

A Parent Workbook: support your child with SCHOOL- BASED ANXIETY



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



Emotional Wellbeing
Service

Cardiff and the Vale



Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Caerdydd a'r Fro
Cardiff and Vale
University Health Board



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



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 parents and carers to support children and young people who may be experiencing anxiety that 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.

It is helpful to work through this workbook slowly, completing small bits at a time. Give yourself and your child some time to practice the strategies and activities before moving onto the next. It is also important to share activities and strategies that work with their school in order to provide a consistent approach.



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What is school-based anxiety?

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.



What are some of the common reasons for school-based anxiety?

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 some children start avoiding it. There are lots of reasons why children feel anxious about going to school, or school-related activities. Every child is different and so it's important to work out what the reasons are for your child.

Here are some common reasons:

- Bullying
- Issues with peers, e.g. falling out
- Not enough sleep
- Work that's too hard or too easy
- Homework problems
- Test and exam anxiety
- Learning styles mismatch
- Issues with teachers
- Noise pollution/finding the school environment sensory overwhelming
- Feeling pressured to do well, or overemphasis on academic achievements
- Low self-esteem e.g. about appearance or about academic abilities
- Difficulties at home make them want to stay at home to feel safe or to make sure their family are safe, e.g. being a young carer, bereavement, divorce, etc.

What are the signs? Cognitive and Psychological

You might notice that your child experiences some of these thinking patterns:

- Unpleasant thoughts e.g. thoughts of everyone hating them, of being different to others, not managing or coping with their schoolwork, of something bad happening if they are in school, of something bad happening to people at home when they are in school.
- Worrying that increases the closer it comes to them needing to go to school e.g. you might notice them becoming quieter and distracted as it gets closer to school time.
- Worrying about judgement from others e.g. your child may be oversensitive about comments from peers or teachers, may not put themselves in situations that could lead to judgement.
- Worrying about failure.
- Feeling on edge e.g. you may notice them being jumpy or very alert.
- 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

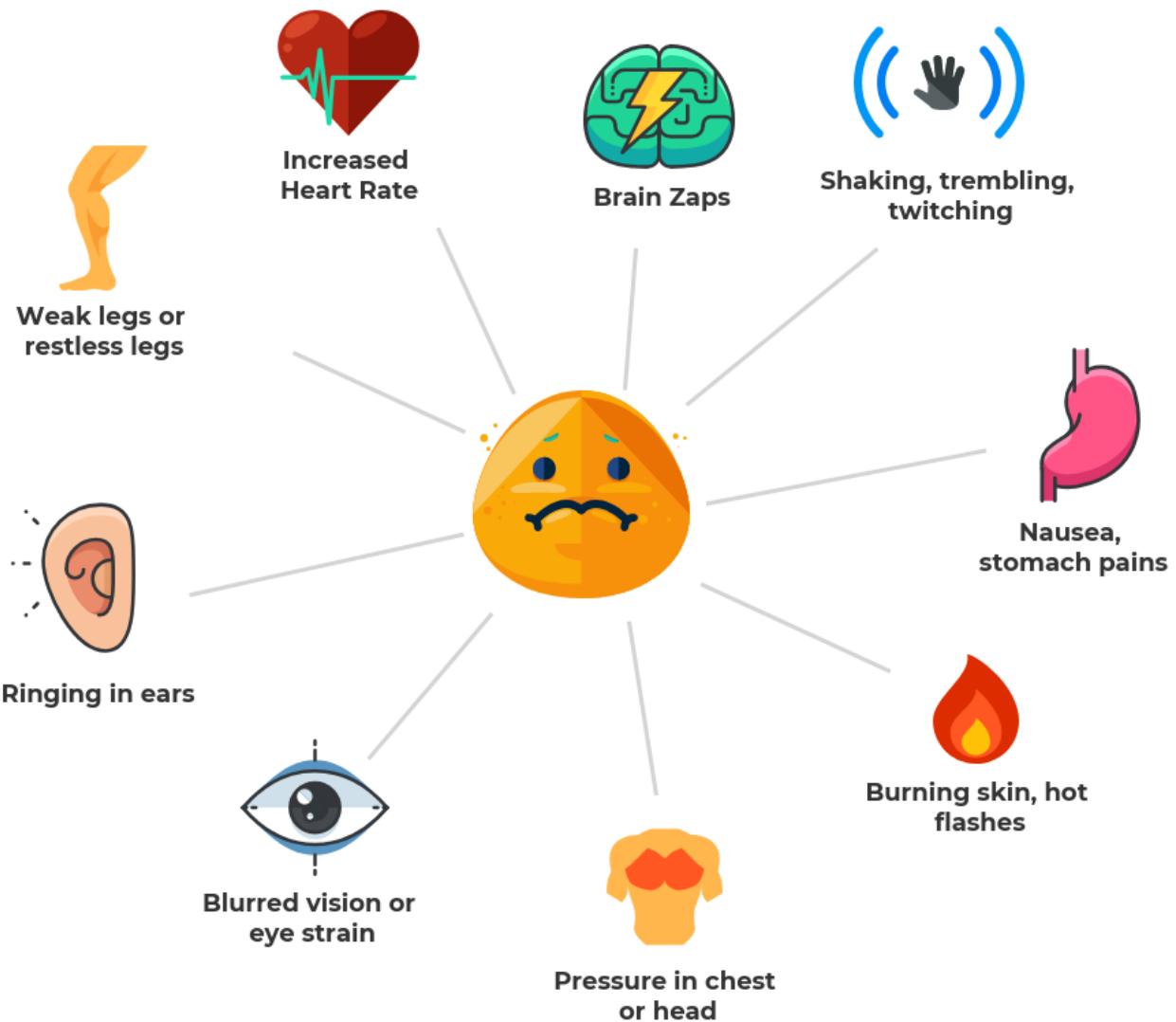
Anxiety-related behaviours can include:

- Avoiding activities related to school e.g. not attending school, isolating self during lunch breaks at school, not attending lessons, avoiding contributing in lessons, avoiding spending time with peers at school.
- 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?
- Seeming distracted or preoccupied particularly on Sunday evenings, and before school.
- Behaviour that you or others might find challenging e.g. lashing out, walking out of lessons, being excluded from lessons.
- 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. See physical sensations for observable signs.

