

Parent/Carer Anxiety Toolkit

A resource for parents & carers to help support their child or young person to understand and manage anxiety.

STEP (Swindon)

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About this toolkit

Children can feel anxious about different things at different ages. Many of these worries are a normal part of growing up, however sometimes anxiety can get in the way of normal everyday life, this is when they may need some help.

When young children feel anxious, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice that they:

- become irritable, tearful or clingy
- have difficulty sleeping
- wake in the night
- start wetting the bed
- have bad dreams
-

In older children you may notice that they:

- lack confidence to try new things or seem unable to face simple, everyday challenges
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems with sleeping or eating
- have angry outbursts
- have a lot of negative thoughts, or keep thinking that bad things are going to happen
- start avoiding everyday activities, such as seeing friends, going out in public or going to school

If your child is experiencing anxiety, there are things that parents and carers can do to help. STEP have put together this toolkit to help you understand anxiety and how you can support your child to manage their anxieties.

Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we perceive that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations

Children and young people often don't recognize their anxiety for what it is. Instead, they may think there is something "wrong" with them. Children may focus on the physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. stomach-aches).

Young people may think they are weird, weak, out of control, or even going crazy! These thoughts might make them feel even more anxious and self-conscious. Therefore, the first step is to teach your child about anxiety and how to recognize it. Self-awareness is essential!

Myth: Talking to your child about anxiety will make them even MORE anxious.

Fact: Providing accurate information about anxiety can reduce confusion or shame. Explain that anxiety is a common and normal experience, and it can be managed successfully! Once your child understands this, he or she will feel more motivated to make life easier

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is normal- Everyone experiences anxiety at times. For example, it is normal to feel anxious when on a rollercoaster, or before a test. Some children and young people may appreciate some facts about how common anxiety problems are. For example, "Did you know that one-in-six children under 18 will suffer from a real problem with anxiety?"

Anxiety is not dangerous - Though anxiety may feel uncomfortable, it doesn't last long, is temporary, and will eventually decrease!

Anxiety can be helpful - Anxiety helps us prepare for real danger (such as a bear confronting us in the woods) or for performing at our best (for example, it helps us get ready for a test or presentation). When we experience anxiety, it triggers our "fight-flight-freeze" response and prepares our bodies to defend themselves. For instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger. When we freeze, we may not be noticed, allowing the danger to pass. Without anxiety, humans would not have survived as a species!

Anxiety can become a problem - Anxiety can become a problem when our body reacts as if we are in danger when there isn't any real danger. You can use the '**smoke alarm response**' below to help your child understand how this happens,

The "smoke alarm" response: "An alarm can help protect us when there is an actual fire, but sometimes a smoke alarm is too sensitive and goes off when there isn't really a fire (e.g. burning toast in toaster). Like a smoke alarm, anxiety is helpful when it works right. But when it goes off when there is no real danger, then we may want to fix it."

Encouraging your child to open up about their feelings and any fears and worries

Firstly try to encourage your child to talk about how they are feeling, talking about anxieties will make them seem less frightening. If they find this difficult or do not wish to talk about it they may benefit from writing them down in a diary and then sharing them with you when they feel they are able to. Don't give up if talking about feelings doesn't go well the first time, keep trying and choose a time when you won't be distracted by things going on around you and they have your full attention. You could also try using "**cup 'o' feelings**" sheet that can be found in the resource section of this toolkit. Once you have been able to talk with your child about what they are feeling you can then start to explore the anxieties your child has been displaying.

Ways in which you can begin to talk about your child's anxieties.

Start by describing a recent situation when you observed some signs of anxiety in your child. *"Yesterday, when we went out for dinner you seemed very quiet and you didn't talk or eat much. It seemed you may have been a bit nervous about going out. What was that like for you?"*

Talk to your child about some things you were scared of when you were the same age (especially if you shared the same types of fears), and ask if he or she has any similar worries or fears.

