breathe, you can use the same counts for square breathing, but add some movement.

When you breathe in, slowly move up to be on your tiptoes. Hold still on tiptoes and then return your heels to the floor as you breathe out.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Below is a diary you can fill in every day for a week. The aim is to pick a different grounding or breathing exercise to practice each day. Record how you felt before and after, using a scale of 1-10. **1 being the most calm you could ever feel, 10 being the most anxious you could ever feel.** There is an example for you.

Day	Feelings before (scale of 1-10)	Activity	Feelings after (scale of 1-10)
Example: 1 - Monday	8/10	5,4,3,2,1 breathing	6/10

Day	Feelings before (scale of 1-10)	Activity	Feelings after (scale of 1-10)

Did any breathing techniques help reduce feelings of anxiety more than others?

The most helpful breathing technique was:

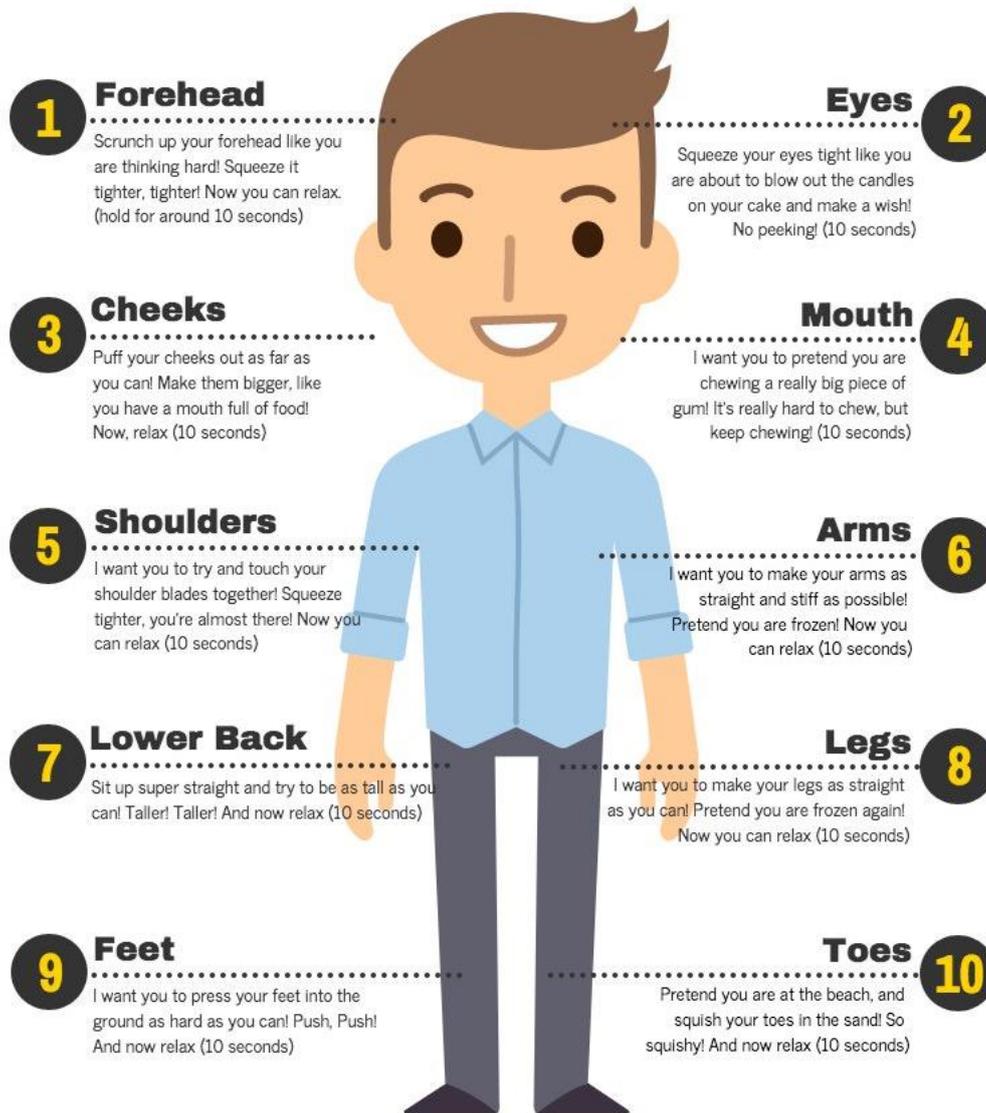
What was your favourite breathing technique? Try using this next time you feel anxious.

