

# helping your child with back to school anxiety

## a guide for parents/carers

If your child has been away from school for a long time due to the covid-19 lockdown, you might notice that they are beginning to feel anxious about returning back to school. Like many children, they might have become used to being at home all of the time and therefore feel nervous about changing their 'new normal' all over again. The important thing to remember is that this is NORMAL and there are some things you can do to help make the transition back to school a little easier and less anxiety provoking for your child.

**If you feel like your child needs further support with feelings of anxiety, your Mental Health Support Team (MHST) at school may be able to help. You can request support from the team by talking to a member of staff at your child's school who can then get in touch with us.**

### get prepared

Try your best to spend the days or weeks leading up to going back to school to get back into a routine. Make sure bed times get back to normal and that you set alarms for your child to get up at the time they would usually get up for school. This might be difficult at first but it will help your child get a good night's sleep and make it much easier to get up for school again when they need to.



### praise & rewards

Don't be afraid to use praise and rewards to encourage your child to get back to their routine and back to school. Try to be really specific with your praise (for example, "Well done, you got up at 7 o'clock this morning and brushed your teeth straight away - that's great!") and use rewards to promote motivation. These don't have to be big rewards (for example, it could be having their favourite meal or watching their favourite movie) and it can be good to ask them what they would like as a reward and what they can do to achieve this. Get them involved in getting back to normal.



### talk & answer questions

If your child has worries about coronavirus, it's important to talk to them about the facts. Explain that they would not be allowed back to school if it was unsafe and try to answer any of their questions open and honestly. Children are resilient and respond well to knowing the facts.



### help your child with their anxiety

Use this booklet to help you and your child to better understand their anxiety and learn some strategies for how to better manage it and help them feel better. If your child continues to struggle, you can always make a request for support with your school's Mental Health Support Team (MHST). Alternatively, you can make a referral to your local CAMHS service by getting in touch with your GP.

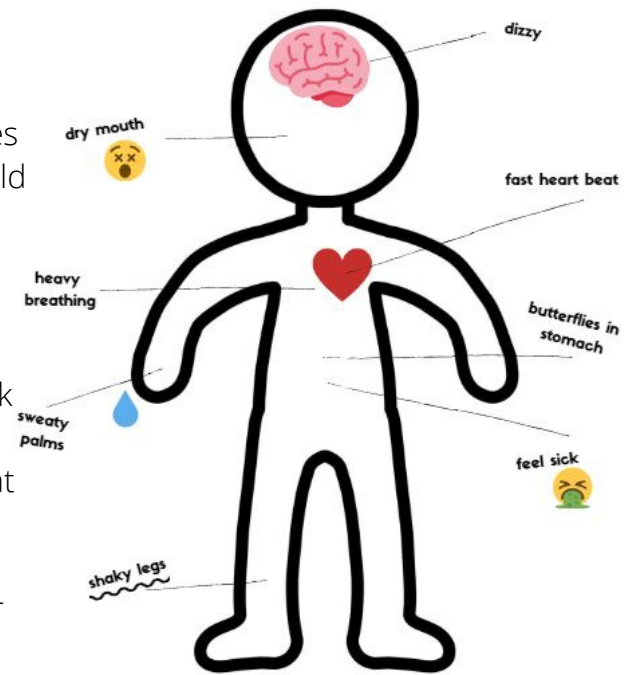


## symptoms of anxiety

When feeling anxious, we all experience some physical symptoms which can be unpleasant and upsetting. It's important to remember that these are NORMAL body reactions to a feared situation that everyone experiences at some time or another. What symptoms does your child recognise when they're feeling anxious?

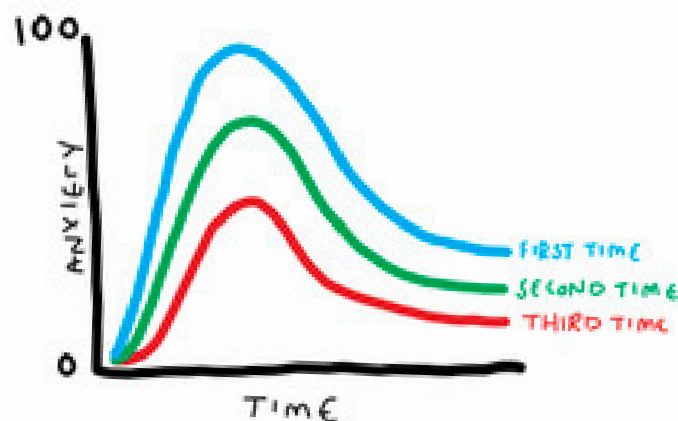
## the fight or flight response

Humans developed this response as cave men because it was a much more dangerous time to live back then (think running away from saber tooth tigers and hunting for food). The Fight or Flight response meant that cave men's bodies went into survival mode whenever their brains sensed danger. This meant their heart rate and blood pressure would increase so they had a better chance of running away (flight) or fighting the danger (fight). We all react in different ways when we feel anxious and our Fight or Flight response kicks in, but it's important to remember that it is normal!