Ask what worries him or her the most. You may have to prompt younger children by offering an example such as: *"I know some kids are scared of ____, do you have that fear too?"* Being specific can help your child sort through confusing fears and feelings.

When your child expresses anxiety or worry, offer reassurance by saying you believe him or her, and that having those feelings is okay. Remember, your child will take cues from you. Show acceptance of worry thoughts and anxious feelings. If you stay calm, it will help your child stay calm, too!

To help your child talk about their worries/fears use the Anxiety triggers activity sheet in the resource section.

Tip

Does hearing "Don't worry. Relax!" help you when you're anxious about something? It probably doesn't comfort your child much, either. It's important to acknowledge that your child's fears are real. Your empathy will increase the chances that your child will accept your guidance, and discuss his or her fears with you in the future

Helping your child to recognise physical symptoms of anxiety.

There are various ways you can help your child to recognise the physical symptoms of anxiety. For younger children you can use **Chester the Cat diagram** in the resource section, for older children you can use the **Does this look familiar** sheet or they could create their own diagram by drawing a body outline and labelling it. You may choose to just have a conversation and even draw up a list of physical symptoms.

Once your child recognises what makes them anxious, how their anxieties physically affects them and is able to talk about it with you or someone they trust, they have already taken the first step in learning how to take control and manage their anxiety.

Other ways parents can help their child manage anxiety:

- Encourage your child to keep talking about their worries or fears and give them reassurance
- Encourage them to ask for help when they are becoming anxious
- Help your child to learn how to breath deeply and slowly - **see the deep breathing exercises in the resource section**
- If you know a big change is coming up such as moving house or school or a family separation, help prepare your child by talking to them about when and why
- Distraction can work well, especially for younger children. Play a game or doing something fun that will take their mind of what is worrying them
- Create a worry box or jar so your child can write things down or draw a pictures and put them inside, you can then go through them together and talk through them
- Talk to your child about creating a place in their mind they can go that feels safe, happy and relaxing it could be once they create from their imagination or it could be somewhere they have been that has happy memories
- Help your child to keep a good routine one that includes doing regular exercise, eating a healthy diet and creating a calm bedtime, including limiting screen time especially before sleep.
- Practicing mindfulness and meditation can help reduce anxiety and worries as well as many other benefits— **see resources section for some mindful activities and online support section for links to guided mediation.**

Managing Panic attacks

Sometimes anxiety may lead to experiencing a panic attack. A panic attack is when your body experiences a rush of intense mental and physical symptoms. It can come on very quickly and for no apparent reason. A panic attack can be very frightening and distressing but they're not dangerous. Common symptoms experienced during a panic attack are:

| | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| A racing heartbeat | Trembling | Numbness |
| feeling faint | Hot flushes | Dry mouth |
| sweating | sweating | Ringling in your ears |
| Nausea | Shaky limbs | A feeling of dread |
| Chest pain | A choking sensation | Pins and needles |
| Shortness of breath | Dizziness | Fear of dying |

You can help your child manage a panic attack by helping them understand that the attack wont cause them any physical harm and reassuring them that it will pass. Helping your child to breath deeply and calmly during an attack can help get it under control more quickly., once they have learnt to use a breathing technique they can use it at any point they are feeling anxious **See breathing techniques in the resource section**

If your child's anxiety is persistent or severe and is impacting on everyday life, you may need further help or support. Visiting your GP can be helpful, not only can they offer advice and guidance themselves, they may also suggest that they refer your child for specialist support with organisations such as, Targeted Mental Health service (TAMHS) or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). There may also be other services in your local community that can offer support to both children and parents. **Please see the sources of support section for helpful websites and telephone numbers.** Talking to your child's school or teacher can also be helpful: they may be able to offer advice to you as a parent/carer and support for your child in school.

