

YOU'VE BEEN MISSED

ANXIETY & CHILDREN

Guidance for parents.



What is anxiety?

A feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome.

It's common.

Anxious feelings (sometimes you might use the word 'worry' or 'worried feelings') are common. Feeling some anxiety is normal when there are changes going on or where we might be uncertain about what is going to happen.

It's a useful feeling at times.

It can help protect us from danger and let us know when things *'just don't feel right'*, or we want to cross a busy road. Anxiety can encourage us to take action - to practice our skills or to study for a test - but when the feeling is excessive it is unhelpful (and it can feel really horrible and uncomfortable in our body too).

It's just a feeling.

While anxiety itself is a feeling and can't hurt you, the uncomfortable feelings that go with it can mean that we don't want to do things. The great thing is that we can learn to manage the feelings and doing so is really positive for our health and wellbeing. Sometimes though, children with anxiety can find it difficult to get in to school or may miss a lot of school. Understanding why this is happening is important as there are ways you can help.

Autism and anxiety.

We know that if your young person has autism they may be more likely to need specialist support to manage their anxiety. However, there are still things that school and you can do to help. It is important to remember that strategies are more effective if all the adults in the young person's life are aware of these. All adults working with your young person should use their name when speaking to them so they know the communication is for them. If instructions need repeating they should use exactly the same language but give the young people 10 seconds of quiet first so they can process what is being said. Concise explicit language should be used. Increasing the certainty of both school and family life helps.

You can find out more at www.autism.org.uk

One of the things that really helps children is if we step in early to offer support. If you notice that your child seems to be feeling worried about going to school speak with their teacher, the school's SENCO or another member of staff you trust. Schools want to know so that they can work with you to help.

There is lots that a school can do to help and, depending on the situation, Schools sometimes ask other agencies for help too to make sure children and their families get the right help at the right time. Depending on the situation they might speak to Forward Thinking Birmingham, The Education Psychology Service or the Communication and Autism Team among others. This can help both you, your child and the school know if extra support is needed and the most appropriate people to help.

*** Metaphors can be used to help you talk to your young person and help them to understand anxiety and getting help. Here's a useful example...**

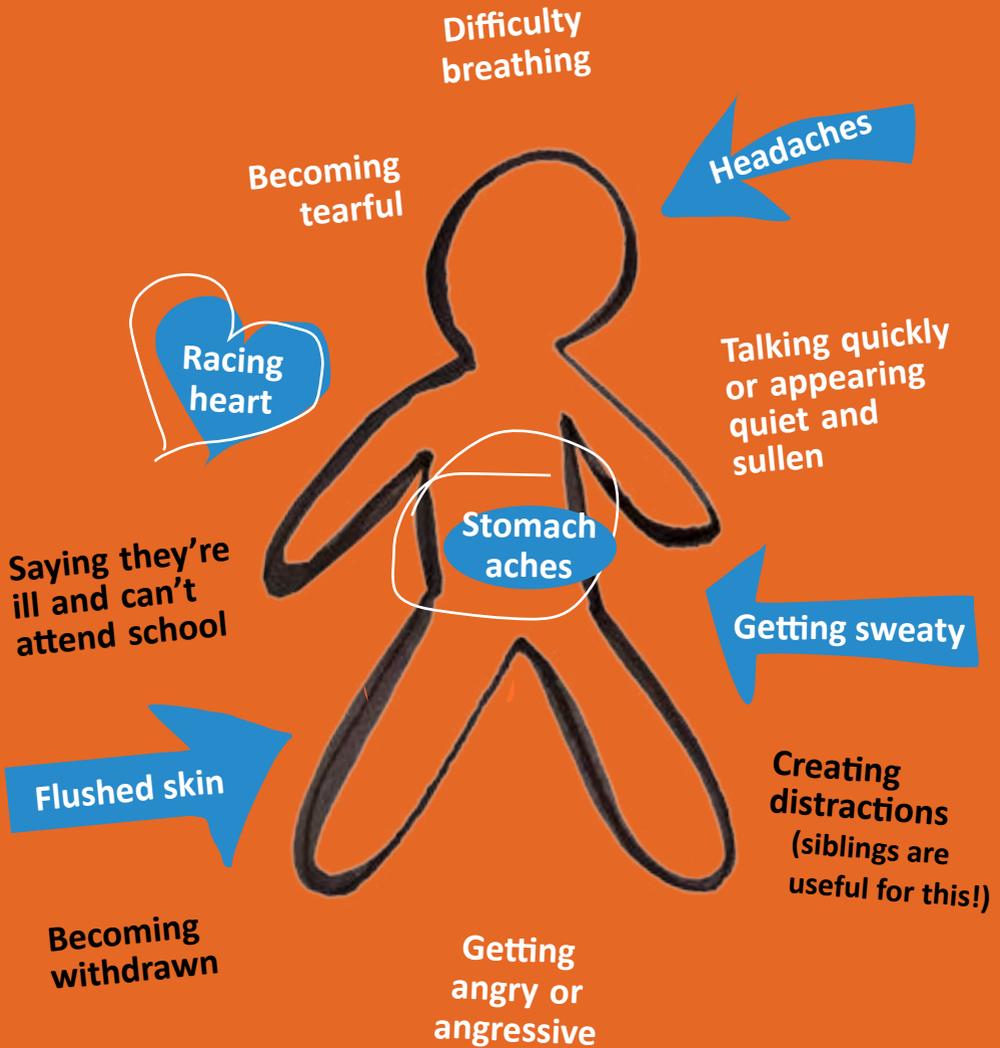
Anxiety is like a fire alarm. A fire alarm is a way of telling you that there is danger and helps keep you safe. However, if it keeps going off, like when you burn the toast, it's annoying and can stop you having fun and learning.