My favourite breathing technique was:

Progressive muscle relaxation

When we are anxious and in fight, flight or freeze mode we tend to tense our muscles, often without even noticing. In order to return to calm we might need to purposefully relax our muscles.

One very effective way of doing this is to work through each muscle group in your body clenching those muscles as much as you can for 10-20 seconds and then completely releasing them for 10-20 seconds. Work your way through the numbers 1 to 10 below, following the instructions for each number.

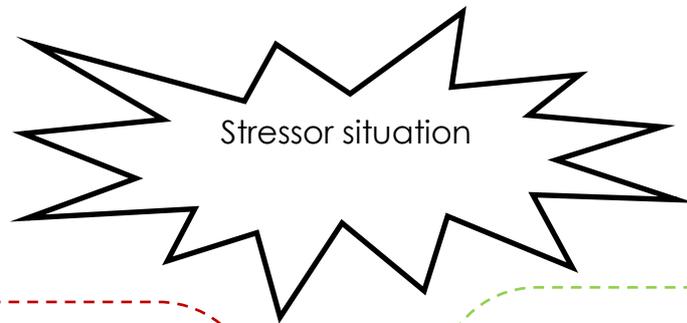


Next time you notice parts of your body feeling tense, why not try some of these. For example, if you are anxious and your shoulders and arms feel tense, to relax those muscles like numbers 5 and 6.

Maybe have a break for a few days before starting the next activity.

The vicious cycle

Sometimes a vicious cycle of anxiety can start, where our physical symptoms, thoughts and behaviours work together to keep the feeling of anxiety going. The diagram below explains what happens to each part of us (physical, feelings, thoughts and behaviour) following a situation that causes us anxiety.



PHYSICAL

A threat is recognised and adrenaline is pumped. You are in fight, flight or freeze and the unpleasant sensations start; feel **sick, headache, go red, blurred vision, tense muscles.**

To refresh your memory on anxiety symptoms, flick back to pages 5 – 6.

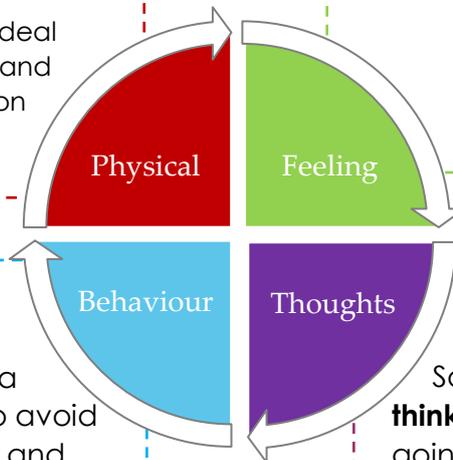
Remind yourself of the ways to deal with this (grounding, breathing and muscle relaxation techniques) on pages 7-12.

FEELING

Given all that is happening, all that you are thinking and all that your body is doing—it makes sense for you to feel **anxious!**

BUT remember the anxiety curve on page 6.

Anxiety can and does pass.



BEHAVIOUR

When we see something as a threat, it is natural to want to avoid it. However, avoiding ('flight and freeze') things that are not actually dangerous, (and may actually be really quite necessary) can make life difficult and make you feel worse about yourself, leading to more anxiety symptoms. Similarly, behaving aggressively ('fight') to things that make us anxious also can lead to negative consequences that make us more anxious in future.

More on this and how to overcome it on pages 18-20.

THOUGHTS

Sometimes anxiety can make us **think** that something really bad is going to happen.

"I am going to be sick"