Resource Section

In this section you will find:

Useful Worksheets

Breathing Techniques

Mindfulness Activities

Online Support Links

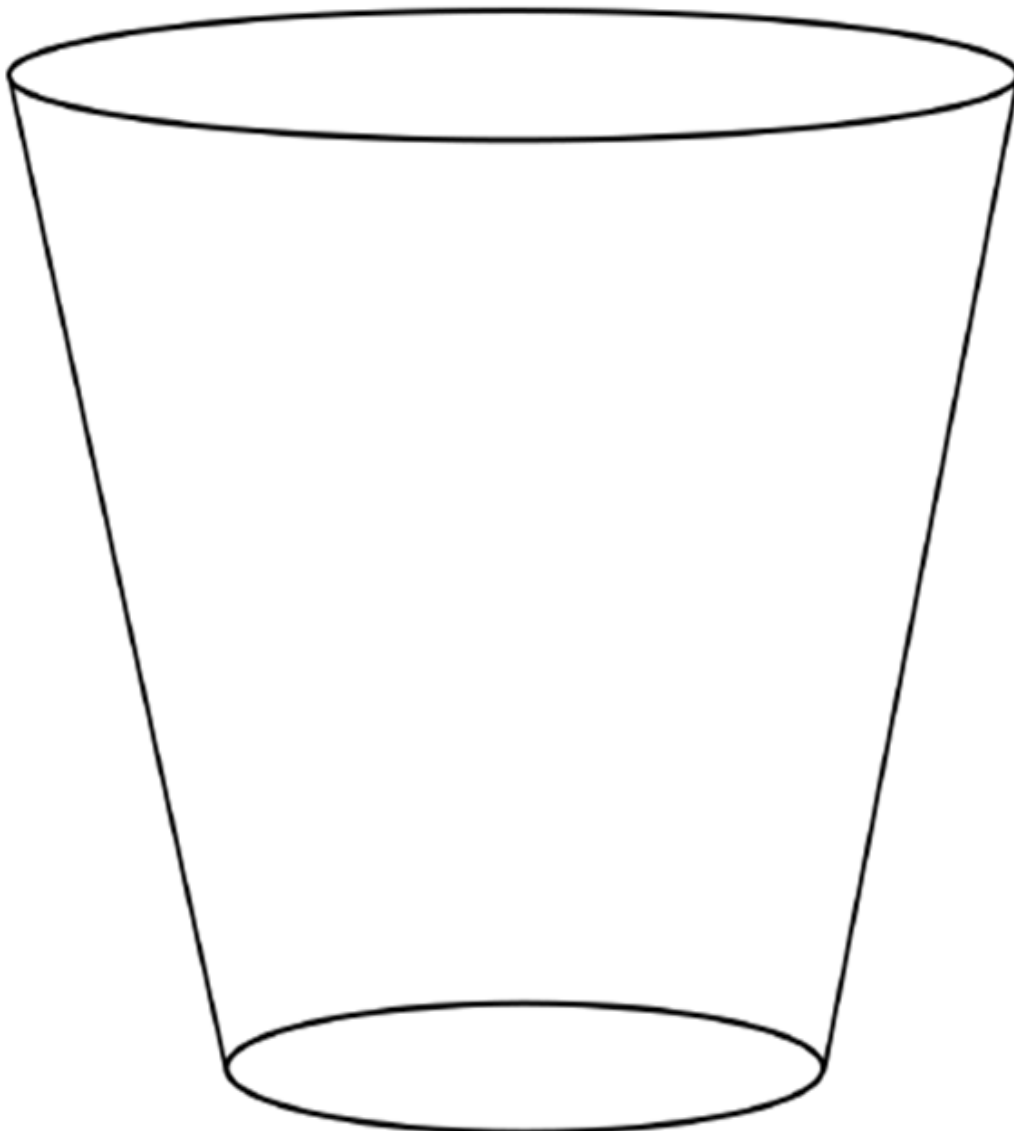
Support Telephone Numbers

Use this sheet to help your child identify their feelings and emotions.

MY CUP-O-FEELINGS

Color inside this cup to show how much of each emotion you're feeling right now!
Use the blank spaces to pick other colors and feelings that you'd like.

