

## Supporting Children When They Worry – Advice for Parents and Carers

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear. Although it is not a pleasant or comfortable experience, it is normal for everyone to feel anxious at times. Anxiety can feel like it might overwhelm us and this can make it difficult to put into words to or describe to someone. Children and young people often find it hard to identify and describe what they are feeling as anxiety / worry to adults. Sometimes they need our help to give them the words and make sense of what is happening for them.

This resource explores some of the common phrases and words children and young people may use to describe their anxiety.

### PRIMARY AGE CHILDREN

Younger children can often say things to us when they feel worried or anxious because they want reassurance – this is really understandable. You might notice that a child asks an adult to stay with them to do activities more often than would be usual for them and, if that is not possible, they may become more distressed than usual. These are some of the kinds of things children might say when they are feeling worried. You may have heard your own child say some of these.

Some comments children might make when they are worried:



### Some Behaviours you might see:

- ▶ Clingy
- ▶ Tearful
- ▶ Irritable
- ▶ Fidgety
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Becoming more forgetful
- ▶ Needing the toilet more often or having accidents
- ▶ Constant worrying

### Some physical complaints they may make:

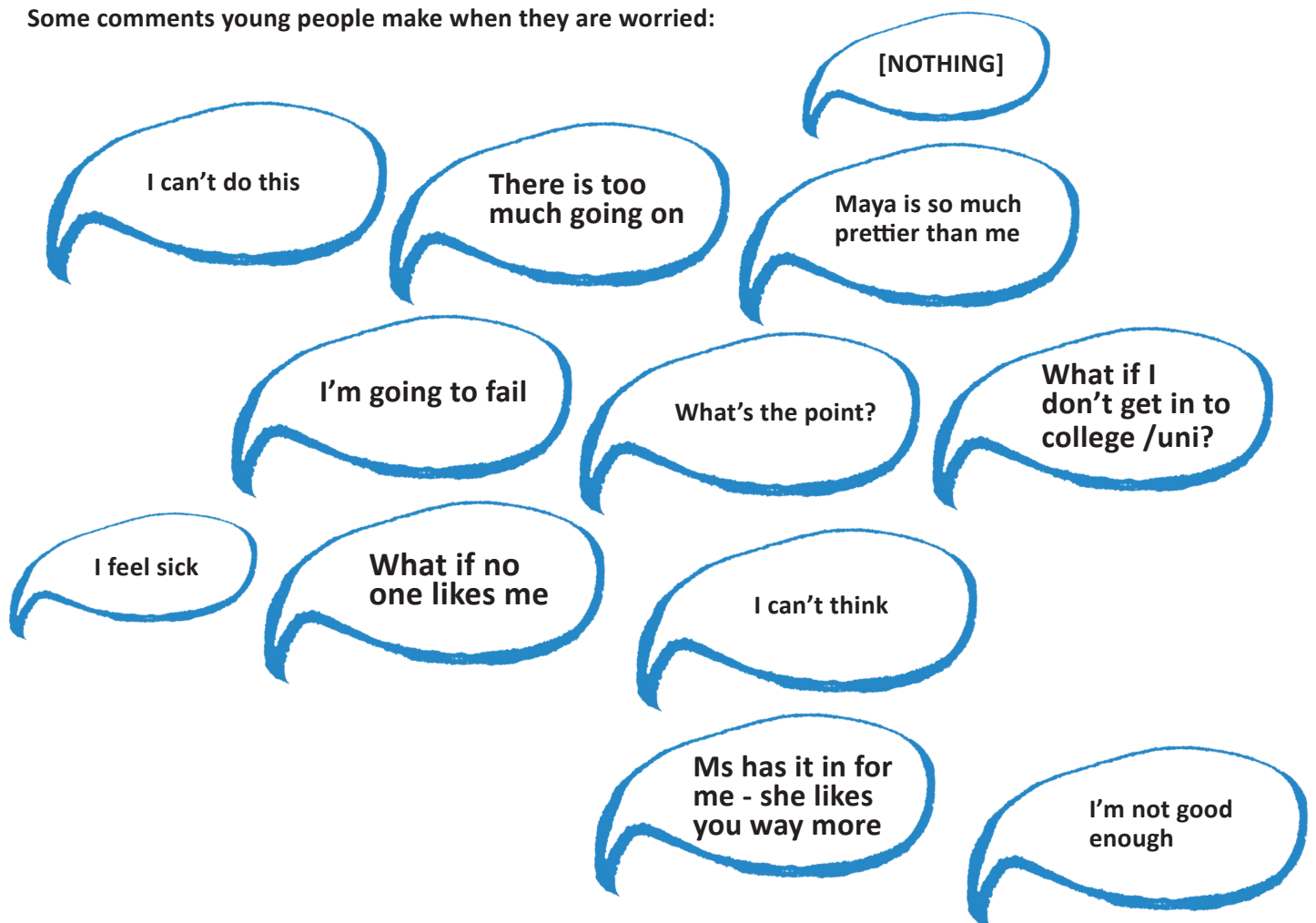
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Tummy aches
- ▶ Racing heart
- ▶ Faster breathing
- ▶ Shaky hands
- ▶ Feeling sick
- ▶ Dry mouth
- ▶ Feeling sweaty

