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Supporting Your Child with Anxiety



CAMHS West Mental Health Support Team (MHST)








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CAMHS West MHST

Who we are:
A team from Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust supporting mental health in schools across Wokingham, Reading & West Berkshire.

What we do:

- Help children and young people with **emerging, mild to moderate anxiety and low mood**
- Offer evidenced-based **1:1 and group support** for secondary-aged children and parents of primary-aged children
- Provide **parent workshops** and **staff training**
- Work with school staff to promote a **whole school approach** to wellbeing

Our goal:
To make mental health support **accessible, early, and effective** for every child.




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Content



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Understanding Anxiety



How Anxiety is Maintained



How you can help: Effective Responses



Feedback



Q&A

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Take Care of Yourself Today



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Anxiety Overview



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A normal response to a perceived threat to keep you safe



Useful to motivate problem solving and/or prepare body for action



Can become problematic when it interferes with daily life

Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn, Flop



Thoughts



Body



Behaviour

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Common Fears and Worries



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Late Infancy

- Strangers
- Unfamiliar objects
- Heights
- Being Alone

Early Childhood

- The Dark
- Supernatural Phenomena (e.g. ghosts)
- Imaginary Figures (e.g. monsters)
- Being Alone

Late Childhood – Early Adolescence

- Physical Injury
- Health/illness
- Death
- School Performance
- Social Situations



Neurodiversity considerations

- Sensory sensitivities
- Change or unexpected events
- Social worries
- Performance pressure
- Communication challenges



Context Matters

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Context Matters



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When considering severity:

- Look at **impact on daily life** (school, friendships, sleep).
- Consider **duration and intensity** of anxiety.
- Notice **patterns and triggers** (specific situations vs. general).
- Compare to **typical developmental behaviour** for age.
- Is the anxiety **in proportion** to the actual threat?



- **Positive Stress:** Boosts focus and motivation.
- **Tolerable Stress:** Short-term; manageable with support.
- **Toxic Stress:** Ongoing and intense; harms health without intervention

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Why Anxiety Feels So Big



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When children (and adults) feel anxious, their thinking often falls into two common traps:

1. Over-estimation of Danger

Children may believe something bad is much more likely to happen than it really is. This makes the situation feel scary and overwhelming.

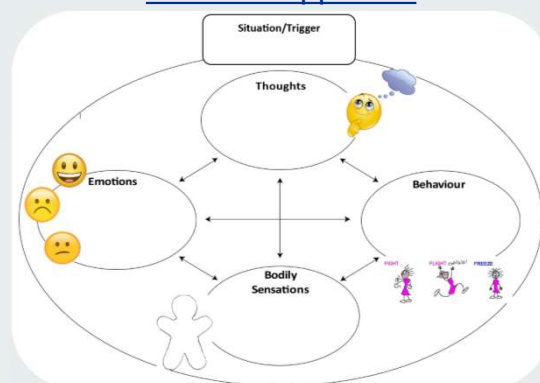
Example: "If I put my hand up in class, everyone will laugh at me."

2. Underestimation of Ability to Cope

At the same time, children often doubt their own ability to handle the situation. This can lead to avoidance, which keeps anxiety going.

Example: "If they laugh at me, I won't be able to cope."

'Hot Cross Bun' The CBT approach



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Common Signs of Anxiety



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Thinking Patterns

- Pessimism
- Self-critical
- Catastrophising
- Negative predictions
- Mind reading
- Constant hypothetical worries



Emotions

- Fear
- Anger
- Irritable
- Sad
- Restless
- Overwhelmed
- Numb
- Lonely
- Stressed



Physical Symptoms

- Tummy pain
- Headaches
- Jumpiness
- Restlessness
- Sleep difficulties
- Poor memory
- Fatigue
- Appetite difficulties



Behaviours

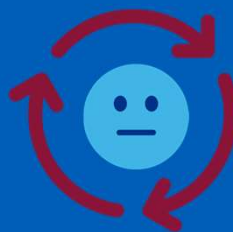
- Crying
- Clinginess
- Perfectionism
- Withdrawal
- Avoiding/Refusing
- Inflexibility
- Irritability
- Aggression

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How Anxiety is Maintained

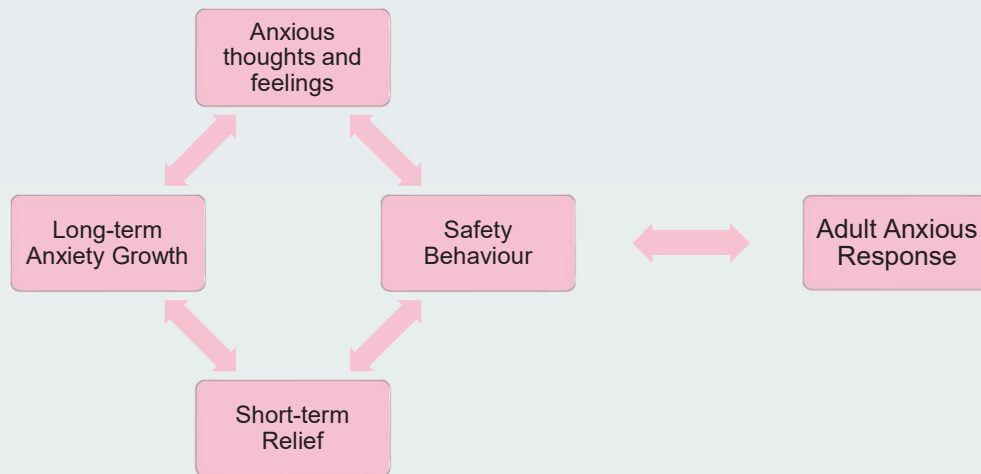


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The Anxiety Maintenance Cycle (CBT approach)