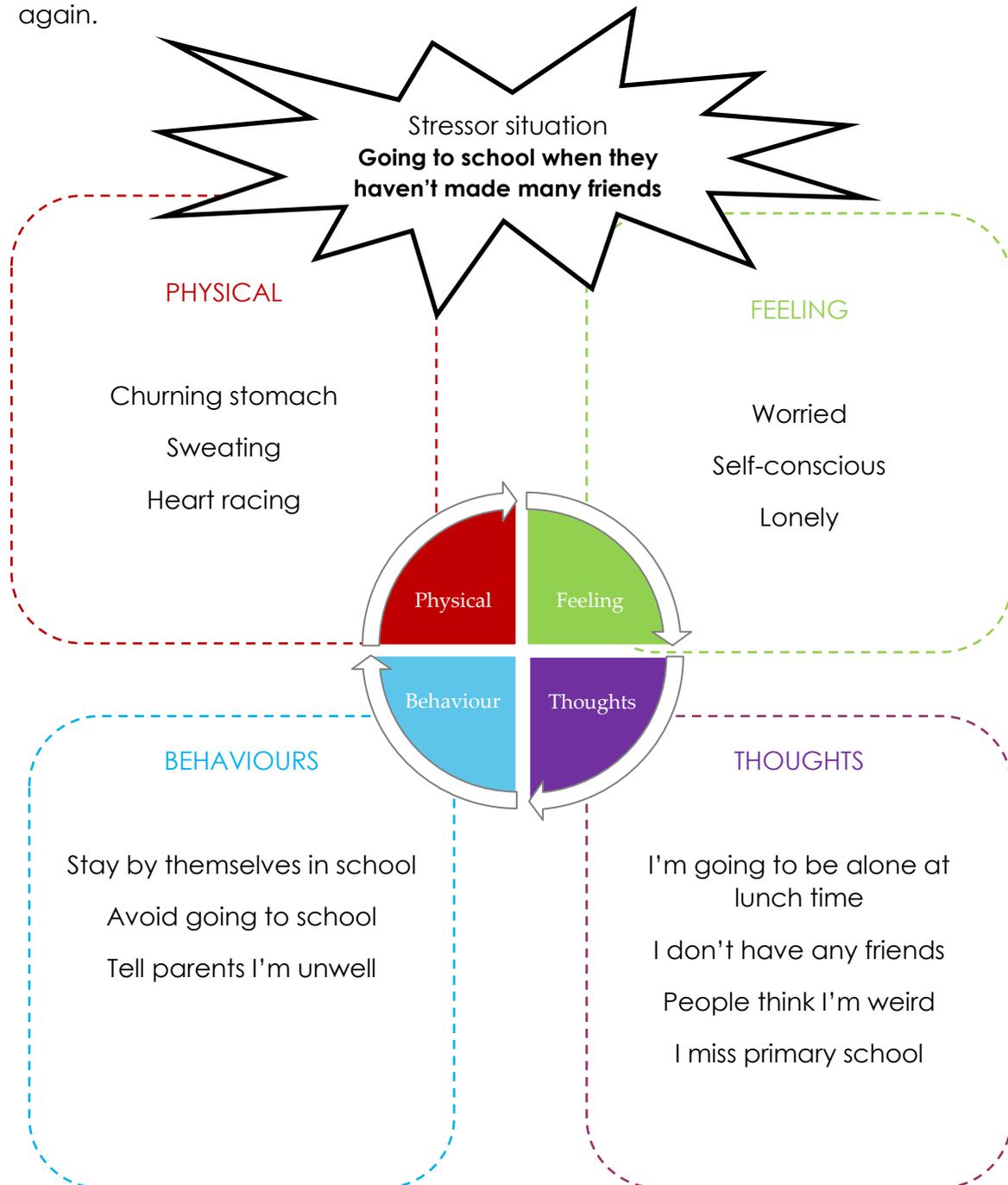
"I am definitely going to fail all my exams"

This can lead to more physical symptoms and more avoidance behaviour which only reinforces (strengthens) the worry thoughts and increases feelings of anxiety.

There is an activity for overcoming this on page 22-26.

