

Understanding and responding to anxious thoughts and feelings

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Rescue me!

It is hard not to swoop in and try to make our young people feel better when they feel anxious. The way we respond can create a vicious cycle.

Anxiety

An anxiety-producing situation leads to uncomfortable symptoms such as worry, fear, a racing heart, sweating, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Avoidance

Uncomfortable symptoms are controlled by avoiding the anxiety-producing situation. Examples of avoidance include:

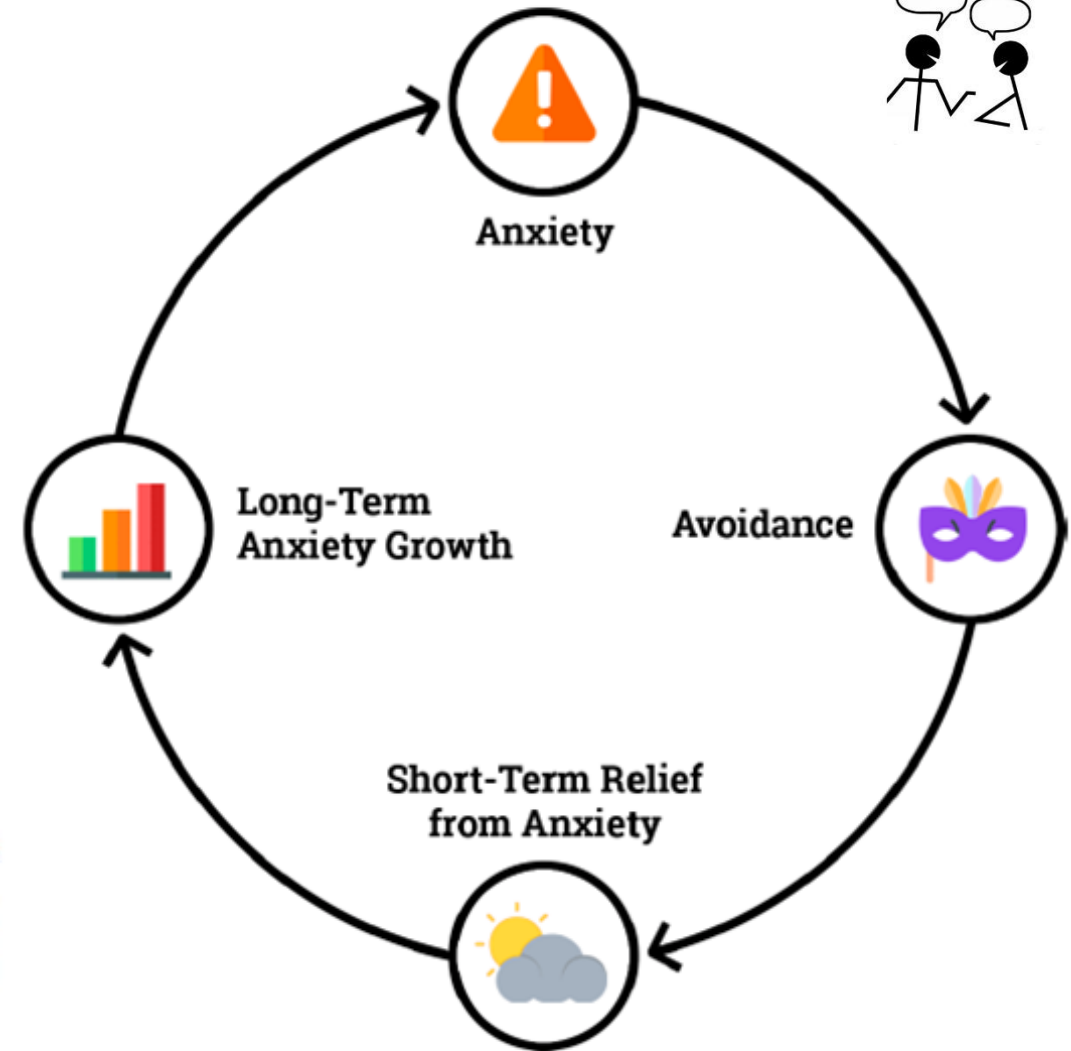
- Skipping class to avoid giving a presentation
- Using drugs or alcohol to numb feelings
- Procrastinating on challenging tasks

Short-Term Relief from Anxiety

Avoidance of the anxiety-producing situation gives an immediate sense of relief. The symptoms of anxiety lessen, but only temporarily.