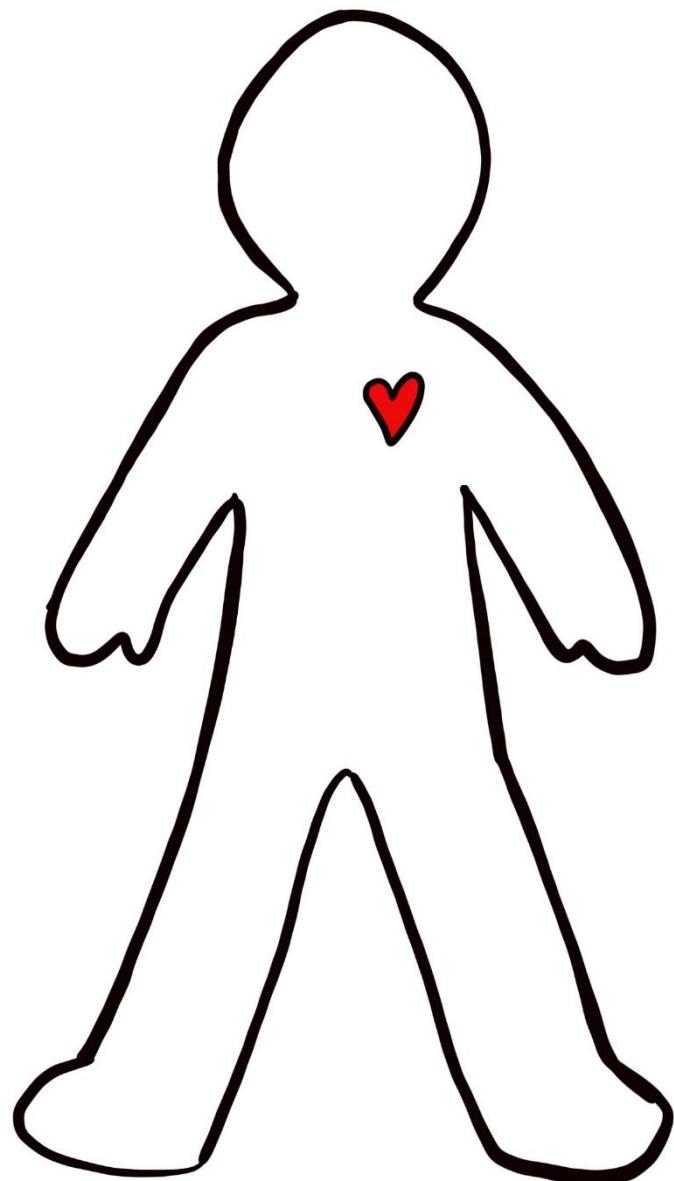
Physical Sensations

Your child might notice these physical sensations caused by anxiety:



Activity 1: Help your child identify what it feels like when they are anxious

It's useful to notice the way the body responds when anxious. You're your child recognise what happens in their body when they feel worried about school, e.g. did their heart beat fast, did they have butterflies in their stomach, were their palms sweaty, did they feel a bit dizzy. Label the diagram below so they can remind themselves of the signs.



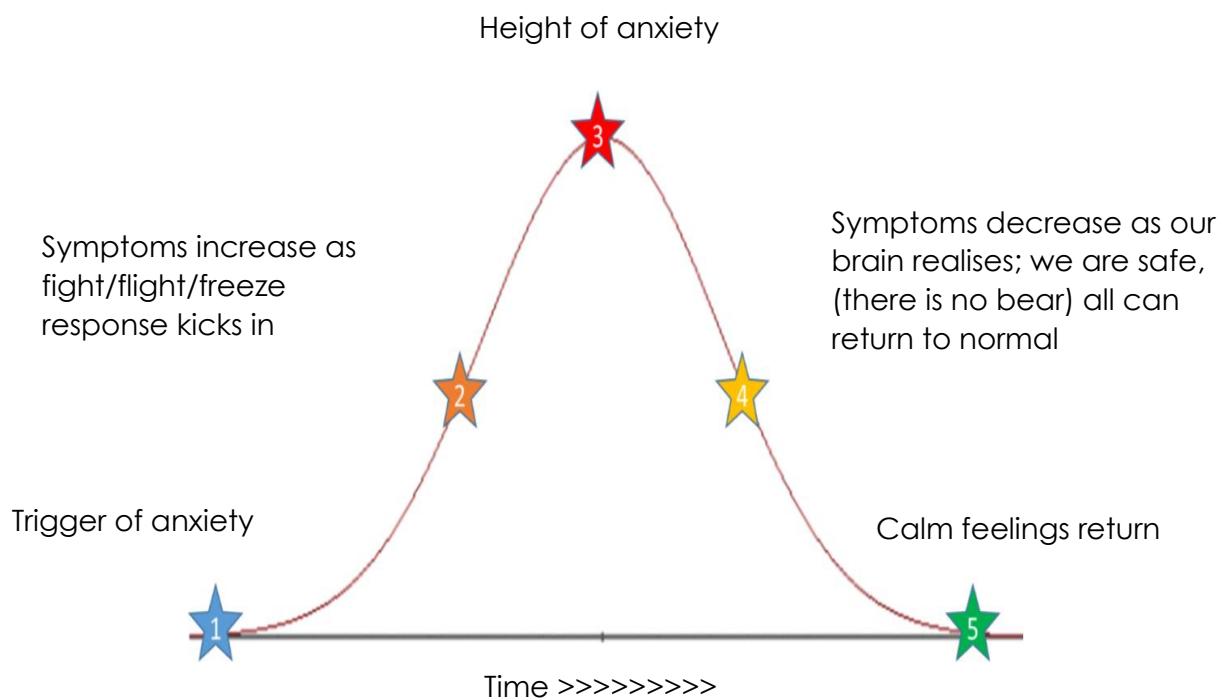
When does anxiety become a problem?