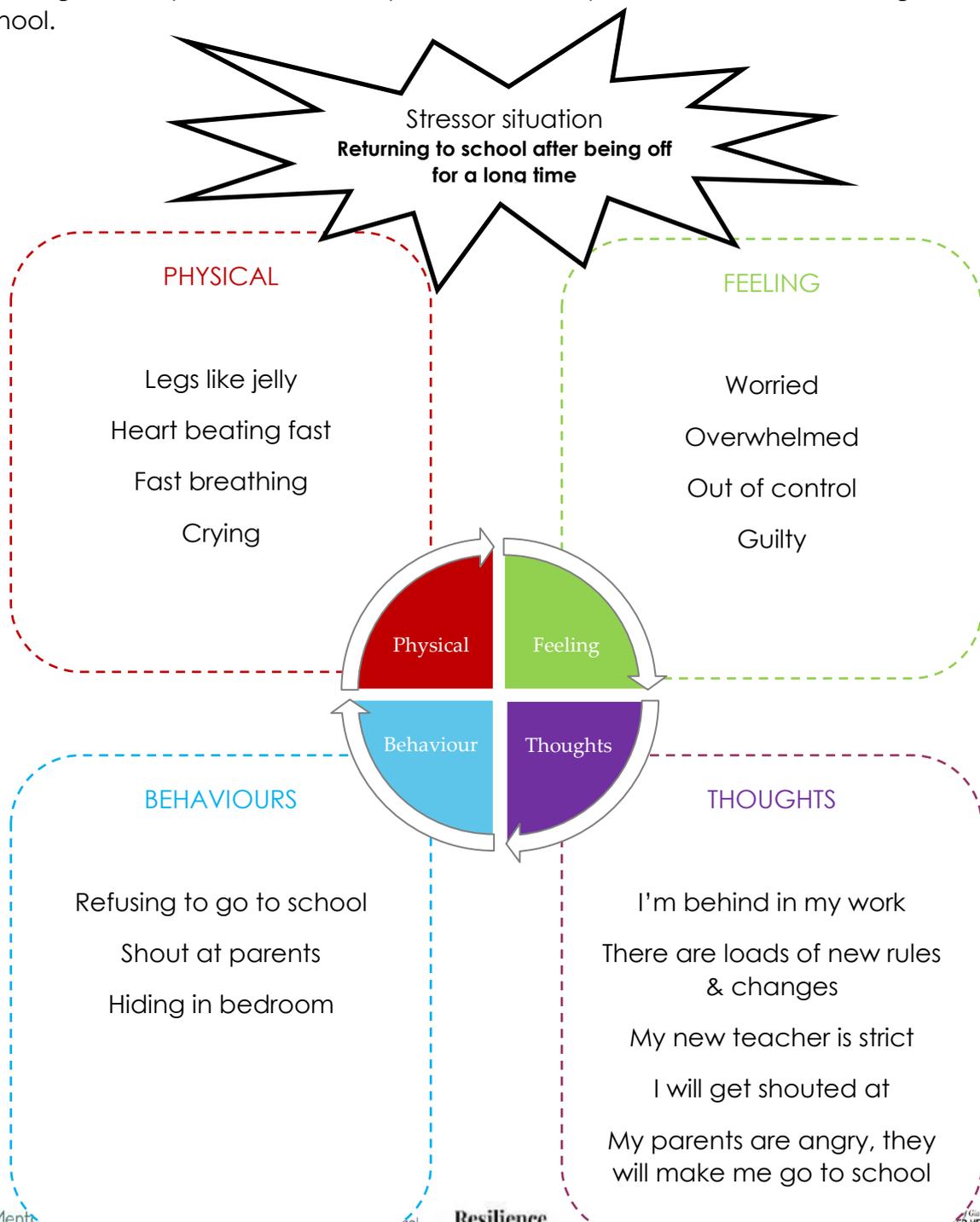
Example 1...

Here is an example of how physical sensations, feelings, thoughts and behaviours interact with each other in a vicious cycle of anxiety. Alex has been struggling to make friendships since moving to secondary school. When they're getting ready for school in the mornings, they get a churning feeling in their stomach, and their palms feel sweaty. They're feeling worried because they often feel lonely at lunch times. Thoughts run through Alex's mind about peers thinking they're weird because they're on their own, and thinks people will try to avoid them. This makes them more feel more alone and self-conscious, and their heart starts to beat faster, and stomach churns more. They wish they were back in primary school. They go down to their parents and say they feel unwell and sick. Parents allow Alex to stay home today, and Alex feels better. But the next day, they wake up and the cycle starts again.



Example 2...

Taylor has been off school for a few months due to illness. They're returning to school with a new teacher. Their legs feel like jelly, and they feel their heart beating fast. They feel overwhelmed and worried, because they think they're really behind their peers in their work. They're sad because they liked their old teacher, and they worry that they've never met the new teacher before. They think they are going to be really strict and shout. They think there are going to be loads of changes, which makes them feel out of control. They get really upset and tell their parent's they don't want to go. When they're parents tell them they need to go school because they've missed so much, they refuse to get in the car. They start breathing really fast, they cry and shout at their parents, and stay in their room. They feel guilty for shouting at their parents, and worry that tomorrow parent will force them to go to school.



Challenging anxiety helps it pass, avoiding makes it worse.

Our behaviour can sometimes be a barrier to overcoming our anxiety. We can get into a habit of avoiding or quickly escaping the situations that make us anxious, which can be a relief in the short term but actually makes us more anxious in the long term. Avoiding or escaping situations means that we don't get to see that anxiety will naturally reach a peak and then reduce even if we stay in the situation – like in the anxiety curve on page 6.

The more you avoid something, the more difficult it will seem to overcome, which in turn will make you feel more anxious.

By gradually exposing ourselves to feared situations or environments, we begin to notice a reduction in the physical sensations of anxiety. Starting with situations or environments that we know we can tolerate and work our way up from there.

Challenge yourself: Behaviour

Instead of escaping, challenge yourself to gradually increase how long you stay in a situation that makes you anxious. Or if you are avoiding situations, challenge yourself to make tiny steps toward being in the anxious situation.