YELLOW = HAPPY **RED = ANGRY** **PINK = HOPEFUL** **PURPLE = SCARED**
ORANGE = NERVOUS **GREEN = EXCITED** **BLUE = SAD** **BROWN = SURPRISED**



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ANXIETY TRIGGERS



An anxiety trigger is something that happens to make you feel anxious or nervous. Go through this list and, on a scale of 1-10, identify how anxious each of the triggers makes you feel.

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|---|------------------|---|---|---------|---|---|--------------------|---|----|
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| CALM | | A LITTLE ANXIOUS | | | ANXIOUS | | | EXTREMELY ANXIOUS! | | |

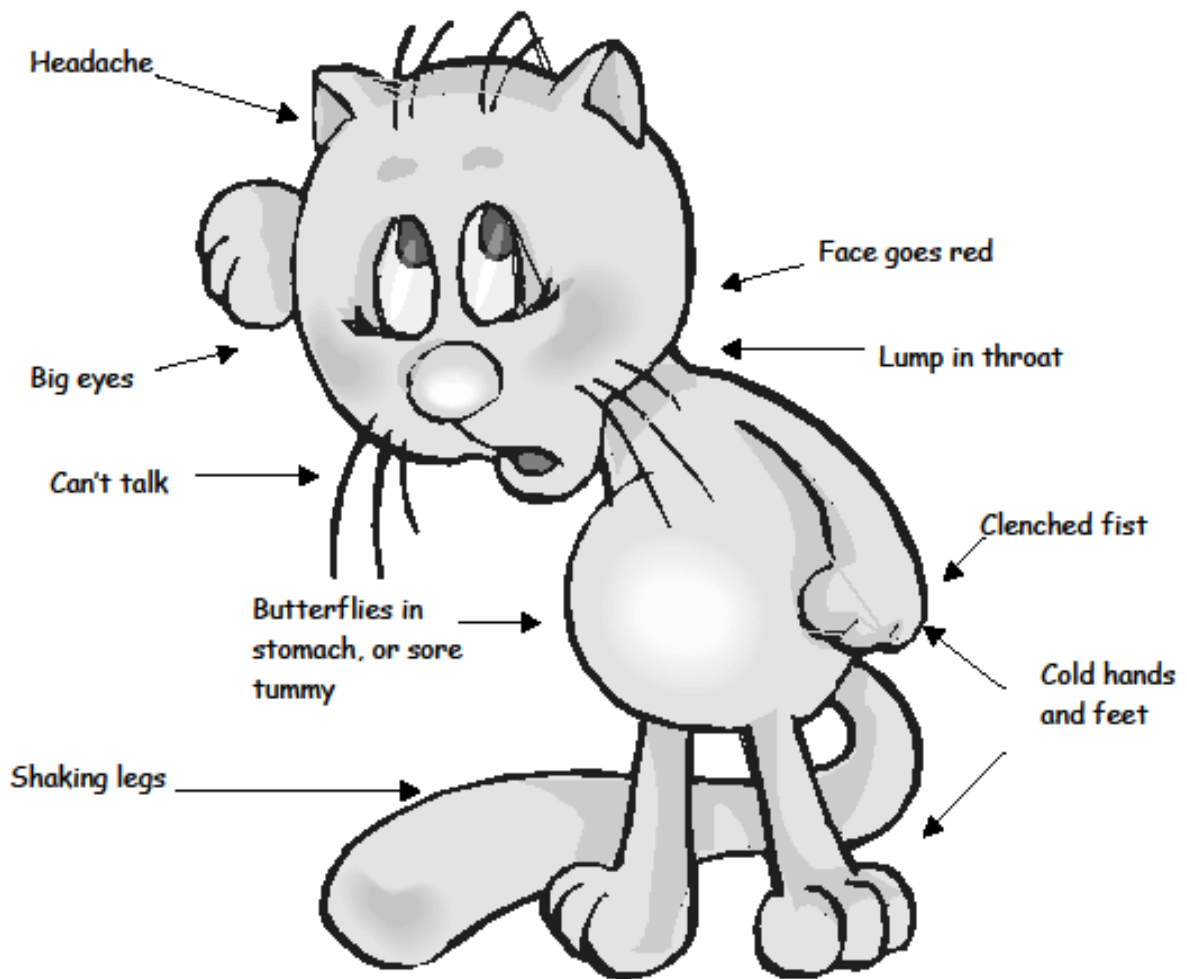
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict or drama in relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Not feeling prepared |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being in a large crowd of people | <input type="checkbox"/> Being in tight spaces, like an elevator |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting new people | <input type="checkbox"/> Being in wide open spaces |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going to a new place for the first time | <input type="checkbox"/> Being around certain people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having to confront someone | <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting with someone I have a crush on |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting on social media | <input type="checkbox"/> Not knowing what is going to happen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having too much to do | <input type="checkbox"/> Not having enough money |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Giving a presentation in front of the class | <input type="checkbox"/> Not knowing what career I want to have |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working as part of a group | <input type="checkbox"/> School violence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pressure to act or behave a certain way | <input type="checkbox"/> Family stress (divorce, finances, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Performing in front of other people | <input type="checkbox"/> A sick friend or family member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Things not going the way I planned | <input type="checkbox"/> Rumors about me spreading around school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having to change up my routine | <input type="checkbox"/> My job, boss, or co-workers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grades or stress from schoolwork | <input type="checkbox"/> Other people's expectations of me |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having too much time by myself | <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being away from my phone for too long | <input type="checkbox"/> Having to be the one to make decisions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friends not texting me back | <input type="checkbox"/> Making new friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loud noises or raised voices | <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in my body or my weight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other people being disappointed in me | <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting with a certain family member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watching the news | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling left out by my peer group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having conversations with peers or adults | <input type="checkbox"/> Becoming an adult with more responsibilities |