**Please note:** complaints of physical illness should always be taken seriously and medical advice sought. If a medical examination reveals no abnormalities, the problems persist and you suspect anxiety, please discuss this with your child's GP.

### SECONDARY AGE CHILDREN / YOUNG PEOPLE

Adolescence can be a really tough time for young people. Young people are really starting to explore their identity in new and different ways. Young people may have more understanding about their emotions and more ways to explain their feelings. For all of us though, when we are feeling a real peak of anxiety, we can seem to lose our words or our ability to describe how we are feeling. Some of the signs that you might notice that could indicate your young person is feeling worried include: starting to lack confidence or feel that they are not good enough, not communicating and/or isolating themselves. You may also hear them comparing themselves negatively towards others, this can reflect their anxious feelings which impacts on their self-worth and self-esteem. Young people may also express that they feel overwhelmed by thing(s) in their life. This is when you may hear "what if" questions about the outcome of different situations.

### Some comments young people make when they are worried:



### Some Behaviours you might see:

- Becoming withdrawn or isolated
- Lack of interest / inability to concentrate
- Altered sleep pattern
- Mood changes
- Low self esteem / confidence
- Disinterest in activities previously enjoyed
- Focusing on the negative
- Constant worrying

### Some physical complaints they may make:

- Abdominal discomfort
- Headaches
- Generalised aches and pains
- Sore throat
- Pains in their chest / palpitations
- Fast heartbeat
- Shaky hands
- Tingling in hands and / or feet
- Diarrhoea / constipation
- Dizziness and / or nausea
- Dry mouth

**Please note:** complaints of physical illness should always be taken seriously and medical advice sought. If a medical examination reveals no abnormalities, the problems persist and you suspect anxiety, please discuss this with your child's GP.

### HOW WE CAN HELP OUR CHILDREN / YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN THEY FEEL ANXIOUS OR WORRIED

Noticing a change in language which might go hand in hand with a change in behaviour, is the first step in starting to think with child about how they are feeling and whether they may be feeling worried or anxious. As a parent or carer you can be curious and gently say that you have noticed a change or something new and that you are wondering if there is something they would like to share with you. This will help them to feel supported and cared about and also means that you can help normalise some of what they might be feeling.

For example:

**PARENT:** *"I noticed that whenever we talk about going back to school after the holidays you change the subject. I was wondering if there's something you want to tell me or if there is something that I can do that could help."*

**YOUNG PERSON:** *"well I don't want to go back, what if it is all different?"*

**PARENT:** *"Oh of course you might feel like that, it's quite normal when we've been away from somewhere for a little while to feel a bit worried about going back. I wonder what we could think about together that might help?"*

(it can be helpful to tell a child about times when they have overcome something similar before or to let them know that you have felt the same too before).

When we think of anxiety it is likely we think of the physical sensations we feel or the 'outward features' we see in others. In addition to these outward signs, your child may show you they are anxious by what they say and how they say it. If you notice changes in your child's language it's worth thinking whether this may be related to anxiety or worry.