1. List all the situations you avoid, or escape from, in the table below. For each one rate how distressed they make you feel from 0 (no distress) to 10 (maximum distress). Make sure you include everything, including the things that are just a little bit distressing as they are going to help you overcome the bigger things.

Situation	Level of distress (0-10)
Example; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to school and staying for the whole day • Going to school and meeting new teacher • Going to school for the morning • Going to school over lunch time • Going to school from 11-12 	10 9 8 6 7
Your Turn;	

2. On page 19, put the situation that is *least* distressing at the top of the ladder on—this is your first goal.
3. Now think about what small challenges could help you achieve this goal. You should add these into the rungs of the ladder, starting at the bottom. There are some top tips below to help you think this through, and there is an example of what that a completed ladder may look like on the next page
4. Before you complete each challenge, mark yourself on a 1-10 scale how anxious you feel, where 0 is not anxious and 10 is most anxious. Repeat this again at the end.
5. Keep moving up the ladder until you reach your goal at the top.

Here is an example for Taylor. This person's least distressing situation was going to school and staying for registration (though that still did cause them distress and anxiety). In order to achieve their goal, they started with a small challenge first (get ready into school uniform and pack your bag). Once they'd completed that challenge and recorded their anxiety before and after – which had reduced - they then moved onto the next challenge (get ready into school uniform and sit in the car). They continued completing each challenge, until they finally were able to go to school and stay for registration.

My Goal	Situation	Anxiety before	Anxiety after
	Go to school and stay for registration	7	5
	Meet friend and trusted member of staff and go to registration	7	6
	Meet friend and go into school to meet a trusted member of staff to say hello	6	4
	Get ready and drive to the school gates	5	3
	Get ready into school uniform and sit in the car	5	2
	Get ready into school uniform and pack your bag	4	2

Top tips for challenging behaviour

- Your challenges should be small and achievable.
- You'll need to think about at what point a situation usually becomes too much for you and work back from there, breaking the goal down into small achievable steps.
- You may find some steps really easy and others more difficult. If you get stuck on a step break it down into smaller steps again.
- Ask for a teacher's help to create a plan that will work for you and work for the school. Share your plan with supportive adults around you, and check in with them around how things are going each week.

My Goal...

Situation	Anxiety before	Anxiety after

My Goal...

Situation	Anxiety before	Anxiety after

Challenge yourself: Thoughts

Just like our behaviours, our thoughts can keep us trapped in the vicious cycle of anxiety. Our worry thoughts ('I am going to fail', 'everyone is going to laugh at me') can lead to more physical symptoms which feel bad, so cause us to have even more worrying thoughts ('I'm going to panic', 'I'm sweating everyone's going to see'), which can lead us to want to avoid or get out of the situation even more.

If we get out of or avoid the situation the worrying thoughts and feeling will probably go away initially, but the problem is next time we have to face a similar situation we are likely to have even more worrying thoughts and anxious feelings.

This is because we didn't give ourselves the chance to disprove our worrying thoughts (which were probably very unlikely to happen in the first place) or give ourselves the change to overcome the anxious feeling, so they may be even stronger next time.

Just stop worrying!

How often have people told you this? It's not very helpful really. The more we try not to think about something, the more we end up thinking about it. The 'worry time technique' below instead helps you reduce the amount of time spent worrying about things outside of your control. You will then have more time to spend on things that make us feel better – like connecting to others, getting on with your plans for the day or doing something nice with a friend!

The Worry Time Technique

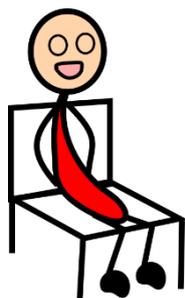
1. Setting up your worry time

Your worry time is a time you set aside during the day in which you are allowed to worry. **It should be between 15 and 30 minutes, no longer.** Try setting a timer if you think you might go over this.



Your worry time should happen at the same time every day.

Different times work for different people but it's a good idea to have it late enough in the day that you will actually have things to worry about, but early enough that you have time to pick your mood back up and do some relaxation before bed. 6 or 7pm works for a lot of people, as cooking and eating dinner can also be effective ways to stop worrying at the end of your worry time.



Your worry time needs to take place somewhere uncomfortable and that is not associated with rest. If you do your worry time in or on your bed, your bed will become associated with worry, which isn't helpful for sleep. It is also helpful to be somewhere that you don't want to stay much longer than 30 minutes. Consider taking your worry time on a hard chair pushed away from where you sleep/work/relax, or sat outside on a step or bench



You need to be able to stop your worry time once the 15-30 minutes is up. Have an activity that you will do straight after that will move your attention away from the worries. Have a look at '50 ways to take a break' on page 28 for some inspiration.

