

Parent/Carer Emotionally– Based School Avoidance Toolkit

A resource for parents & carers to help support their child or young person to understand and manage Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

STEP (Swindon)

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About this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help parents and carers of young people who are experiencing emotional based school avoidance. It contains information about what this is and how a young person can be supported through this. While it is entirely normal for young people to resist going to school or feel anxious about it, sometimes this can become a longer-term issue for them, meaning they refuse to attend for either long periods or on frequent occasions. This is when it becomes emotionally-based school avoidance. It is important to communicate clearly with the child's school and to work with them to make sure everyone is doing what's needed to help your child overcome their anxieties and make sure things are put in place to help them return to the classroom. Speak with the school SENDCo to address any needs.

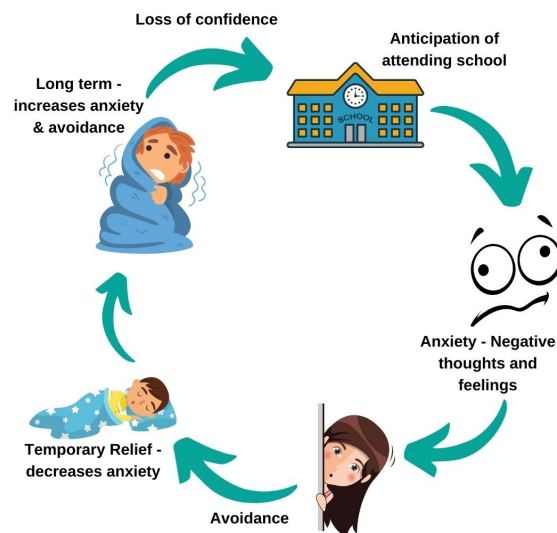
What is emotionally-based school avoidance?

The Anna Freud charity (www.annafreud.org) states that:

Reduced or non-attendance at school by a child or young person is often rooted in emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues.

Non-attendance can include not attending entirely for prolonged periods or regularly missing whole days at school. It can also include:

- not going to their classroom
- not staying in class
- not attending some lessons
- avoiding some physical spaces or people.



What causes non-attendance?

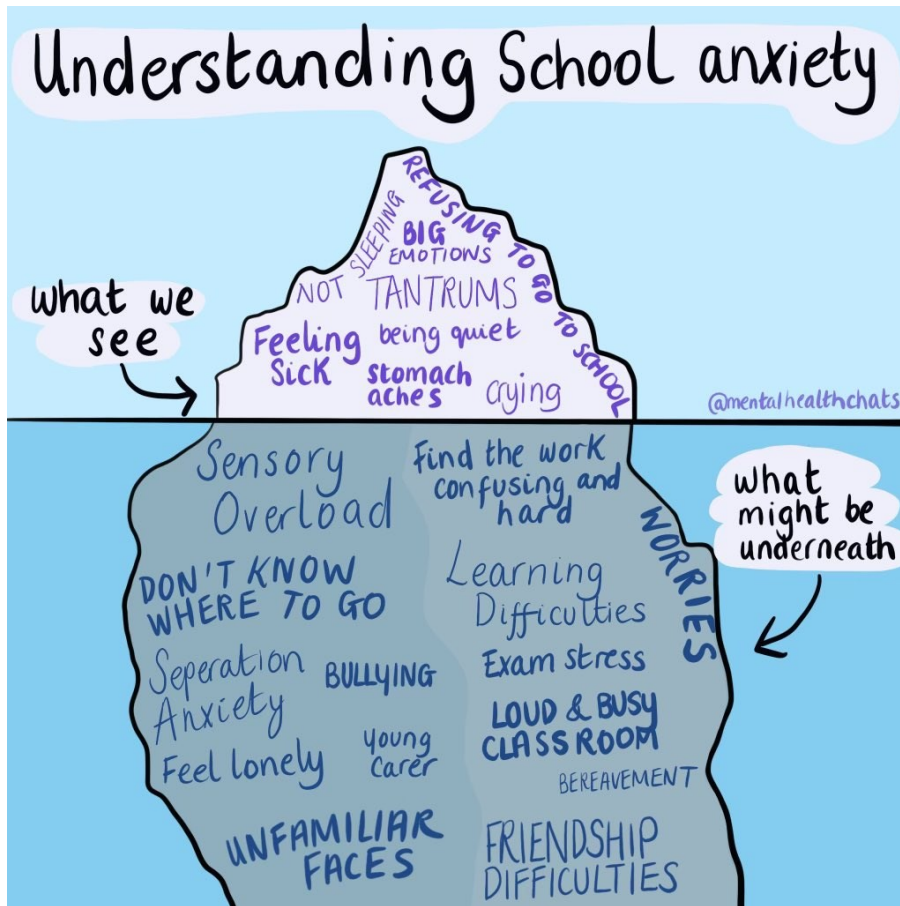
There is no one reason why children and young people might have difficulties attending school. It varies by individual, and is usually caused by a combination of various factors and their interaction, rather than a single cause. Potential risk factors for non-attendance can be split into three main categories: aspects specific to the child or young person, factors to do with the family and home, and issues to do with school.