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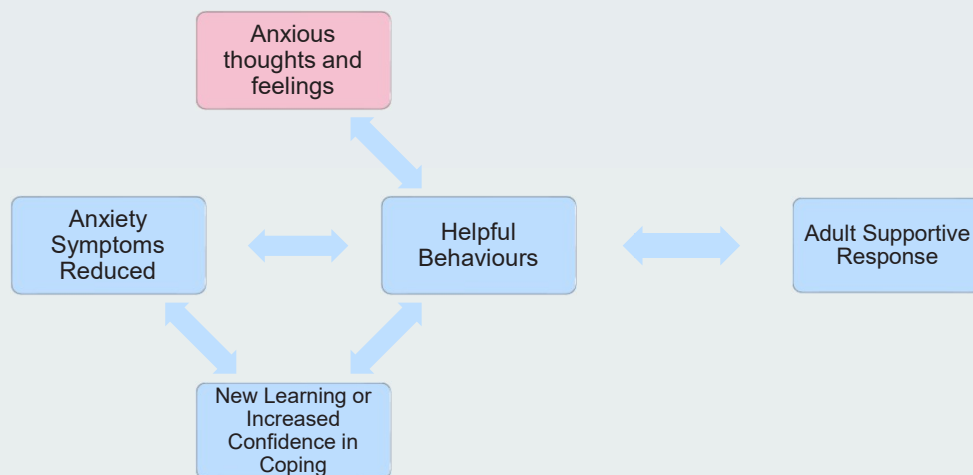


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Breaking the Cycle (CBT approach)



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Effective Adult Responses



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How Can You Help?

Encourage Conversation

- Curious Questioning
- Active Listening
- Avoiding Reassurance

Boost Self-Confidence

- Help Them Understand Their Feelings
- Practice Coping Skills
- Model Managing Your Emotions

Encourage Having A Go

- Take a Step-by-Step Approach
- Celebrate Bravery

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Before You Support Them...



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Consider Your Own Emotions

- **Stay calm and grounded** – Children pick up on your reactions.
- **Acknowledge your feelings** – It's normal to feel worried or frustrated.
- **Avoid passing on anxiety** – Take a breath before responding.
- **Seek support if needed** – Talk to someone you trust or a professional.



Tip:

You can't pour from an empty cup—looking after yourself helps your child.

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Break Time



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Encouraging Conversation



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Curious Questioning



- **Stay calm and curious** – Avoid rushing to reassure or fix.
- **Ask gentle, open-ended questions to explore the worry:**
 - *What is making you feel worried?*
 - *What do you fear might happen?*
 - *What is the worst thing you think will happen?*
 - *How likely do you think it is that this will happen?*
- **Wonder together** – “What might help if that happened?”



- Encourages independent thinking
- Gives children a sense of control
- Reduces feelings of shame or embarrassment
- Builds tolerance for uncertainty

Tip:

Validate feelings – “That sounds tough. I’m glad you told me.”

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Active Listening



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- **Listen fully** – put distractions aside and give your full attention.
- **Reflect back** – repeat or rephrase what they've said (e.g., "It sounds like you are feeling anxious")
- **Stay curious, not critical** – ask gentle questions to help them explore their feelings.
- **Avoid rushing to fix** – sometimes they just need to feel heard before they're ready for solutions.



- Shows your child they matter
- Helps them make sense of their own thoughts
- Reduces misunderstandings
- Builds trust and emotional safety

Tip:

Listening is powerful -sometimes, feeling heard is the first step to feeling calm

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Avoiding Reassurance



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- **Label emotions** – *"It sounds like you're feeling worried."*
- **Empathise and normalise** – *"Lots of people feel that way sometimes."*
- **Ask what could help** – *"What do you think might help right now?"*
- **Encourage perspective** – *"What would you say to a friend feeling this way?"*
- **Make gentle suggestions** – *"Would you like to try [idea] together?"*
- **Praise sharing** – *"Thank you for telling me how you feel."*



- Reassurance can become a habit that increases long-term anxiety.
- Children may feel they *need* reassurance to cope.
- Encouraging independent coping builds confidence and resilience.
- Helps children test their own thoughts and manage uncertainty.

Tip:

Validate feelings – "That sounds tough. I'm glad you told me."

