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LITTLE WORRIES - BIG FEELINGS

Anxiety is defined as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome and often involves thoughts about the future. Some describe the experience as having *butterflies in their tummy*. Worries silently sneak into our minds and the minds of our children, regardless of age.



WHEN DO WORRIES LURK IN THE MINDS OF CHILDREN?

Change and/or new beginnings can often cause small worries in our children's minds, creating big feelings. In times of extra worry, it is important for us to think about *what brings these worries into children's minds*:



- Starting at a new school or moving to a new grade
- Birth of a new sibling
- Moving house
- Changes in family structure
- Losing people.
- Writing tests or exams
- Breakups in friendships or friends moving away.

WHAT DO WORRIES LOOK LIKE?

Now that we have an idea of what brings worries into our children's minds, we can think about what these worries might look like in children of different ages:

| Ages 7-11 | Ages 12-18 |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Avoidance ➤ Somatic symptoms (stomach aches, headaches) ➤ Emotional outbursts – quick to anger and/or cries easily | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Irritability ➤ Oppositional, defiant, or resistant behaviour ➤ Rebellion ➤ Indifference |

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Difficulty sleeping ➤ Changes in appetite ➤ Inability to concentrate, fidgety ➤ Overthinking situations or constantly having negative thoughts ➤ Seeking reassurance or being clingy <p>The above are some of the ways in which worries may commonly present in children aged 7-11. Children of these ages often struggle to speak about their worries, which can lead to overflowing of emotions (such as anger or sadness) and can often present or be identified as behavioural difficulties rather than being caused by worries.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Restlessness ➤ Withdrawn ➤ On-edge ➤ Easily fatigued ➤ Difficulty concentrating ➤ Changes in sleeping patterns - either more or less ➤ Changes in eating habits - either more or less ➤ Muscle tension - stiff neck ➤ Headaches and/or stomach aches |
|--|--|

WHAT TO DO WHEN WORRIES ARE AROUND

Worries can be overwhelming, but steps can be taken to limit their grip on our children by focusing on specific aspects of the human experience. Worries move unnoticed through our children's thoughts and present themselves physically through the body, which is why we need to focus on the body and the mind when worries are around.

| The Body | The Mind |
|---|--|
| <p>Our minds are housed in the essential nurturing environment that is our body. In times of worry, a relaxed body can help a worried mind. It is important to calm your child's physical self before thinking about the thought processes contributing to their feelings of worry. To help maintain a happy body, help your child prioritise these three things during stressful times:</p> <p>Diet:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourage your child to eat as healthy as possible. ➤ Buy nutrient-rich foods for your child and avoid overly fatty and oily foods. ➤ Avoid caffeine intake. ➤ Help your child eat around more or less the same times each day. <p>Exercise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourage your child to exercise regularly, even a simple activity like walking. Physical activity helps the body release adrenaline, which builds up in times of worry and limits our ability to think rationally. | <p>Minds can be relentlessly busy - but unfortunately, many minds do not discriminate between work and worry. One of the biggest reasons for an unfocused mind is worries. To help quieten your child's busy mind when feelings of worry are around, prioritise the following tasks:</p> <p>Breaking big tasks into smaller parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Worries can often lead to avoidance of certain places, activities, or situations. However, the more we avoid, the bigger the worries get. Laddering is a helpful technique you can use with your child to break down tasks or achieve a goal their worries are causing them to avoid. Laddering creates small but manageable steps to achieve a specific goal. <div data-bbox="970 1709 1197 1933" style="text-align: center;"> </div> |

Sleep:

- Prioritise sleep by ensuring your child gets to bed at the same time each day, with about 9-12 hours recommended for children aged 6-13.
- Consider starting a wind-down routine with your child each night before bed. This could include guided visualisation techniques, which you can find an example of at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlv6Y1tq1sQ>. These guided techniques help bring your child's thoughts to the present moment rather than worrying about the future or past. It is important to find a guided visualisation that appeals to your child.

Breathing:

- Practise breathing exercises with your child every day. This is important because it takes time to learn how to breathe correctly. Your child will need time to practise the breathing technique to master it for times when worry is around.
- A simple breathing technique is called 4-7-8 diaphragmatic breathing. Firstly, inhale through your nose for 4 seconds into your diaphragm, imagining a balloon inflating below your ribcage into your tummy. Then, hold the breath in your tummy for 7 seconds. Lastly, make your mouth small and exhale for 8 seconds to deflate your balloon. Repeat these steps for 5-10 minutes each day.



Put a plan in place:

- Worries tend to cause extreme irrational thoughts, including "What if..." questions (i.e. "What if I fail the test?"). When responding to these thoughts it is important for parents to know that assurance of these worries not happening does not generally comfort children. Rather, try to brainstorm a plan with them for what they might be able to do in case their worries actually happen.

Best, worst, and most likely Scenarios:

- Thinking through the *best-case scenario*, the *worst-case scenario*, and then the *most likely scenario* can assist children in rationalising their thoughts.

What if I fail a test?

Worst Case Scenario:

- I fail the grade.

Best Case Scenario:

- The test mark does not count towards my overall grade.

Most likely Scenario:

- The test only counts a small portion of one subject, forming a small part of my overall grade.



"Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow."

SWEDISH PROVERB

These strategies are some ways that parents can use to empower their children with the skills to manage feelings of anxiety. However, these strategies may not be enough in isolation, and some children may also require support from a professional. Play therapy or psychotherapy may be needed, and sometimes also a pharmaceutical intervention.