

# Supporting the Mental Health of Children and Youth

Presented to Parent Involvement Committee  
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**CHEAT SHEET**

## **Anxiety is:**

- A normal reaction to perceived danger or important events.
- An internal alarm system that alerts us to danger and helps us perform.
- Something everyone experiences from time to time.

## **Symptoms include (not exhaustive lists of examples):**

- Physiological responses: Sweaty palms or armpits, tummy upset, poor sleep, loss of appetite or eating for comfort, nausea and butterflies, lightheaded, tense muscles, pounding heart
- Emotional responses: Usually very uncomfortable or distressing levels of worry, fear, or nervousness. The state of emotional distress can wear one down and then it can manifest in other emotions such as irritability, tearfulness, sadness, or despair.
- Thoughts: Can be a result of dwelling on legitimately worrying circumstances, however, often it is illogical and fraught with intrusive catastrophizing. It can be specific to certain triggers or can be general and be triggered by ordinary daily and mundane experiences.
- Behaviours: Can include avoidance, withdrawal, intense emotional displays, low motivation, clinging to adults, or confrontations.

## **Be prepared to:**

1. **Frontload:**
  - Learn and increase your understanding.

- Talk about it at non-heightened times so that your child will know what to anticipate when you will be coaching them through anxious moments.
- With respect to panic attacks, reassure the young person that they won't die or sustain permanent harm but acknowledge that they are SCARY.
- Plan strategies during non-heightened times and allow your child to identify what would be most helpful.

## 2. **Validate feelings of anxiety:**

- Validation involves being empathetic and avoiding judgement.
- Avoid suggesting they simply not worry; if it were that simple, most worriers would stop.
- Listen just to listen and without feeling the need to fix things.
- Let your child or youth know that you understand how uncomfortable it is and that you feel bad for them when they feel so uncomfortable. This conveys that you really care and understand that they are uncomfortable.
- Normalize the discomfort; we all have it sometimes and lots of students have it, even lots of grown-ups experience it, and some people even take medication for it.

## 3. **Co-Regulate:**

- Co-Regulating emotions means supporting someone to calm their intense emotions by being emotionally present and remaining calm while offering comfort and suggestions.
- When someone is emotionally escalated, it's difficult to think clearly, especially when the emotion is as intense as it is during a panic attack. Sometimes little ones, or someone who is experiencing conflicting and complex emotions, have a hard time pinpointing or articulating their emotions. To help with the emotional identification, ask questions about what they are feeling or offer what you suspect they are feeling and ask if you are correct.
- Suggest strategies that you have discussed together at less emotionally intense times. Be prepared to get some pushback at times but don't take it personally. Learning to navigate anxiety and other emotions is skills based and it takes time to get better at it, but evidence shows that strategies, if practiced, can have a significant impact on identifying and navigating difficult emotions.

## **Strategy Building**

These strategies are often best supported through the co-regulation process in the initial stages but skills in being able to utilize strategies independently can definitely be developed.

### 1. **Breathe:**

There are a variety of techniques and some can get quite complex, however, simply taking deep, slow breaths right down into the tummy rather than holding it up in the chest, and releasing in a slow and controlled way has a calming and mind clearing effect.

**2. A place of comfort:**

This is particularly important in cases of panic. If anxiety escalates in a shopping centre or classroom, moving to a quiet space or a place of calm can help. Nothing is worse than losing your cool in front of an audience. But even at home, a quiet space can help a lot. Ask your child if this would help them at home.

**3. Awareness of intensity:**

Support them to focus on the emotion and to purposefully think of how the intensity will pass. Validation can be very helpful at these times so let them know that you know it feels horrible.

**4. Positive thinking:**

Encourage recognition of catastrophic thinking and support thought changing to imagine better outcomes.

**5. Bring the mind to a pleasant place:**

This could be a very happy memory, a funny experience, a favourite activity one doesn't have access to at the moment (ie/horse riding, playing a favourite sport), or simply an imagined holiday or event such as a picnic on the beach. Encourage thinking about it in detail and actually trying to picture it in your mind: what do you smell? Hear? See? Feel? Who is there?

**6. Distract the mind:**

It helps to have discussed this during frontloading preparations. Get a sense of what they like to do and what *they* feel would be helpful when anxiety has them in a grip. The list is endless, it's a matter of being creative and knowing oneself well enough to know what simple activity may offer relief. Examples could be:

- listen to music
- take a walk
- drink a glass of water or herbal tea
- play with a pet
- take a warm bath
- paint, draw or colour
- call a friend

**7. Desensitize**

Help make small incremental steps to expose themselves to the trigger. And when they are avoiding, try to ensure that the activity or place they withdraw to isn't rewarding or a soothing comfort. For example, if they refuse to attend school, ensure they aren't replacing school with a mini-vacation day off.

## **General wellness and resilience**

Try to support your child to develop skills in:

- Emotional identification and management
- Perseverance and motivation
- Goal setting and goal attainment
- Coping with/accepting failure
- Being comfortable with being uncomfortable (even if the discomfort is extremely uncomfortable at times)
- Developing interests

And finally, be purposeful about:

- Screen time in moderation
- Getting exercise and fresh air, being in nature
- Sleep, nutrition
- Gratitude, faith, cultural connection
- Finding space and time for calm

## **Resources**

**Anxiety Canada:**

- [Children](#)
- [Youth](#)
- [Adults](#)

**Kids Help Phone:** [How to cope with panic and anxiety](#)

**CHEO:** [Anxiety and Stress Management](#)

**School Mental Health Ontario:**

Faith and Wellness (\*These resources were developed for educators but many of the activities can be adapted for skill building at home.)

- [Primary, Junior, and Intermediate](#)
- [Secondary](#)