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.

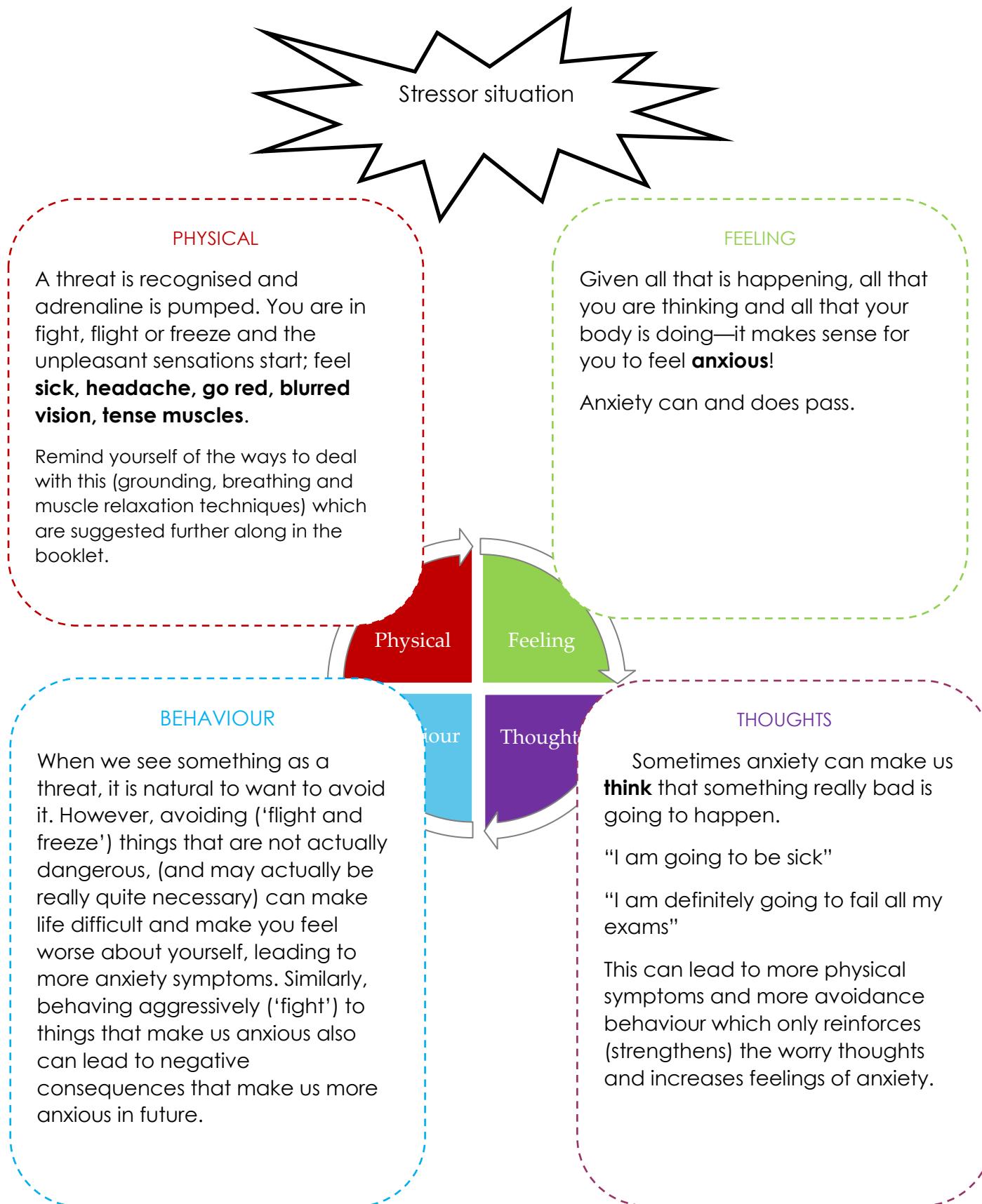
Possible signs that anxiety might be becoming a problem:

- 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 your child. The rest of this workbook will share ideas to help manage anxiety around school and remind your child **"I am safe" (there is no bear).**

The Cycle of Anxiety

Sometimes a 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.



Activity 2: Identifying what someone may be thinking, feeling and acting when anxious.

We are going to refer back to the cycle above and identify what Taylor is thinking, feeling, their physical sensations and their behaviours. Have a discussion with your child and see if together you can identify these and brainstorm below. You can see what we have identified in the diagram on the next page.

CASE 1: TAYLOR

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 parents they don't want to go. When their 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 their parent will force them to go to school.



What thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours of Taylor's did you identify?



Use this template to outline some of the key thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and body sensations.