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER THINGS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL ANXIOUS?



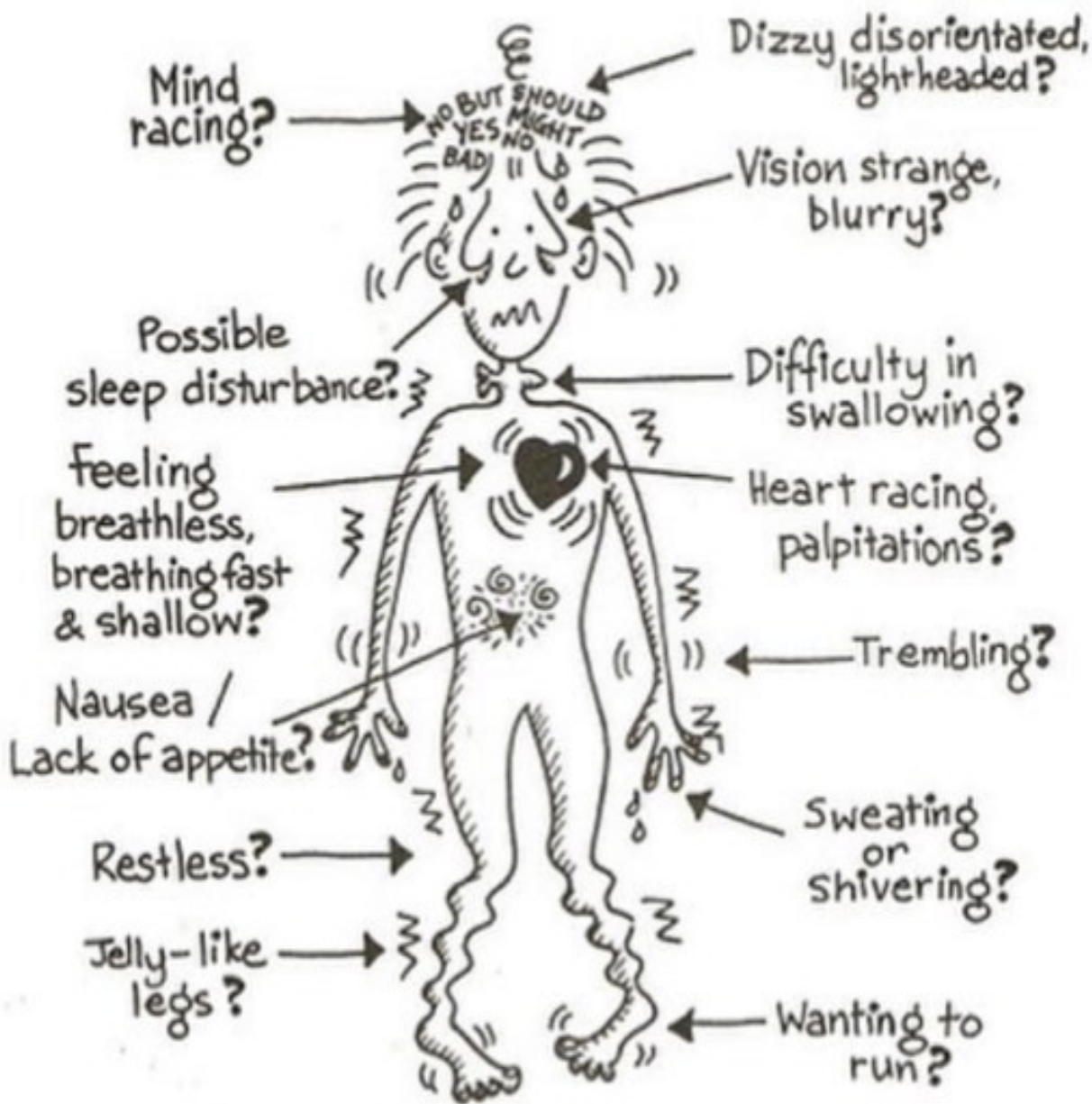
Talk through all the symptoms of anxiety Chester feels in his body and ask your child to circle the feelings they experience when they feel anxious.