Some examples of non-attendance risk factors could include:

Child/young person	Family/home	School
Anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns	High levels of family stress (including financial stress, conflict or domestic violence)	Bullying and microaggressions
Difficulties with managing and regulating emotions	Changes to the home environment (including divorce, separation or parent/carer illness)	Difficult relationships with staff members
Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	Being a young carer	Lack of provision to meet specific learning or wellbeing needs
Difficulties making and maintaining friendships, being socially isolated	Loss and bereavement	Difficulties in particular subjects or physical spaces
Separation anxiety or attachment issues with a parent/carer	Family history of difficulties at school	Demanding, pressurised academic environment
Having a special educational need or disability, or being neurodivergent	Poor parental mental health	Transitions: from primary to secondary, or through key stages





Not wanting or not feeling able to go to school can be due to a wide variety of reasons and just, like an iceberg, the reactions to it that we see on the surface are often caused by underlying struggles, emotions and difficulties. Symptoms of emotionally-based school avoidance are similar to symptoms of general anxiety but are triggered by school attendance or conversations around school. These symptoms are due to a “fight, flight or freeze” response triggered in the body as a reaction to a perceived threat and are not something the young person can control.

THE STRESS RESPONSE IN KIDS

FIGHT

- Yelling, Screaming, Using Mean Words
- Hitting, Kicking, Biting, Throwing, Punching
- Blaming, Deflecting Responsibility, Defensive
- Demanding, Controlling
- “Oppositional”, “Defiant”, “Noncompliant”
- Moving Towards What Feels Threatening
- Irritable, Angry, Furious, Offended, Aggressive

FLIGHT

- Wanting to Escape, Running Away
- Unfocused, Hard to Pay Attention
- Fidgeting, Restlessness, Hyperactive
- Preoccupied, Busy with Everything But the Thing
- Procrastinating, Avoidant, Ignores the Situation
- Moving Away From What Feels Threatening
- Anxious, Panicked, Scared, Worried, Overwhelmed

FREEZE

- Shutting Down, Mind Goes Blank
- Urge to Hide, Isolates Self
- Verbally Unresponsive, Says, “I don’t know” a lot
- Difficulty with Completing Tasks
- Zoned Out, Daydreaming
- Unable to Move, Feeling Stuck
- Depressed, Numb, Bored/Apathetic, Helpless

Signs of emotionally based school avoidance

Bolton Educational psychology service describe the symptoms of emotionally based school avoidance as:

What are the early warning signs of EBSA?

- Change in attendance or punctuality (absent or late more often / just in time when they normally arrive in plenty of time).
- Unsettled on arrival to school.
- Crying and tearfulness.
- Pleading to stay at home.
- Refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house.
- For younger children, reluctance to leave parents or get out of the car.
- Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members (may worry about the safety of those at home).
- Absences for minor illnesses.
- Patterns in absences (particular days and/or subjects, after weekends and holidays).
- Social isolation and avoidance of classmates or peer group.
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence.
- Confusion or extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to lack of concentration.
- Expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so.
- Negative talk about school.
- Reluctance to attend school trips.
- Physical changes e.g. sweating, sickness, aching limbs, headaches, panic attacks, tummy aches, rapid weight loss or gain.
- Complaints of feeling ill on school days (psychosomatic illness).
- Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness and/or outbursts of temper.
- Challenging behaviours, particularly in relation to specific situations at school.
- Defensive aggression as a means of trying to control a situation that feels 'out-of-control'.
- Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours.
- Low mood and sense of isolation resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.
- Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence.
- Disruption of day-to-day activities that affect the family and put parents/carers under a great deal of pressure.
- A history of anxiety (including EBSA) in the family.