Long-Term Anxiety Growth

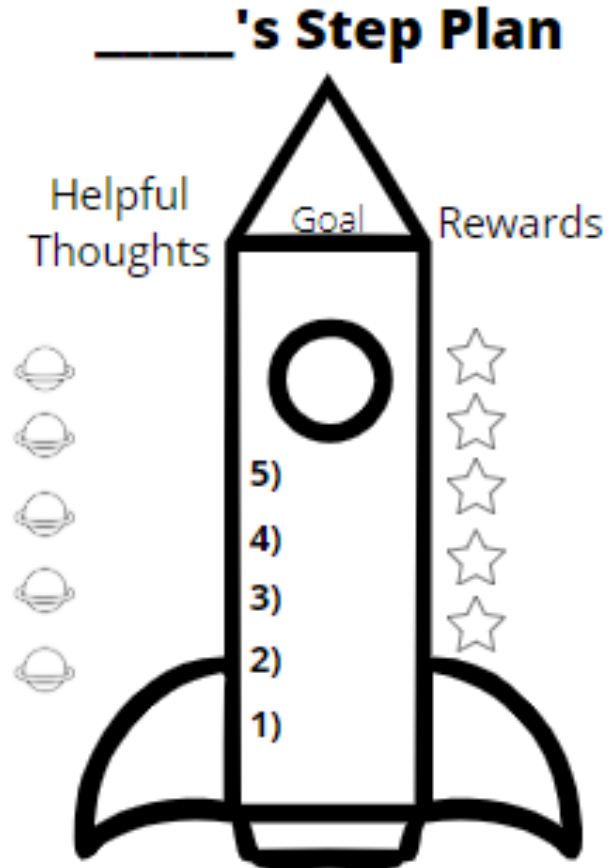
The fear that initially led to avoidance worsens, and the brain learns that when the anxiety-producing situation is avoided, the symptoms go away. As a result, the symptoms of anxiety will be worse the next time, and avoidance is more likely.



How can you help?



Step Plans



It can help to break the situation down into small achievable steps.

This plan should be completed together and it can be helpful to come up with small rewards along the way as a motivator. This could be something as simple as reading their favourite book or some extra play time.

Worry Time

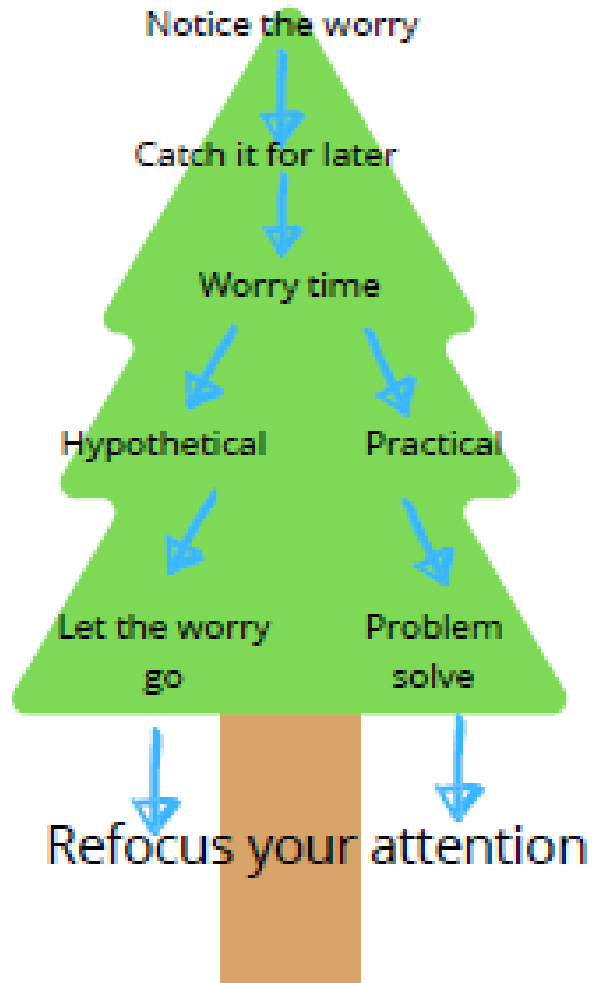
Parents and teachers can encourage children to write their worries down

These worries are placed into a container, either a worry jar or a worry monster.

The child is given a set time in the day, not before bed time where they are allowed to open their worry jar and worry all that they want during the time. You can allow between 15 and 30 minutes. Once the time is up, the worries are placed back into the jar.