### Overall it might be helpful to:

- Find out directly from your child what they are feeling, what they are thinking and what they think might help
- If you think that they may be anxious, talk to them about anxiety and what happens physically to our bodies as well as how we might think and act when we feel anxious
- Provide suggestions as to how they could deal with their anxiety such as breathing exercises, relaxation, physical activity or doing something they enjoy. Practice this with them
- Schools are used to supporting children who feel anxious or worried so talking with a member of staff you feel comfortable with at school can really help to make a shared plan together.
- From time to time, we all need a little bit more help with different things in our lives. If your child's worry is really starting to impact on their overall health and how they live their life then considering speaking with your GP or contacting FTB's Pause drop in centre for more help.

Below you will find some practical ideas to start the conversation when you hear some common comments made by children or young people when they are feeling worried or anxious.



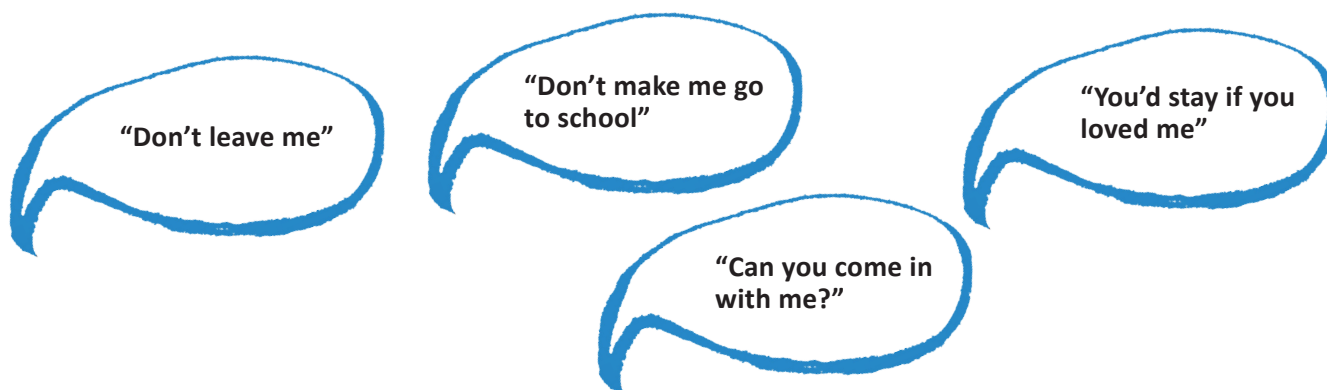
### SCENARIO 1 - Child is seeking constant reassurance or constantly asking you to do activities with them:



#### Responses to consider:

- Children need our reassurance and they also need us to help name some of the feelings they are having
- If you find yourself repeating things, try saying something similar to *"we have talked about this before, now let's go and..."* (and offer a distraction)
- You could write/ draw a plan with them and say *"let's have a look at what we did before, what does that say (or show)"*
- Direct your child to use their self soothe box \*\*

### SCENARIO 2 - Fear of being separated from parent or carer:



#### Responses to consider:

- Often it is really helpful to 'think ahead' for children and young people who can feel anxious in different situations. As an adult, you may know what is likely to happen when child goes in to school (for e.g.) and by explaining what will happen, this can take away some of the unknown (like a role play)
- You can reassure a child that you (or another grown up) will be there afterwards – agreeing a plan like this with a child or young person can be really helpful
- Ask the school whether your child or young person could bring an object such as a key ring or small soft toy from home to school with them, to remind them of home
- If your child is worried about going to school ensure the school is aware and together you have agreed upon a clear plan of how to support your child. Remind your child of this plan

### SCENARIO 3 - Avoidance:

"I don't feel very well"

"I don't want to go to school today"

"I'm not doing PE today, I've got tummy pains"

"I don't want to get the bus today - can we walk?"

#### Responses to consider:

- Encourage your child to continue to attend school (or doing the activity they are avoiding)
- Remember that avoidance (of the thing that makes them feel uncomfortable) makes your child feel better in the short term but in the long term this increases the anxiety and makes it more difficult to return to what they have been avoiding
- Identify what it is they are avoiding and why. What do they think will happen if they do the thing they are avoiding?
- Start to get the child or young person to challenge their thoughts. 'Take Your Thoughts to Court', 'Thought Detective' or 'ANTs' (Automatic Negative Thoughts) can be helpful worksheets to complete with your child or young person\*\*

### SCENARIO 4 - Catastrophizing:

"I'm going to fail all of my exams!"