2. Postpone your worries at all times other than your worry time

During the day when a worry thought comes to you (a thought about something bad happening in your future that you cannot immediately do anything about), write it down. You could:

- Put your worries on post-it notes and stick them on your door/fridge
- Write them down in a notebook
- Write them in a note on your phone
- Put them on bits of paper and into a worry jar

Then in your worry time you will come back to this list/jar and think about each worry then.

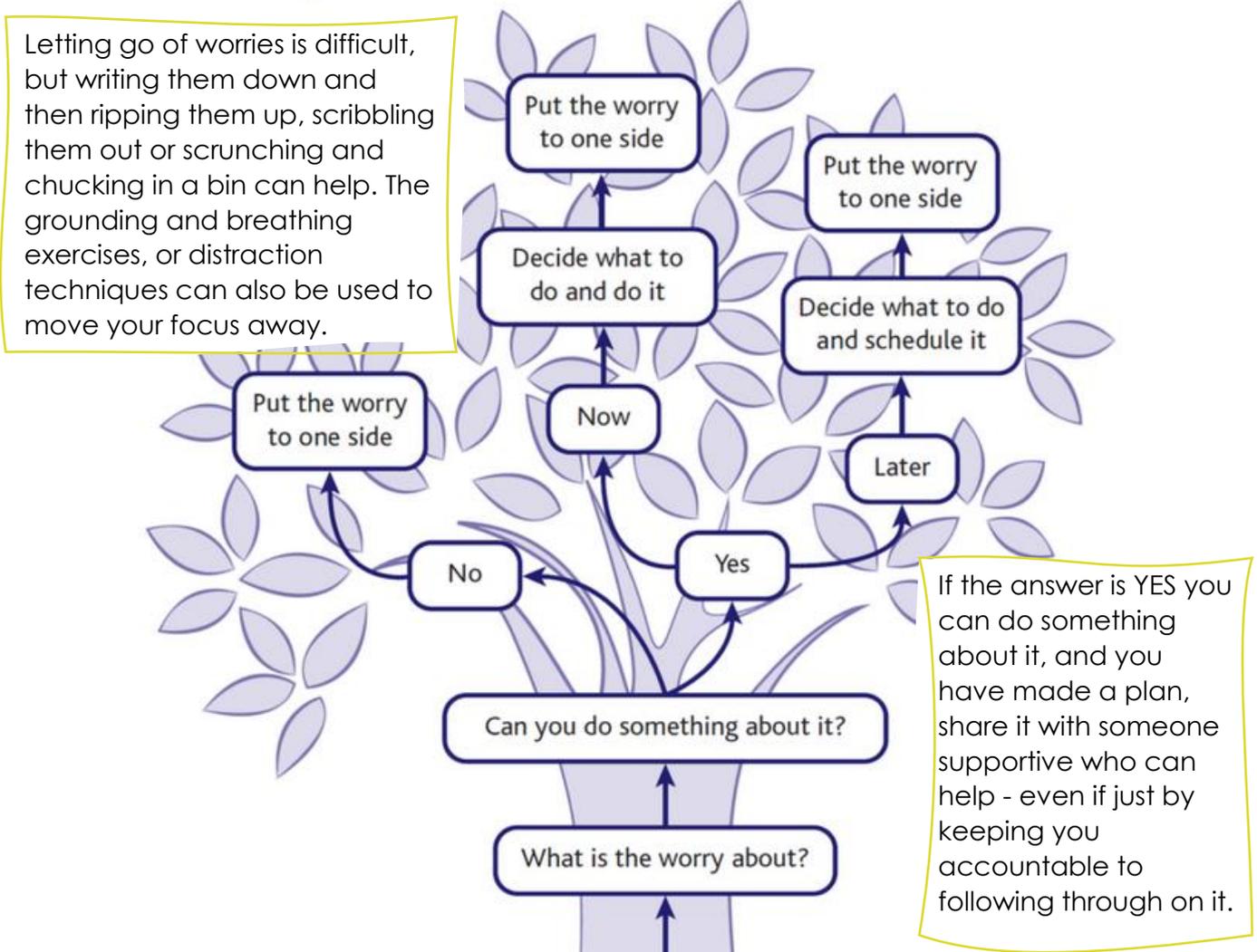
Once you have written it down, do something to postpone that worry, by moving your attention to something else. Take a look at the distraction ideas on page 29 to give you some ideas.