Worry Tree



Worry Diary

Situation	Worry	How worried I feel 0-100	Hypothetical or Practical Worry?

Keeping a worry diary can help you become more aware of your worries and what type of worries they are.

Young people need to learn skills and strategies to problem solve for themselves – this comes with practise.

This is also helpful for highlighting unhelpful thinking styles.

Thinking Styles



Mental Filter

When we notice only what the filter wants or allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed



Judgements

Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for

Mind-Reading

Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us)



Emotional Reasoning

I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger



Prediction

Believing we know what's going to happen in the future



Mountains and Molehills

Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives

Compare and despair

Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and comparing ourselves negatively against them



Catastrophising

Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen



Critical self

Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility

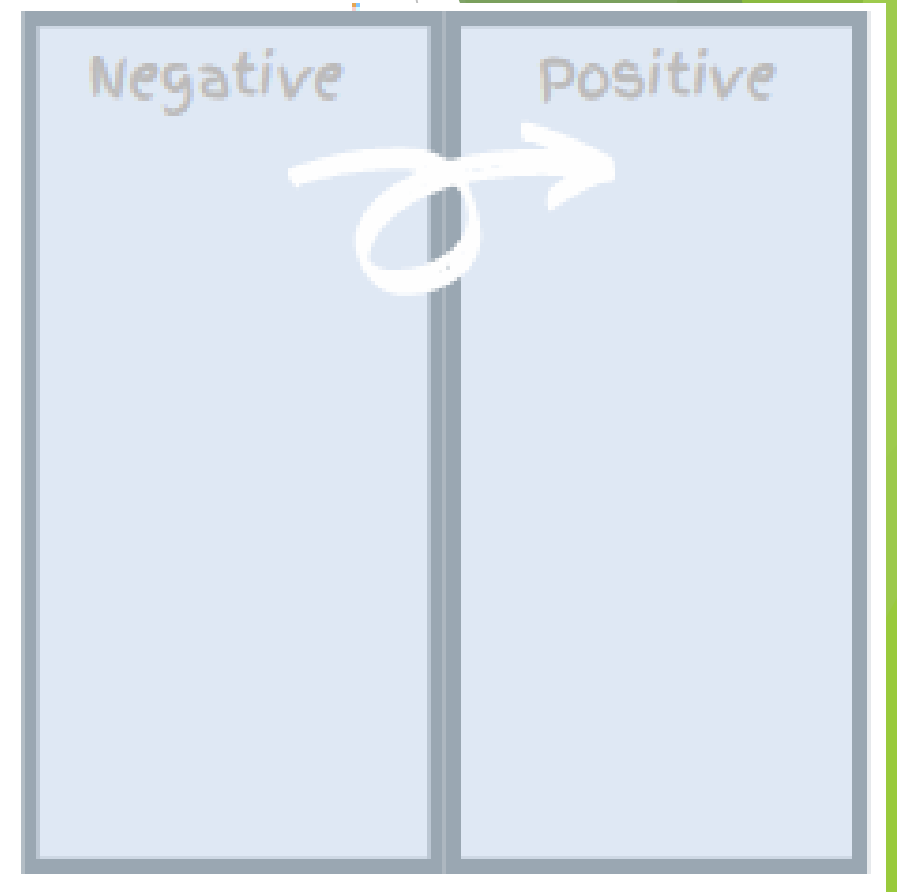


Black and white thinking

Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'

Flip the thoughts

- “Thought flipping” can be used to change a negative thought to a more positive, useful thought.
- For example, “I am going to fail this test!” could become “I can study each night and just try my best”.
- The more you practise this with your child, the more automatic it will become.





Thought Challenging

Just because you think something, doesn't make it true. When you are anxious your thoughts can be quite scary, but remember- you are stronger than your worry!



You can "Take your Thought to Court"



The thought:

Evidence **FOR** the thought:

Evidence **AGAINST** the thought:

The Verdict:

Deep breathing
using your hand.



5 things you can see

1 emotion you feel

4 things you can touch

2 things you can smell
(or 2 smells you like)

3 things you can hear

A collection of six circular icons arranged in a grid. Each icon is on a colored circle and has a blue ribbon with text below it. The icons are: a blue circle with a pink heart (1 emotion you feel), a red circle with a blue eye (5 things you can see), an orange circle with a hand (4 things you can touch), a green circle with a nose (2 things you can smell), a yellow circle with an ear (3 things you can hear), and a blue circle with a heart (1 emotion you feel).