Anxiety is your body's way of telling you there is danger - don't cross the busy road - there is a car coming! However when your anxiety alarm goes off when you are not in danger it can get in the way of doing things you want and/or need to do (like attending school). It gets annoying, just like the fire alarm.

What you may notice; first signs of anxiety and school avoidance.

- ↳ Withdrawing from social activities they had previously enjoyed
- ↳ Less contact with school
- ↳ Changes to sleep pattern
- ↳ Appearing sullen and quiet (consider this in the context of your child's developmental stage)
- ↳ Appearing to have difficulty completing homework, not fully engaging in school life or becoming less motivated than before to complete educational activities
- ↳ Reluctance to leave for school
- ↳ Changes in appetite (eating more or less than usual)

Other signs to look for:



What happens to your young person's brain during anxiety?

When your young person is experiencing anxiety one side of the brain stops talking to the other. So, the left side that deals with logic and reasoning goes 'off line'. Therefore they can't hear and respond to your logic, for example, if you say to them "*there's nothing to worry about*".

The right side of the brain that deals with emotions, impulses and senses gets over stimulated during anxiety. This is great in times of danger - it's the more primitive side of the brain doing what it should; protecting them from danger, but it's not helpful if the mechanism has become over-sensitive and alerts them to danger when there is none.

What helps?

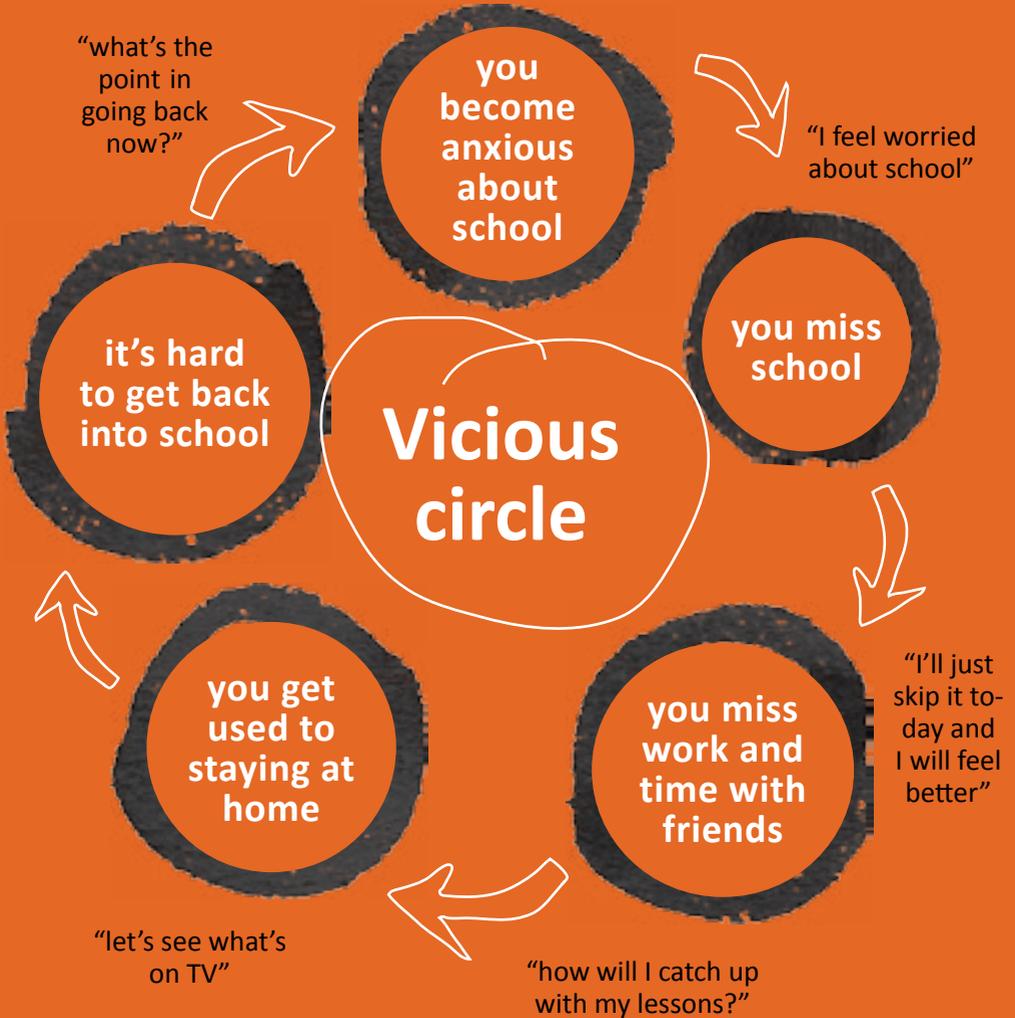
Young children's brains are still forming so, for grown ups, one of your jobs is to help strengthen the connections in their child's brain - everything you do can help this: talking, listening, asking questions and talking about feelings (when they are calm), will help build your young person's emotional resilience/anxiety. The adolescent brain adapts and changes when exposed to stimulation, so encourage problem solving skills. What can we do about this? Get creative with this idea and talk about '*in a perfect world..*' what could happen, or have them imagine what they would really like to happen.