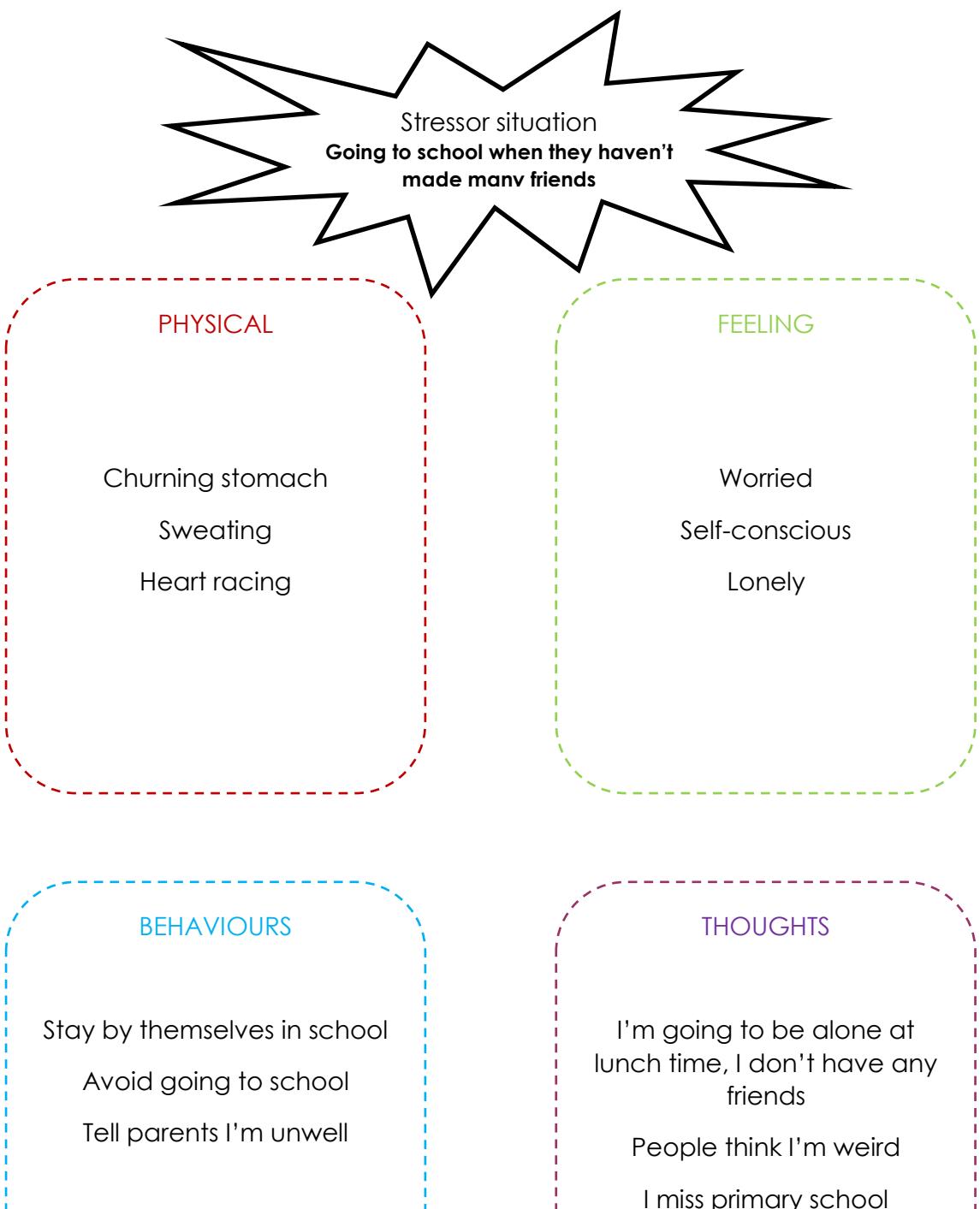
Now we are going to look at Alex and their worries about school. Again, have a think about what their thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours could be. Then look at some of our ideas on the next page. Did you notice the same things?

CASE 2: ALEX

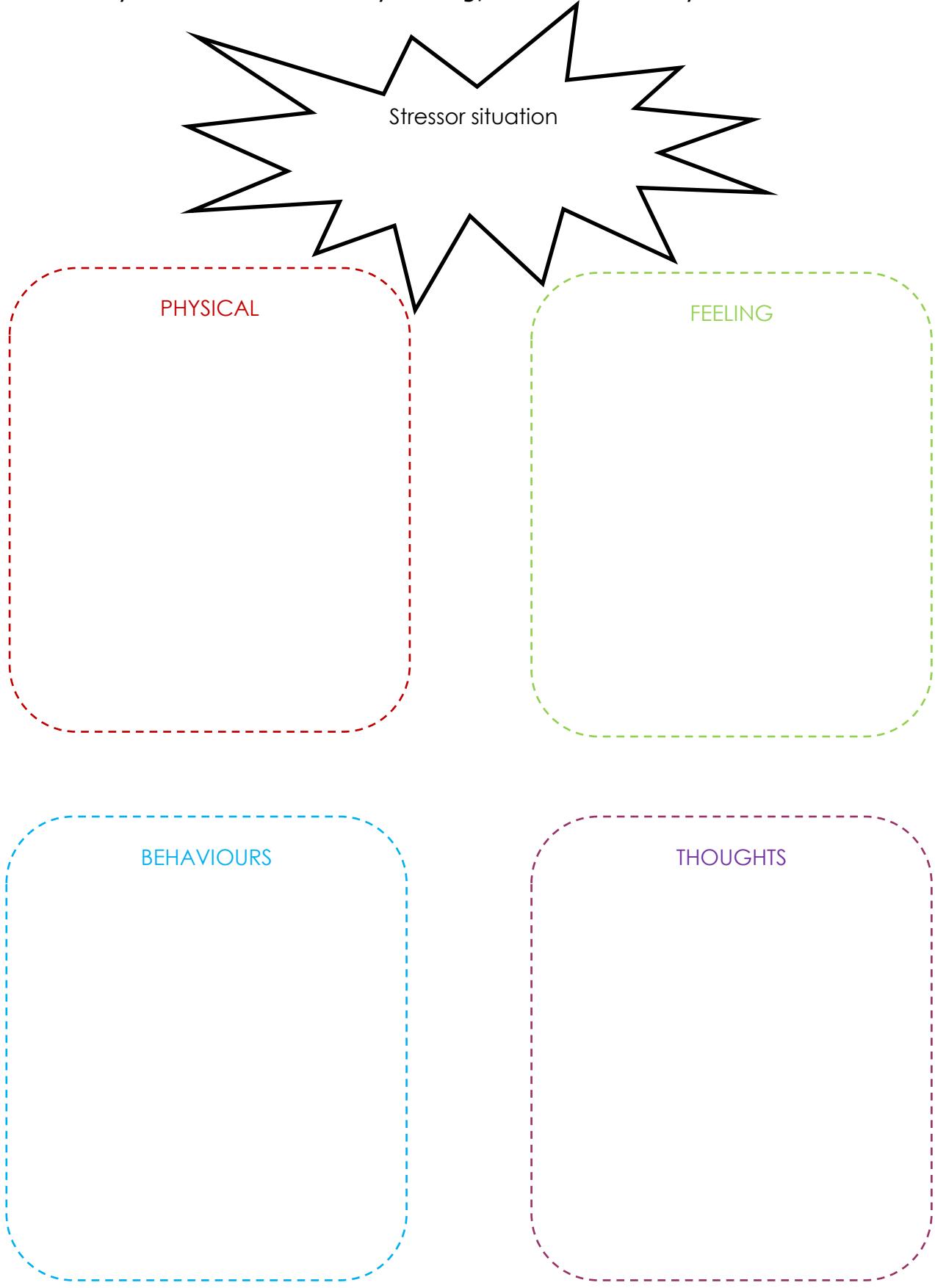
Alex has been struggling to make friendships since moving to secondary school. When they're getting ready for school in the mornings, they get a churning feeling in their stomach, and their palms feel sweaty. They're feeling worried because they often feel lonely at lunch times. Thoughts run through 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.



What thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours of Taylor's did you identify?



Now it is your turn. Talk with your child about a time they were feeling anxious about attending school. What were their thoughts and feelings, what body sensations were they feeling, and how did they behave?



Coping with feelings (Grounding Techniques)

You have identified their **thoughts**, **feelings** and **behaviours** around their worries so we are now going to start with some grounding techniques. 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 your child is already calm. You and your child can practice these techniques together.

Activity 3 – Breathing Techniques

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?

Activity 4: 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

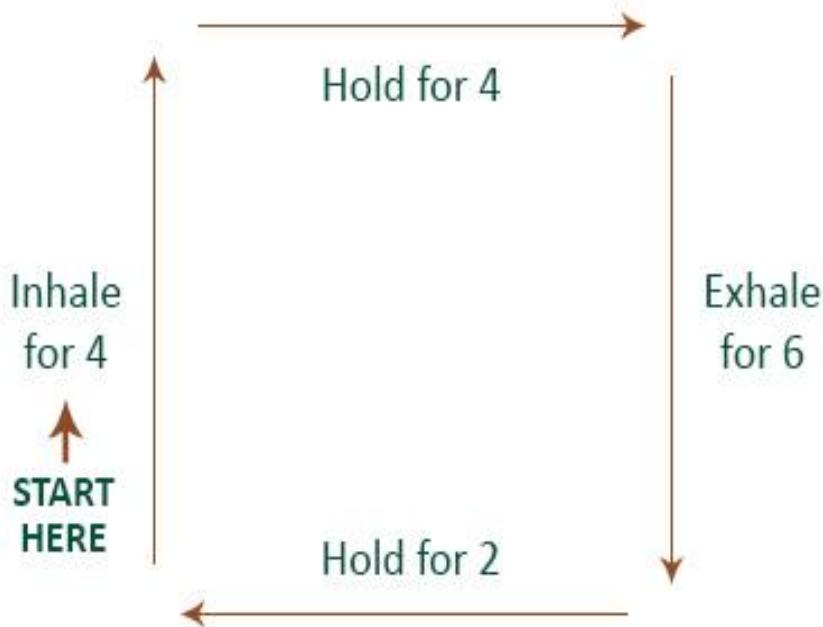
Hold your breath for four counts as you trace the second side of the square

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?



Activity 5: Counting

There are a number of counting strategies you can use that can help ground your child:

- Count backwards from 10
- Take a minute to look around you and count objects e.g. all blue items, all cars, trees, birds, people etc.

You can also use the 5,4,3,2,1 technique

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.

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.