5 Steps to Wellbeing



CONNECT



BE ACTIVE



TAKE NOTICE



GIVE



KEEP LEARNING

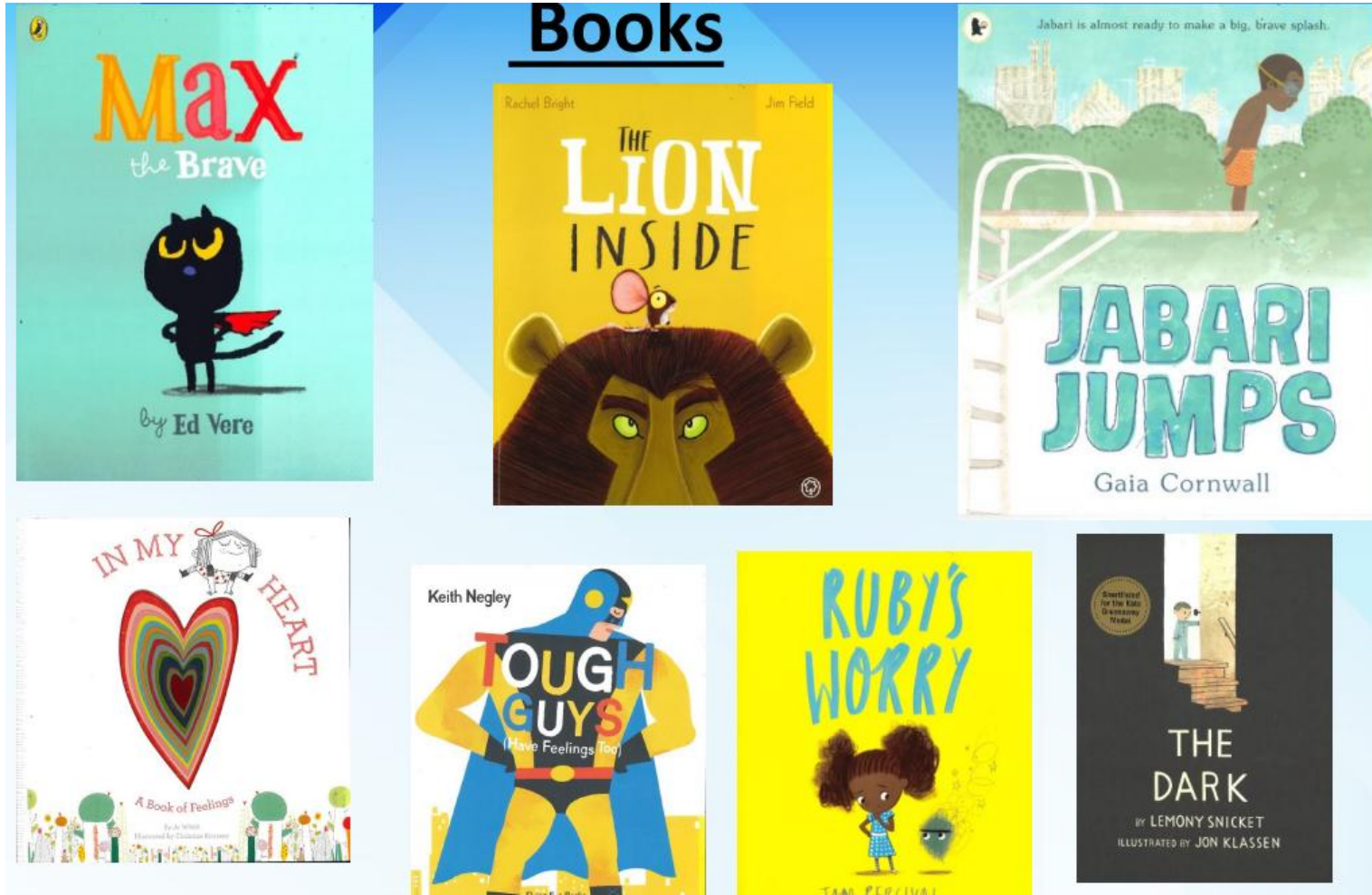
Anxious about school

- Stay curious about what might be happening
- Understand that there may not be a particular reason why the young person feels anxious – just like adults
- Some children may not recognise the signs that they are feeling anxious
- Have predictable routines and advance preparation for change
- Let school know if anxiety becomes an issue
- Low demand when they get home – feeling anxious can be tiring

Create your own toolbox at home of things to help when children need to regulate - this could be a calm box.



Books about Feelings – Read different books about feelings to open up discussion



Some useful resources