Building relationships is important. It can be difficult during your young person's adolescence to know when to approach them and when to leave them alone. They often give out the message that they want to be left alone but this may not be the case. Make some time with them - perhaps choose a TV programme that you both enjoy and can routinely watch together. If the show is very relational (lots are) use it as an opportunity to ask how others in the show may feel or what your young person would do if they were in their shoes?

Acknowledge their feelings even if you don't know the cause of the anxiety - it still feels real to them. They may not be able to answer questions about what it is themselves (don't push them to find a reason), they really may not know. Think about ways to help rather than focusing on the '*why*'.

Know that things can take time so keep communicating with the school.

Why your child needs to carry on attending school



Anxiety will rise and then reduce. Anxiety doesn't remain high for long periods (think back to the last time you felt very anxious). It reduces after 25-40 minutes so if your young person is anxious about attending school, by about 9.30am they may well be calmer. If they stay off school their anxiety will reduce but then will be more heightened next time they attend. Additionally, important opportunities to problem solve and for your young person to learn to manage their own feelings are missed.

It is hard for parents and carers to see children in their care struggle. Remember that support for yourself is also really important - you might be feeling anxious too!

Questions you can ask about your young person's anxiety.

Some anxiety has a cause which can be explored, for example bullying, or changes in your family such as moving house, a bereavement, separation or divorce and conflict. Sometimes there is no obvious reason for the anxiety. Separate the young person from the anxiety so they can start to see it as separate from them and not actually them. You can help to do this by calling it **THE** anxiety not **YOUR** anxiety.

- When did the feelings of anxiety start?
- Are there times when it isn't noticeable at all? What is happening at this time?
- When do you think the feeling is at its worst?
- Who is best at supporting you when you are feeling anxious? What do they do?
- What helps to reduce your anxiety?
- What plan shall we make to help you manage the feeling?
- How would you help a friend who was feeling this way?

Reassure your young person that anxiety is a normal feeling and that there are ways to manage it.

Managing your own feelings.

It can be hard and frustrating caring for a child who is feeling anxious. Being with someone who is feeling anxious can mean that you feel anxious too so remembering to seek support for yourself is also important. Stay as calm as you can and, when you can, spend time looking after your own well-being - seeing a friend or treating yourself. Talk to school and other adults.

Myths about anxiety.

There are some myths about anxiety for example that you need a specialist mental health professional to help. Sometimes, when feelings of anxiety start to really interfere with everything then thinking about getting more help is a good thing but that can include: help in school, finding out about other activities in your local area, exercise or trying some of the apps at the end of this guide

Another myth is that '*something must be wrong*' - children and young people get anxious sometimes and you won't always know why. Remember that growing up is a tough job and children are learning every day about who they are and how relationships work. Sometimes things resolve with time as a child naturally develops.