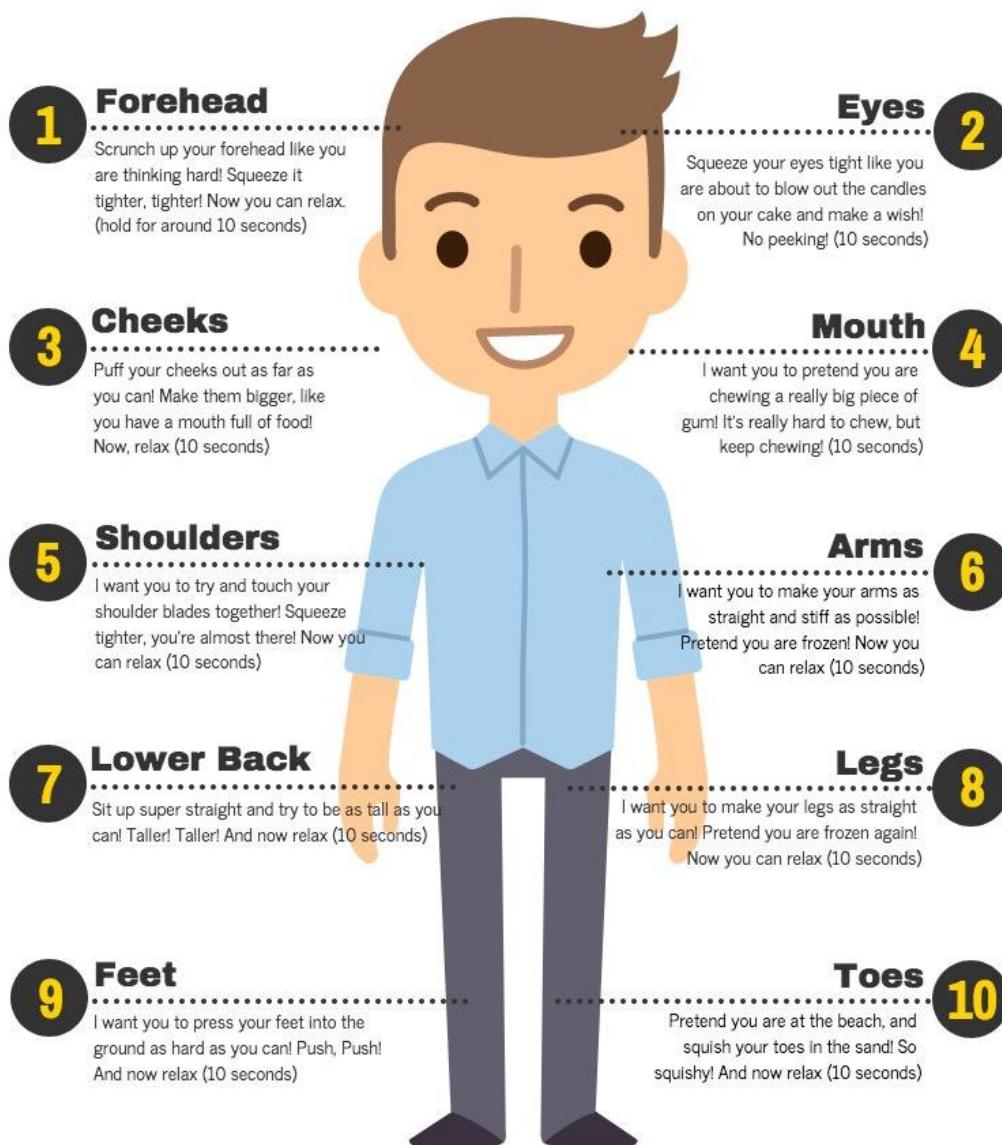
Notice 2 things you can smell- this can be difficult, but often our own clothes keep a smell, or we might smell food or an air freshener.

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.

Activity 6 – 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. With your child, work your way through the numbers 1 to 10 below, following the instructions for each number.



Challenge their behaviour

The strategies from above will help regulate your child's emotions when they are feeling anxious. The next part is going to focus on challenging your child's behaviour. This will need to be done in small steps so as not to overwhelm your child.

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.

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.

Activity 7: Challenging their behaviour

Instead of escaping, we are going to support your child to gradually increase how long they stay in a situation that makes them anxious. Or if they are avoiding situations, challenge them to make tiny steps toward being in the anxious situation.

1. List all the situations they avoid, or escape from, in the table below. Ensure to discuss this together and have them identify the situations. For each one rate how distressed they make them 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 them overcome the bigger things. You can use some of the examples below or some of the ideas you identified in activity2.

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 registration • Going to school over lunch time 	10 9 7 8
Your Turn;	

2. Put the situation that is *least* distressing for your child at the top of the ladder – this is their first goal.
3. Now think about what small challenges could help them 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 0-10 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 they 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
	<i>Go to school and stay for registration</i>	7	5
	<i>Meet friend and trusted member of staff and go to registration</i>	7	6
	<i>Meet friend and go into school to meet a trusted member of staff to say hello</i>	6	4
	<i>Get ready and drive to the school gates</i>	5	3
	<i>Get ready into school uniform and sit in the car</i>	5	2
	<i>Get ready into school uniform and pack your bag</i>	4	2

Top tips for challenging behaviour

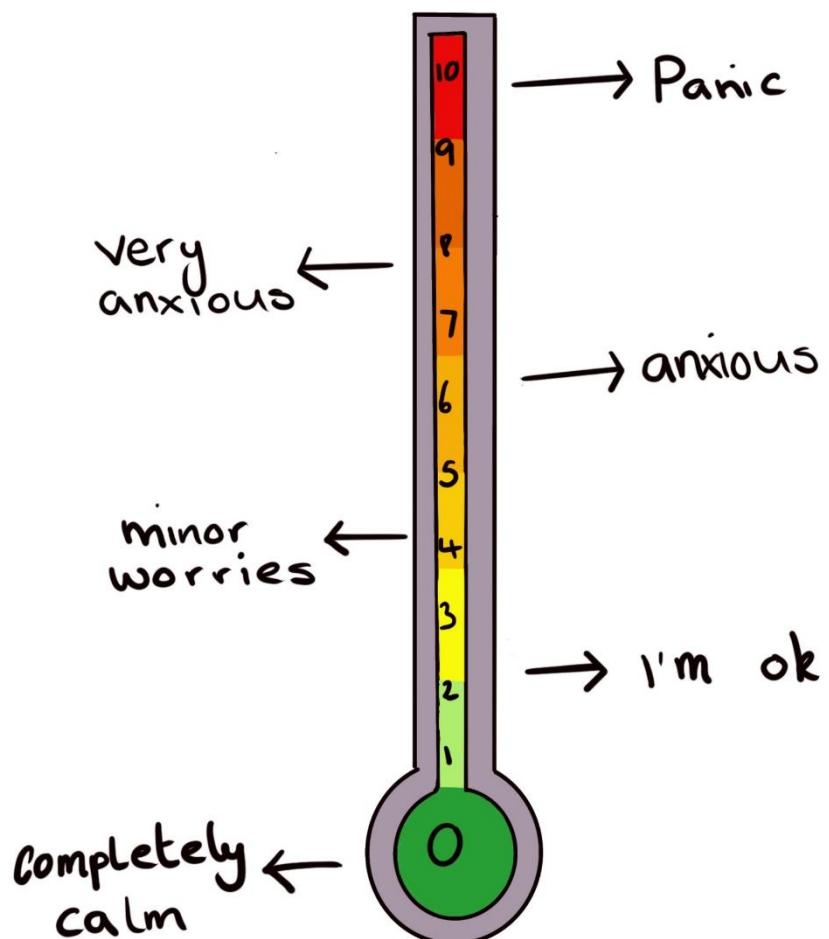
- Challenges should be small and achievable.
- You'll need to think about at what point a situation usually becomes too much for your child and work back from there, breaking the goal down into small achievable steps.
- You may find some steps really easy and others more difficult. If you get stuck on a step break it down into smaller steps again.
- If the anxiety is school related, you should ask for a teacher's help to create a plan that will work for you and work for the school.
- It can be difficult to stay in these situations but it is important that we remain in the challenges for long enough until anxiety naturally reduces. Plan how you will help your child cope with feeling uncomfortable. The grounding and breathing exercises will help you.
- Once you have completed a challenge have a think about what happened. Did their initial fears come true? Did they survive? Which coping skill(s) did they use? Do you think you need to repeat the same thing again, or are they ready to move onto a slightly harder challenge?
- Aim for at least 5 challenges a week, this can include repeating the same challenge more than once. Just add in extra rows between steps.
- Once they have completed one whole ladder, pick the next most distressing situation from the original list and make a whole new ladder of challenges.
- Don't forget to celebrate each challenge they complete – everyone is a step toward achieving their goal!