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Boosting Self-Confidence



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Help Them Understand Their Feelings



- **Name the feeling** – “It sounds like you’re feeling worried.”
- **Validate and normalise** – “It’s okay to feel anxious sometimes.”
- **Separate the feeling from identity** – “You feel anxious” (not “You are anxious”).
- **Use tools** – Feelings charts, emotion wheels, or drawing feelings.
- **Encourage reflection** – “What happened before you felt this?”



- Understanding feelings makes them less overwhelming.
- Builds emotional vocabulary and coping skills.
- Helps children see feelings as temporary, not permanent.

Tip:

Praise their effort in sharing feelings
-“Thank you for telling me how you feel”

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Practice Coping Strategies



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- **Breathing exercises** – Slow, deep breaths to calm the body.
- **Positive self-talk** – “I can handle this.”
- **Body relaxation** – Stretching, progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Refocus attention** – Engage in a calming activity (drawing, music).
- **Problem-solving** – Break challenges into small, manageable steps



- Helps children manage anxiety in the moment.
- Builds lifelong resilience and problem-solving skills.
- Encourages independence and confidence.

Tip:

Practice these skills when calm, so they're easier to use during anxious moments.

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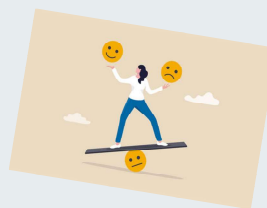
Model Managing Difficult Emotions



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- **Name your feelings** – “I’m feeling worried right now.”
- **Show your coping strategy** – “I’m going to take some deep breaths.”
- **Be honest about mistakes** – “That didn’t go as planned, but that’s okay.”
- **Demonstrate calm problem-solving** – Talk through your steps out loud.



- Children learn by watching how adults handle stress.
- Shows that emotions are normal and manageable.
- Builds trust and teaches healthy coping strategies.

Tip:

Keep it age-appropriate and reassuring: show that feelings come and go..

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Encouraging Having a Go

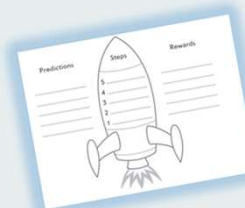
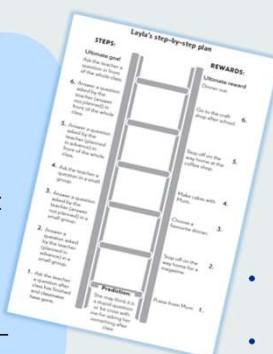


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Using a Step-by-Step Approach



- **Start small** – Choose an easy first step your child can manage.
- **Agree on the steps together** – Involve your child in planning.
- **Celebrate each step** – Praise effort, not just the end goal.
- **Move at their pace** – Only increase difficulty when they feel ready.
- **Use coping strategies along the way** – Breathing, breaks, or calming activities.



- Reduces pressure and fear of making mistakes.
- Encourages children to try even when they feel worried.
- Builds confidence and resilience over time.

Tip:

Bravery is about trying, not being perfect. Every attempt is a success

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Celebrate Bravery, Not Perfectionism



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- **Praise effort and courage, not outcome** – *"I'm proud you gave it a go!"*
- **Highlight small wins** – *"You spoke up even though you felt nervous."*
- **Model self-compassion** – Share your own mistakes and what you learned.
- **Avoid focusing on flaws** – Let them experience learning without criticism.
- **Pair praise with curiosity** – *"What did you notice when you tried that?"*



- Reduces pressure and fear of making mistakes.
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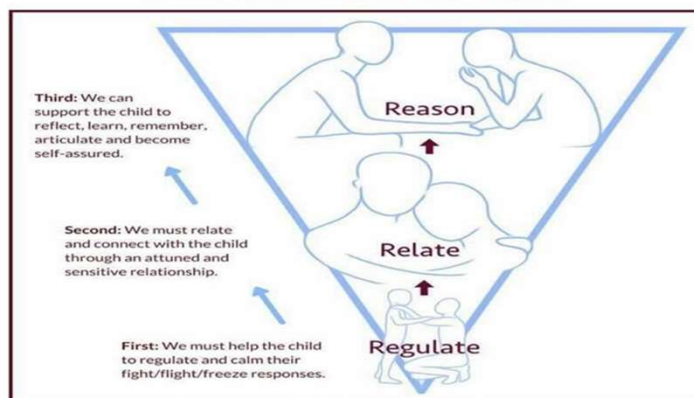
Support Regulation First



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The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.



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When to ask for more help



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Seek extra support if:

- Anxiety is **persistent** (lasting several weeks or more).
- Worries are **intense and hard to manage**, even with strategies.
- Anxiety is **interfering with daily life** (school attendance, friendships, sleep).
- Your child is **avoiding many activities** they used to enjoy.
- There are **physical symptoms** (stomach aches, headaches) with no medical cause.
- Your child seems **distressed most of the time** or talks about feeling hopeless

Tip:

Asking for help early can prevent anxiety from becoming more severe

Who to Contact:

- **School staff** (Senior Mental Health Lead, teacher, SENCo).
- **GP or health professional** for advice and referrals.
- **NHS 111** for urgent mental health support and advice
- **999** for serious injuries or risk to life

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Any Questions



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We Value Your Feedback

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