3. Using worry time effectively

In your worry time you will come back to your worries that you've written down as they came up during the day. For each one, use the worry tree on the next page to work out what to do with them.

The Worry Tree



If all else fails, something that has helped a lot of people is to think...

'If it wasn't me, if it was a friend asking for advice about their thoughts and worries, what would I say to them?'

Usually we are much better at giving advice than taking it on ourselves.

Two examples;

1. You are worried about having enough time to revise for exams.

This is something you can do something about, so you make a timetable for the next week of when you will revise. You then ask a friend or family member to help you stick to it. Don't forget to add into the timetable time to relax as well. You could create the timetable during your worry time, or you could schedule a time to do it the next day if you have some other worries you need to get through.

2. You are worried people will laugh at you when you give your presentation.

There is not really anything you can do about other people's behaviour, you can only prepare for your presentation and manage your own behaviour. For thoughts like these that are worries about future events you have no control over, it can be helpful to ask yourself some questions:

- What do you fear might happen?
- Why do you think it will happen?
- What has happened in the past in these situations?
- What in the current situation is telling you it will happen?
- What is the evidence for and against this happening?

By spending some of your worry time answering these, it usually becomes clear that the worry is not based on reality, and that it is very unlikely to happen. You can end the questioning by saying positive statements to yourself (positive self-talk), based on the answers to your questions and the evidence you have found against your worry. You can find some examples of positive self-talk on page 26.

Below is an example of this process. There are some blank tables on the next page for you to use.

My thought: I don't want to give my presentation	
What I fear will happen: Everyone will laugh at me	
Evidence of why this is likely to happen	Evidence of why this is unlikely to happen
I have seen it happen in films	People would get in trouble
I just feel it might happen	It's not happened when other people have presented
	I am prepared for the presentation
	I have spoken in class before and no one laughed
What I can say to myself instead: I have spoken in class before, and no one laughed. It is most likely that they will not laugh when I present either.	

Challenging thoughts templates

My thought:	
What I fear will happen:	
<i>Evidence of why this is likely to happen</i>	<i>Evidence of why this is unlikely to happen</i>
What I can say to myself instead:	

My thought:	
What I fear will happen:	
<i>Evidence of why this is likely to happen</i>	<i>Evidence of why this is unlikely to happen</i>
What I can say to myself instead:	

My thought:	
What I fear will happen:	
<i>Evidence of why this is likely to happen</i>	<i>Evidence of why this is unlikely to happen</i>
What I can say to myself instead:	