"It's never going to be OK"

"It's all going wrong and it's all my fault!"

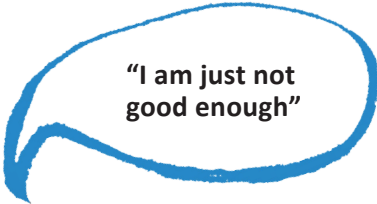
#### Responses to consider:

- Remember that children and young people have not had the life experience to know that they can cope. Exams and tests can feel all consuming so acknowledge the worry
- Encourage them to think about what is most likely to happen vs what they are worried is going to happen. Reality testing can be really helpful
- Let them know that they are loved, regardless of the outcome of what they may be worried about
- Direct them to write in their Worry Box\*\*

## SCENARIO 5 - Lacking confidence / low self-esteem:



"Everyone is better at it than me"



"I am just not good enough"

### Responses to consider:

- Provide positive feedback about things your child has achieved and/ or done well so that they can connect to times when things have worked out
- Encourage the child or young person to do something they enjoy
- Resources already identified can help to challenge them to think about things differently ('Take Your Thoughts to Court', 'Thought Detectives' or 'ANTs Automatic Negative Thoughts'\*\*) )

## SCENARIO 6 - Not communicating/ withdrawing:



"There's nothing wrong with me"

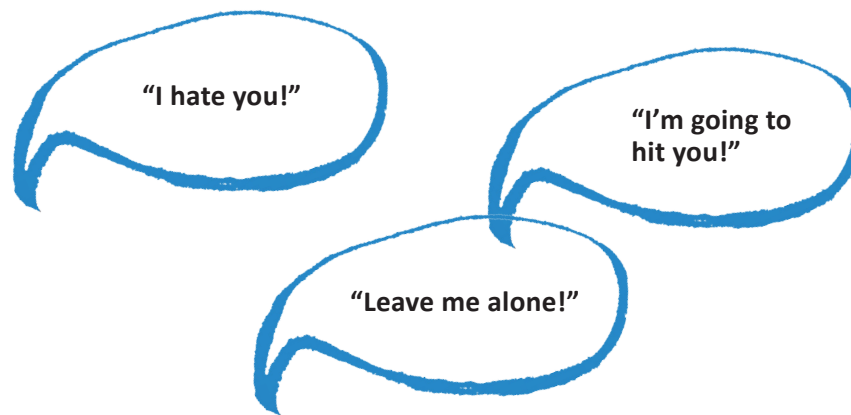


[saying nothing at all]

### Responses to consider:

- Be with your child or young person and accept silence if they do not want to talk. Let them know that you are there for when they are ready (or let them know that there are other good adults around they can talk with too)
- Offer physical comfort if your child or young person would accept it
- Sometimes it can be helpful to 'think aloud' with your child, for example, 'I know that sometimes when people feel worried about something then they want to hold on to the worry and not talk about it, sometimes because they worry what other people might think or we might feel a bit embarrassed. I wonder if you might be feeling anything like that. I'm here for you when you feel ready to share anything"
- Talk to them about what you have noticed for example "I've noticed that sometimes when you can't answer a question you look upset, have I got that right?"

## SCENARIO 6 - Angry / frustrated:



### Responses to consider:

- It can be really easy for us as adults to feel triggered when our child is angry
- As much as possible, try to stay calm yourself. Things that can really help are focusing on your breathing for a few moments, counting to 10
- If a child is experiencing a very physical response then be sure to check that they are safe where they are (that will also calm you down as a parent or carer)
- When the moment has passed, you can think about the function of the behaviour. Work backwards thinking about what was going on beforehand. What could have led to such distress? Be curious about what a child's behaviour is trying to tell you
- There can be lots of things that are going on underneath the angry feeling: sadness, hurt, fear, disappointment, loss to name just a few
- When things are calm, you can think with your child about how, together, you could manage things differently another time
- Self soothe boxes can be really helpful in calming us down

\*\* For more information and for the resources listed please go to <https://bwc.nhs.uk/parents-and-carers>