Behaviour challenge trackers

Here are your blank behaviour challenge trackers that you can fill in.
Remember, small steps!

My Goal...	Situation	Anxiety before	Anxiety after

If your child is struggling with the ladder models you can change and adapt it to fit them. For example you could use a thermometer like the one below. Or create a chart that includes their interests where each stage of anxiety is represented by an item e.g. animals, weather, tv characters etc.



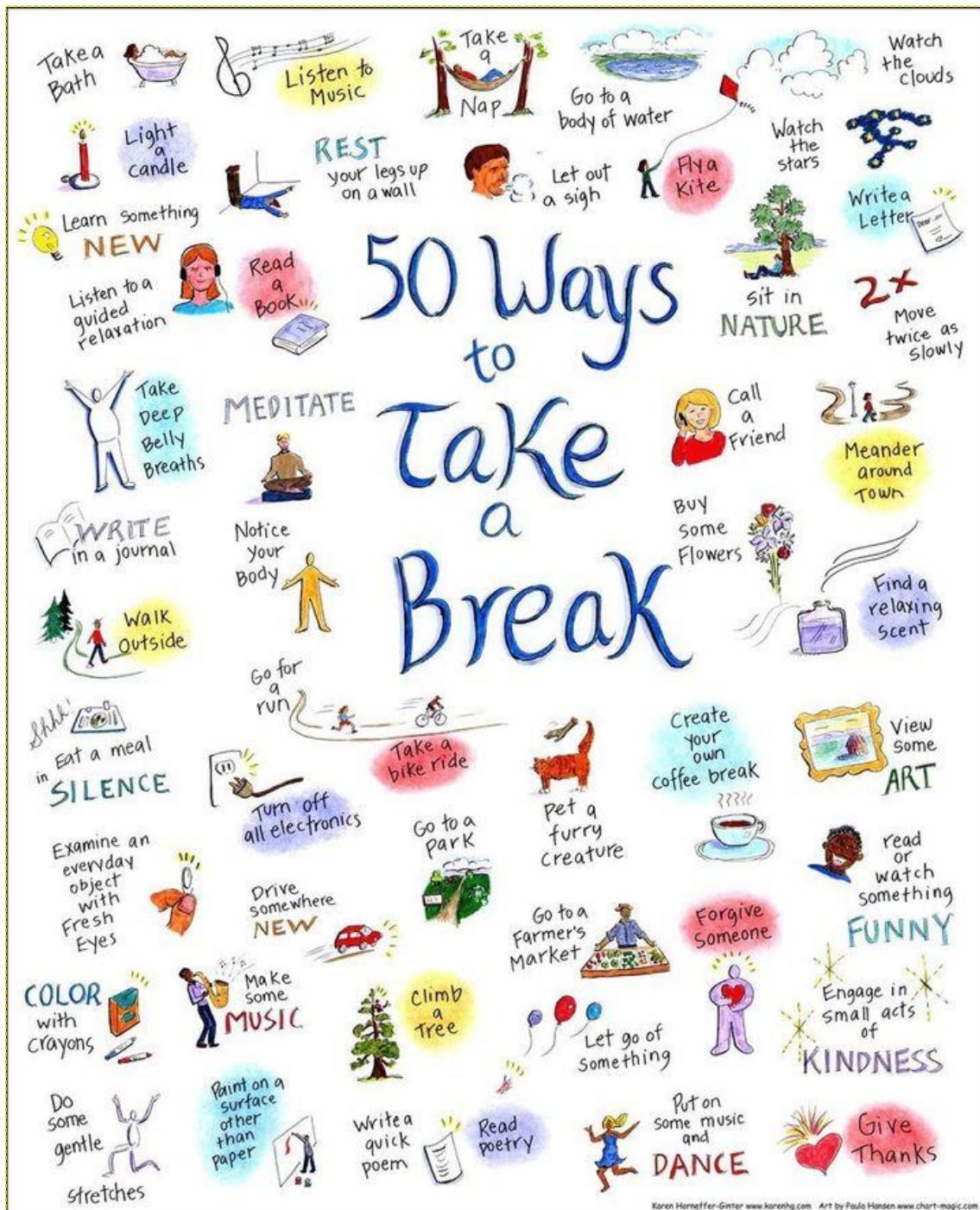
Activity 8: Take a break activities

Sometimes having a break to calm down can help return to the anxiety provoking task refreshed. Help your child choose 10 different 'Take a break' activities to try out over the next week or so. You can use this table to think about which ones helped your child the most. Write which activity they tried and your child's feelings before and after. Fill in on a scale of 1-10, how anxious do you feel? (1 being not anxious at all, 10 being the most anxious ever).