Positive self talk

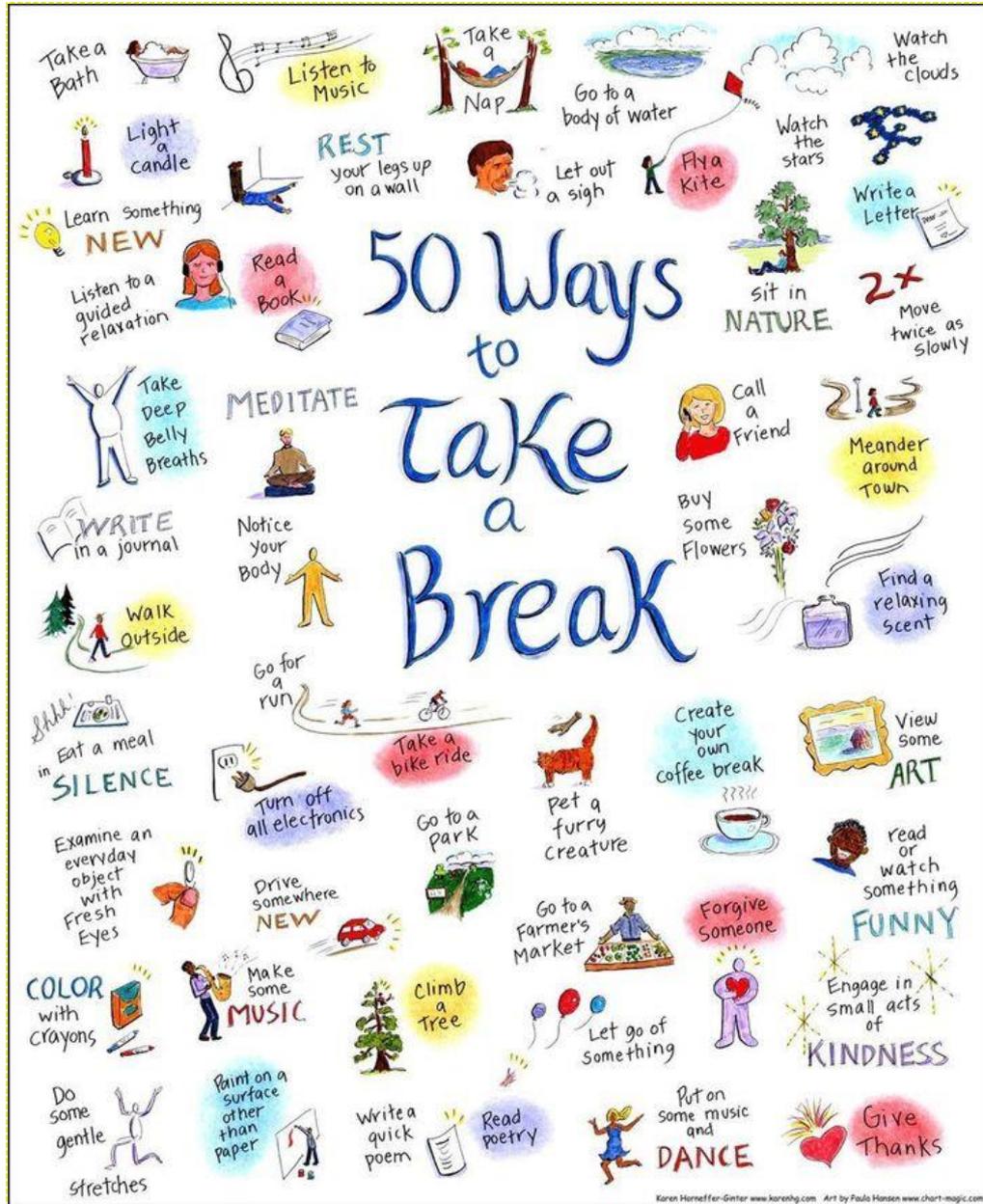
We can often be our own worst enemy. We say things to ourselves that we would never say to anyone else and can really beat ourselves up and think the worst. If you find yourself being a bit unkind to yourself, or stuck with your worry thoughts, try saying some of these to yourself.

- ♥ Stop, and breathe, I can do this
- ♥ This will pass
- ♥ I can be anxious/angry/sad and still deal with this
- ♥ I have done this before, and I can do it again
- ♥ This feels bad, it's a normal body reaction – it will pass
- ♥ These are just feelings, they will go away
- ♥ Thoughts come and go, they will pass
- ♥ This won't last forever
- ♥ Short term pain for long term gain
- ♥ I can feel bad and still choose to take a new and healthy direction
- ♥ I don't need to rush, I can take things slowly
- ♥ I have survived before, I will survive now
- ♥ I feel this way because of my past experiences, but I am safe right now
- ♥ It's okay to feel this way, it's a normal reaction
- ♥ Right now, I am not in danger. Right now, I'm safe
- ♥ My mind is not always my friend
- ♥ Thoughts are just thoughts – they're not necessarily true or factual
- ♥ This is difficult and uncomfortable, but it's only temporary
- ♥ I can use my coping skills and get through this
- ♥ I can learn from this and it will be easier next time
- ♥ Keep calm and carry on

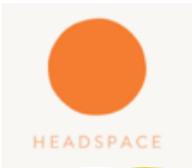
Which of these thoughts was your favourite?

Distraction

Postponing our thoughts for worry time or stopping our thoughts at the end of worry time can be a real challenge. It is important that we have things lined up to help us move on and get on with our day. Here are some ideas, **circle the ones you most want to try!**



Youtube can be a great way to try something new – try searching yoga for beginners, or breathing imagery...or just find some funny clips of animals!



Headspace and Calm both have guided meditations, and mindshift has lots of self help resources for managing anxiety.



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Websites and Apps

There are lots of supportive places online to help you manage anxiety. We have already mentioned Calm and Headspace, but here are a few more...

Some helpful places to go online:

Emotional Wellbeing Service
Cardiff and the Vale

Beat Eating disorders

ChildLine 0800 1111

meic

selpharm UK

kooth

family lives

Anxiety UK 1970-2020 Helping you for over 50 years

PAPYRUS PREVENTION OF YOUNG SUICIDE

DrugWise

Some mindfulness apps we like:

Calm < Calm
Headspace >

HEADSPACE

< StopBreatheThink

Smiling mind >

Some other apps we like:

COMBINED MINDS
Combined Minds to help friends and family support a young person's mental health

CLEAR FEAR
Clear fear to help with anxiety management