## habituation (getting used to a feared situation)

Evidence shows that the more we avoid feared or uncomfortable situations, the more anxious we will become. This is because our body and brain are learning to fear that situation. For many children, the longer they have spent away from school and the more they have become used to being at home, the worse their fear/anxiety around school has become. This is because they haven't had any opportunities to test out that fear and teach their brains that there is nothing to be worried or scared about. Many children will therefore need to HABITUATE back to school. This means that, the first time they go back to school, they will most likely experience the symptoms of anxiety because their fight or flight response has reacted to the feared situation. However, what we know is that, the longer your child stays in that situation, the less they will feel anxious. This means the more times your child goes back to school, the easier it will become. It can be a good idea to explain this to your child so that they know it is NORMAL.



Use the strategies on the next pages to help your child manage the feelings of anxiety when returning and getting used to being back at school.

# Breathing Techniques

When we feel anxious, upset or distressed, it can be difficult to know what to do to feel better. By using these breathing techniques, we can reduce our anxiety and lower our blood pressure/heart rate. This helps us feel calmer and more focused and helps us to face our fears.

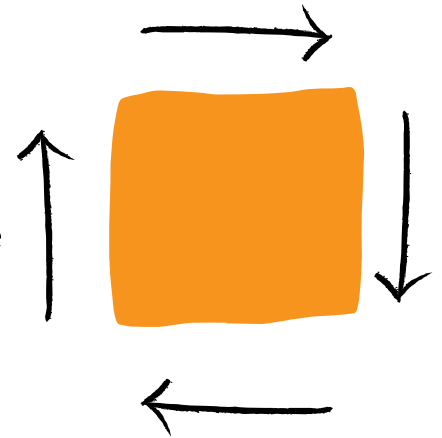
## Belly Breathing



- Take a deep breath in and fill your belly like you're inflating a balloon.
- As you do this, count 1, 2, 3, 4 to breath in and fill the balloon in your belly.
- Pause and then let all of the air out of your belly like you're letting a balloon deflate.
- As you do this, count 1, 2, 3, 4 to breath out and let the balloon go down from your belly.

## Square Breathing

- Imagine you're drawing a square with your finger in the air.
- Breath in while counting 1, 2, 3, 4 as you draw the top line and then pause.
- Breath out while counting 1, 2, 3, 4 as you draw the line down the side and then pause.
- Breath in while counting 1, 2, 3, 4 as you draw the bottom line and then pause.
- Breath out while counting 1, 2, 3, 4 as you draw the line up the side to make the square.



## Finger Breathing



- Use your index finger to trace around the edges of the fingers on your opposite hand.
- Count 1, 2, 3, 4 and breath in as you go up the first finger.
- Count 1, 2, 3, 4 and breath out as you go down the finger.
- Repeat until you have traced up and down all five fingers, breathing 1, 2, 3, 4 in and 1, 2, 3, 4 out each time.

Top Tip! Practise these breathing techniques when you're calm so that you're better prepared to use them when you need to.



Count **slowly** when breathing in and out and **repeat** the technique as many times as you need to until you feel calmer.

# Worry Time

Young people can find it difficult to manage their worries and they might struggle with worries even more than usual when it comes to going back to school. This guide can your child to manage their worries in a structured way to help them to feel better.

There are two different types of worry and it's important to know the difference because we can deal with them in different ways. The first are **Hypothetical Worries** which are worries we don't currently have control over and can't do anything about. The second are **Practical Worries** which are worries we can do something about.

## Hypothetical Worries

- What if we all get ill?
- What if I have a different teacher?
- What if I'm in a different class?
- What if I infect my family?

## Practical Worries

- I might not be with a friend.
- What if I can't remember what we did in maths?
- Someone might not follow the social distancing guidelines.

As you notice worries during the day, write them down so that you can come back to them later at **Worry Time**. You could also **make a worry box** to put your worries in.

Once you've written the worry down, it's important to **refocus your attention**. Pay attention to whatever it is you're doing at that moment OR do something totally different. You can also refocus by using one of the calming techniques below.



Use **Worry Time** to go back and address all of the worries you have written down that day. Worry time should be at the same time everyday and should last for a maximum of 30 minutes. Make sure it's not too close to bed time and that you're not distracted when doing it.

For each worry, decide whether it is a **Practical Worry** or **Hypothetical Worry**.

## for the hypothetical worries:

For hypothetical worries, **let the worries go**. You can do this by ripping up, scribbling out or scrumpling up and throwing away the worry. Once you've done this, use a calming technique to refocus your attention from the worries which you have let go.

## for the practical worries:

For practical worries, use **problem solving** to find a solution:

- 1) write the problem in 1 or 2 sentences.
- 2) think of all of the solutions you can.
- 3) for each idea you came up with, write down all the good things and bad things for each solution.
- 4) choose the solution that looks the most likely to help.
- 5) make a plan to put your solution in place and DO IT.
- 6) review how it went - did it solve the problem or do you need to change and/or try a different solution?

notice the worry

↓  
write it down for later

↓  
worry time

↙ ↘  
hypothetical  
worries

↙ ↘  
practical  
worries

↓  
let the worry go

↓  
problem solving

↓  
change your focus of attention



## calming techniques to change your **5,4,3,2,1** focus of attention

Notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.

### Fact name

Think about and name facts about what is going on right now. For example, think:

My age is...

My name is...

I am wearing...

The weather is...