Chester the Cat feels anxious! How does Chester feel anxiety in his body?

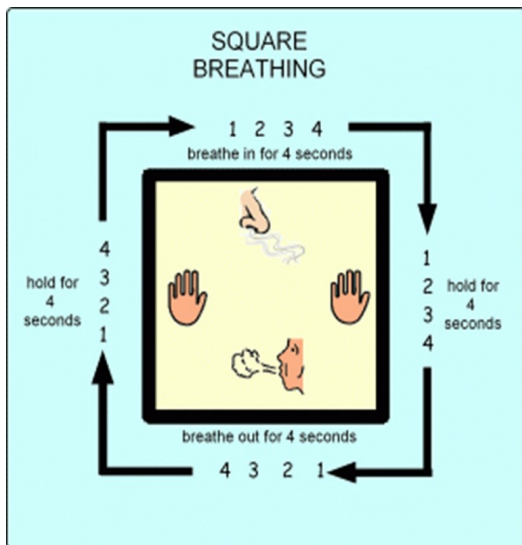


Older children can use this diagram to highlight which symptoms they feel when they are anxious or they can draw their own. Have a conversation with them about how often they experience these feelings and in what situation so you have a better idea of how much anxiety is affecting them.

DOES THIS LOOK FAMILIAR?



Deep breathing techniques can be used to manage stress, anxiety and panic, it takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. Below you will find a few different techniques you can teach your child to use, why not try and learn them together.



1. Begin by slowly exhaling all of your air out.
2. Then, gently inhale through your nose to a slow count of 4.
3. Hold at the top of the **breath** for a count of 4
4. Then gently exhale through your mouth for a count of 4.
5. At the bottom of the **breath**, pause and hold for the count of 4.