Helping your young person to be in school.

When it comes to getting your young person back in to school, or if they are still in school but at risk of EBSA, have a think together who may be the first person you approach - is there someone at school they have a particularly good relationship with? It is important that this happens even if your young person is reluctant.

- Encourage them to stay on top of homework tasks
- Be organised for school to reduce anxiety in the morning
- Prepare lunch for them (even if you don't usually)
- Have conversations about the level of contact you have with them during the day - too much contact can increase anxiety. Perhaps agree that you text them at lunchtime and draft a text that reminds them you are thinking of them but does not require a response
- Establish a morning routine, encouraging them to eat breakfast as hunger can increase symptoms of anxiety. Is there anything in their routine that could be changed to reduce anxiety? For example, they could go to school earlier to avoid a very crowded bus. Stay calm (see *Managing Your Own Feelings*)
- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible
- Prepare your young person for changes to the school day where possible, but not too far in advance...
- Notice when you get anxious yourself and think about the way you express it and resolve it
- Tell your child what you will be doing during the day, for example: *"I'll be at work until 2.30pm then I will collect and walk the dog. I'll be home when you get there"*
- Listen to what they say and acknowledge that it feels hard, for example: *"I imagine that feels really horrible"*
- Keep them in the present: *"We can talk about that later but lets make sure you have eaten first"*
- Reassure them that the feeling will pass and explain what you will do to help
- Spend time individually with them if you can
- Use self-help resources and work through them together
- Seek help - talk to the school where someone will be able to advise you about what you may need to do and who you should contact if you need further help
- If you are angry, or need to talk to another adult about something difficult, do it out of ear shot of your child
- Write some calming statements on a note for them
- All repetitive activity, including drumming and walking, helps to calm the brain
- All physical activities help with stress and anxiety
- Mindfulness and meditation can help - even if you have never tried it before



Example Script

Young person:

I'M NOT WELL SO I CAN'T GO TO SCHOOL

(they may well have some pain or dis-comfort as a physical symptom of anxiety)

Carer:

I IMAGINE THAT FEELS REALLY HORRIBLE *(acknowledge feelings)*.

I'M SORRY YOU ARE FEELING LIKE THAT. IS THERE SOMETHING PARTICULAR THAT YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT? SHALL WE TALK ABOUT IT OVER BREAKFAST? *(bring back to here and now)* OR DO WE NEED A LONGER TIME? PERHAPS WE COULD TALK AFTER SCHOOL OR THIS EVENING WHEN THE OTHER CHILDREN ARE IN BED? *(the message is 'I want to make sure that I give you/the issue my undivided attention')*.

Young person:

I DON'T WANT BREAKFAST. I'M ILL. I'M GOING BACK TO BED.

Carer:

OKAY. YOU NEED TO ATTEND SCHOOL - IT WILL MAKE IT HARDER IF YOU DON'T. I'LL MAKE YOU SOMETHING AND YOU CAN EAT IT ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL OR DURING THE DAY. WHAT KIND OF DAY DO YOU HAVE TODAY? GET DRESSED FOR SCHOOL AND WE CAN MAKE A PLAN ABOUT WHAT MAY BE HELPFUL AND WHO WE SHOULD GET ON BOARD TO HELP YOU *(bring back to here and now)*.

Young person:

I'M NOT GOING *(remember they may feel unwell with anxiety but avoiding a situation is not helpful)*.

Carer:

I'M HEARING THAT IT IS REALLY HARD FOR YOU TO GO BUT NOT GOING WILL ONLY MAKE IT WORSE *(repeat the same message that not going to school will make things worse)*.

I WONDER IF YOU ARE WORRIED OR FEELING ANXIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING BECAUSE I KNOW THAT MAKES YOU FEEL ILL. LET'S ARRANGE TO TALK ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL ABOUT IT AND THINK ABOUT WAYS WE CAN ALL HELP. I'LL WALK WITH YOU TO THE BUS STOP IF YOU WANT? *(back to present)*.

You might also find it useful to look at:

VISIT

- ↳ bwc.nhs.uk/youve-been-missed
- ↳ forwardthinkingbirmingham.org.uk/services/13-pause
- ↳ localoffer.birmingham.gov.uk
- ↳ headspace.com
- ↳ anxietyuk.org.uk
- ↳ thetappingsolution.com
- ↳ calm.com

READ

- ↳ Huge bag of worries by Virginia Ironside
- ↳ Hey Warrior by Karen Young

APPS

- ↳ Stop, Breathe, think Kids
- ↳ Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame
- ↳ Positive Penguins
- ↳ Breathing Bubbles