Activity	Anxiety before (scale of 1-10)	Anxiety after (scale of 1-10)	How did they find it?
Example: Went for a walk outside	8/10	4/10	The fresh air helped me to relax and be in the moment

Activity 9: Distraction

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



Karen Horneffer-Ginter www.karenhg.com Art by Paula Hansen www.chart-magic.com

Challenging 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 chance to overcome the anxious feeling, so they may be even stronger next time.

Activity 10: Rating possible reasons for worry

If your child is struggling to identify or communicate why they are worried you may want to do the following activity. In the table write potential reasons for them worrying about school. This could include problems with peers, not wanting to leave the house or not understanding schoolwork (a list has been added below the table to help you). Then have your child rate from 0-10 how anxious that makes them feel (0 being not at all anxious and 10 being extremely). It may take some discussion and you being curious to identify their reasons but don't be disheartened if it takes a while to find the answers.

Activity 11: What thoughts were running through their heads?

Or during times your child is feeling very worried you can discuss the thoughts that are running through their head. Have them think about:

- What they were doing?
- How they were feeling?
- What were they thinking?

Day and time	What were you doing?	How were you feeling?	What thoughts were running through your head?



**Just stop
worrying!**

Worry time

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 your child reduce the amount of time spent worrying about things outside of their control. They will then have more time to spend on things that make us feel better – like connecting to others, getting on with their plans for the day or doing something nice with a friend!

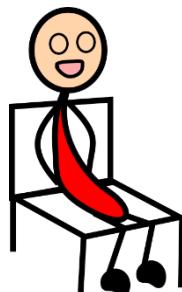
Activity 12: The Worry Time Technique

1. Setting up worry time

Worry time is a time set aside during the day in which your child are allowed to worry. **It should be between 15 and 30 minutes, no longer.** Try setting a timer so you don't run over time.



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 your child will actually have things to worry about, but early enough that you have time to help them pick their 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 worry time.



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



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

2. Encourage your child to postpone their worries at all times other than their worry time

Suggest to your child that if during the day a worry thought comes to them (a thought about something bad happening in their future that they cannot immediately do anything about), write it down. They could:

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

Then during worry time you can both come back to this list/jar and think about each worry then.

Once they have written it down, they can try to do something to postpone that worry, by moving their attention to something else. Take a look at the distraction ideas on page 31 to give you some ideas.



3. Using worry time effectively

In worry time you and your child will come back to worries that they've written down as they came up during the day. For each one, split them into 2 categories:

1. Worries you can do something about right now. Together discuss a plan of how you can solve these worries.
2. Worries I can do nothing about. Help your child accept that unfortunately there are some worries we have no control over.

Activity 13: Positive self-talk

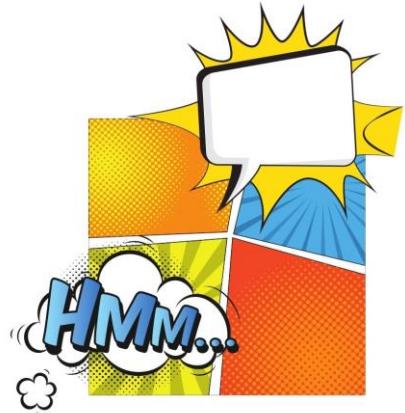
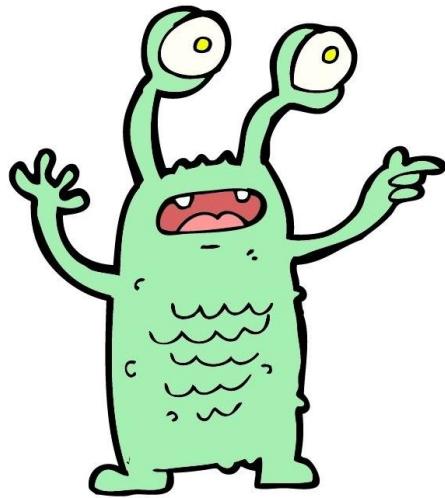
We can often be our own worst enemy. We say things to ourselves that we would never say to anyone else and can really beat ourselves up and think the worst. If your child finds themselves being a bit unkind to themselves, or stuck with their worry thoughts, have them try saying some of these to themselves.

- ♥ 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?

Other activities that may help:

- Sing your worries
- Draw it out. What object would it be? Big? Small? Soft? Spiky? Maybe it looks like a monster?
- You can turn your worries into a comic strip



Other Tips

- If possible warn your child of transitions or changes
- Have close links with the school so there a consistent plan to support your child e.g. where they prefer to sit in lessons, a key adult meeting them at the school gates etc.
- Use transitional objects. These are objects your child can take with them to remind them of you and their safe space. Ensure it is something small and not valuable in case they lose it.
- Don't rush the process. Don't worry if some of the activities take time. Small steps are still progress.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember you are doing an amazing job supporting your child.
- You can use some of the support agencies or apps below to further support your child

Websites and Apps

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

Some helpful places to go online:



Emotional Wellbeing
Service

Cardiff and the Vale



Some mindfulness apps we like:



< Calm
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 to help with
anxiety management