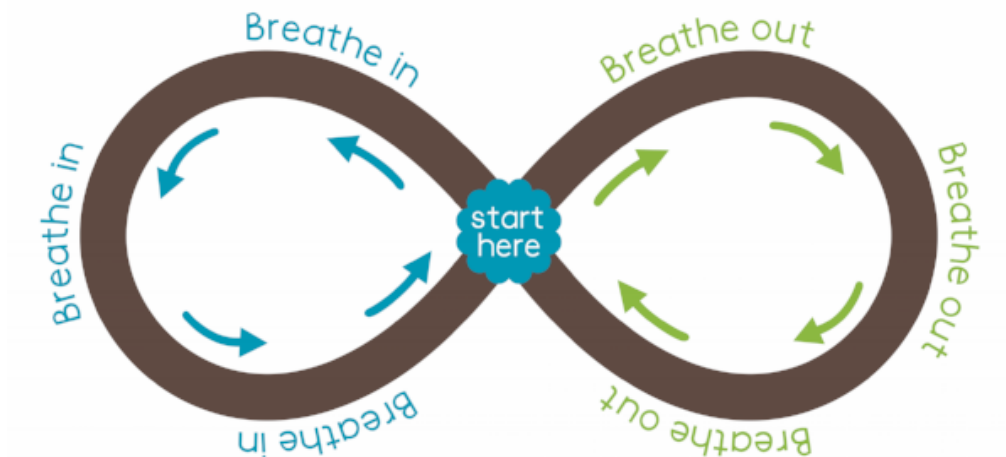
Star Breathing

Trace your finger around the star and follow the instructions.

Breathe in **Hold** **Breathe Out**



Lazy 8 Breathing



Mindfulness Activities Suggestions



Mindfulness colouring can help lift your mood, decrease anxiety and stress. Free printable sheets and mindfulness colouring books can be found online. We have included one colouring sheet for younger children and one for an older child in this resource.

Mind Jars or Glitter shakers are a great way of distracting your mind away from anxious thoughts. You can also use old plastic bottles instead of jars, just make sure the lid is on tightly!



Examples of Self-soothing using the 5 senses



Sound:

Listen to soothing music, have a conversation with someone who cares, listen to an online meditation exercise



Sight:

Look at pictures that bring up good memories, take a walk and enjoy your surroundings, look up places you want to see online or in a travel magazine



Taste:

Cook and taste your favorite meal, chew a piece of gum, make some green/herbal tea



Touch:

Pet your dog/cat, give someone you care about a hug, carry around a small stress ball or soft trinket to squeeze, take a bubble bath

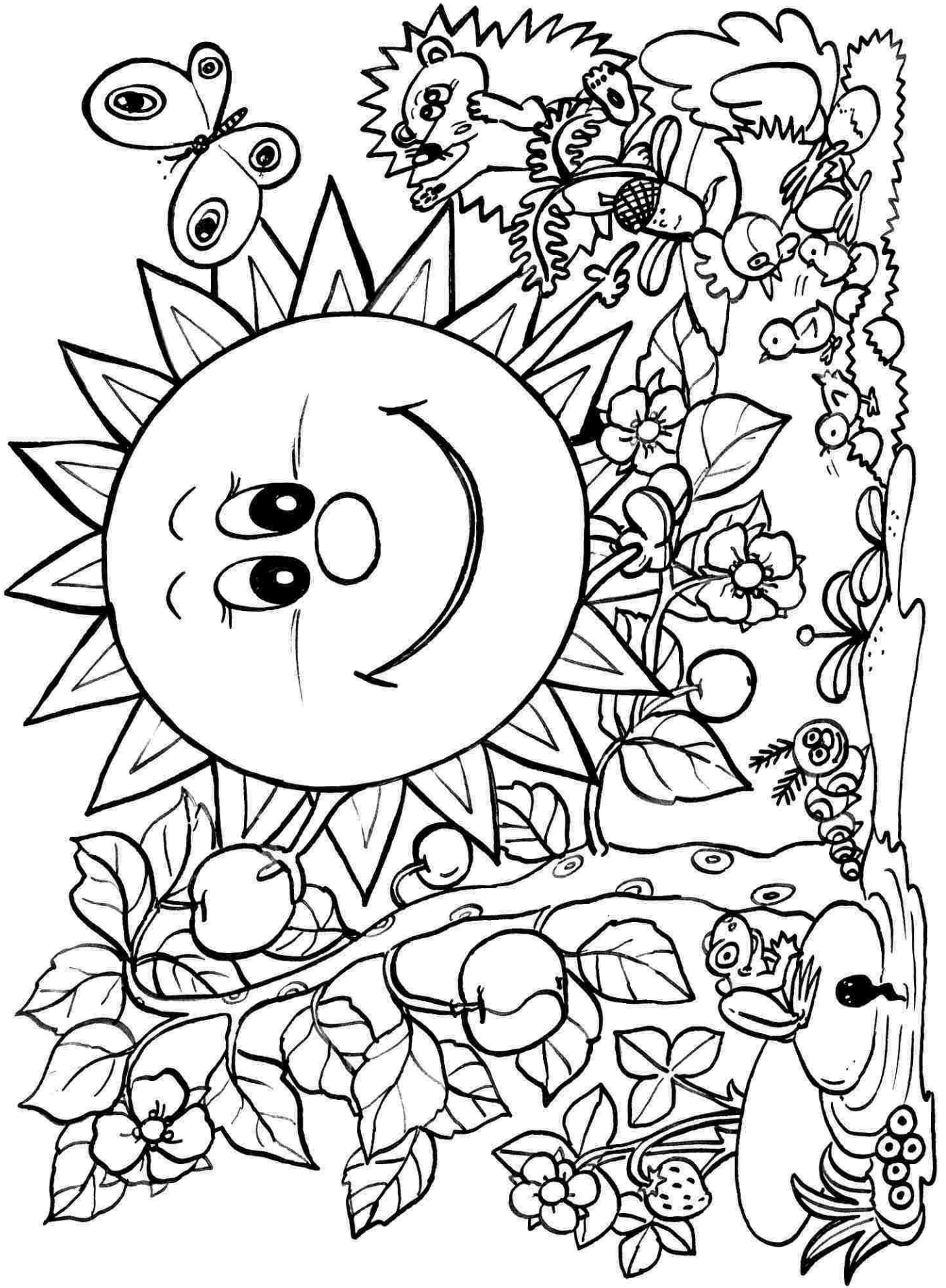


Smell:

Light a candle (your favorite scent), sit outside and take in the fresh air, buy some fresh flowers

Here are some ways to your child can use their 5 senses, focusing on the present moment rather than worrying or anxious thoughts





Sources of Support

Online Support—The following organisations can provide advice and guidance for children and young people and many offer advice and for parents/carers.

Mind - provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.
<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

The Mix - <https://www.themix.org.uk/mental-health>

Young Minds - UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health.
<https://youngminds.org.uk/> and <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

Kooth – Free, safe and anonymous online support for young people.
<https://www.kooth.com/>

NHS - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety-in-children/>

The Dock Swindon - The Dock is a new and different way for young people to find out about services that are here to help them in Swindon. <https://thedockswindon.co.uk/>

Friends of STEP Facebook Page - Here you can find useful resources covering a variety of topics
<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfStep/>

Useful Telephone Numbers

TAMHS (Targeted Mental Health Service) - Work with children and young people with emotional and mental health needs such as: Anxiety, trauma, emotional distress, low mood, self-harm. Tel - 01793 463177

CAMHS (children and adolescent mental health services) - help children, young people and their families across Swindon, Wiltshire, Bath & NE Somerset who are experiencing more severe, complex and persistent mental health difficulties. Tel - 01865 903422 (Swindon)

Useful online videos

Self massage for anxiety - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-nKMaCkxGM>

Sleep - a bedtime story (meditation to get to sleep) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fbaoqkY0Qk>

The benefits of exercise - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNI0sNI-o60>

Headspace meditation - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_yXe_6mYTA

The Five Ways to Wellbeing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF7Ou43Vj6c>

Beginners guide to meditation - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-kMJBWk9E0>

How to calm worries and sleep- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fu1TaDhEtDY>