9 Signs of Anxiety In Children



1

Excessive worry or fear: Anxious children might worry excessively about school performance, going to the dentist, or even friendships. That's why they might seek constant reassurance and ask lots of What-If questions.

2

Trouble sleeping: Anxious children might have difficulty falling asleep, wake up frequently at night, or have nightmares.

3

Physical complaints: Some children may experience headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension even though there's no underlying medical cause. These can be triggered by anxiety and it's called somatization.

4

Clinginess and separation anxiety: Anxious children may become very clingy to parents or caregivers, particularly in unfamiliar situations, like when meeting new people, trying new activities, or visiting new places.

5

Avoidance behaviors: Children with anxiety might avoid situations that trigger their worries, like social events, school presentations, or certain places. This can become a cycle that reinforces their anxieties.

6

Changes in appetite: Some children may lose their appetite, while others might overeat due to stress.

7

Irritability and outbursts: Anxiety can make children feel on edge, leading to irritability, angry outbursts or emotional meltdowns.

8

Difficulty concentrating: Anxiety can make it challenging for children to focus in school or complete tasks. Their minds might be racing with worries, making it hard to concentrate on the present moment.

9

Perfectionism: Children with anxiety might set unrealistically high standards for themselves, striving to avoid making mistakes and potential criticism at any cost. This can lead to frustration and disappointment.

How can I help my young person?

Swindon Borough Council provide lots of help and support for parents and carers of emotionally-based school avoiders. Their recommendations for support are:

If your child is worried about going to school, it is important to address the problem early. It is important to consider the individual needs of your child and their situation.

- Be sympathetic, supportive and understanding of their perspective and acknowledge their fears
- Identify what is causing any worries by asking them specific questions—for example, what three things are you most worried about? Sometimes children find it difficult to express their feelings face to face, so you could ask them to write it down, text or draw to offload anything they want to.
- Help them find things they can enjoy in the school day—for example, favourite subject, playing with their friends at break-time or a specific teacher
- Devise a step-by-step plan. Identifying a clear goal and work out a series of gradual steps to build up to this such as getting out of bed at the right time, or getting their school things ready the night before. Celebrate and notice these achievements.
- Increase social contact and any enjoyable activities which can build confidence and lift low mood such as seeing friends and taking part in clubs.
- Encourage them to do some regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormone
- Learn relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and practice deep breathing exercises daily
- Support with good sleeping habits. Keep a calm bedtime routine and make sure there is reduced screen time in the evening
- Make sure your child eats regularly and has a healthy diet—for example, not eating too much sugar or caffeinated drinks

Progress isn't always linear. If your child finds it difficult to go to school on one day, keep an optimistic approach and start again the next day.

Encourage your child to be a 'thought detective' which is based on principles from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

You can do this by encouraging your child to use the mnemonic of the 'The Three C's':

- **Catch it** – Ask your child to think of one troubling thought, for example, "Can you tell me one thing you are worried about?", "What do you least like about going school?" "If you had one wish, what would you change?"
- **Check it** – Next, ask them to collect some evidence to support this thought, for example, "What is the evidence that this true?", "What is the evidence that this is not true?"
- **Change it** – Get them to think about the evidence and consider it in a balanced way, for example, "What do you think about that worry now you have considered more than one view of it?", "What would you say to a friend that was feeling this way?"

How to help your child in an anxious moment

Your child is shaking. They are holding their chest because they can't breathe. Their breathing is getting heavier and heavier. When your child is feeling very anxious or stressed like this, the most important thing you can do in the moment is to help them calm down and relax. Talk in a calm voice and reassure them that they are ok and experiencing symptoms of anxiety.

There are lots of different calming techniques you can use, which will mean it may require some trial and error. It's important to build up a 'personalised toolbox' of coping skills.

Here are some strategies that you can try:

- **Physical touch** – a long hug can give reassurance in the moment to a child, releasing feel-good hormones called oxytocin
- **Breathe slowly and deeply** together – get them to inhale slowly for 2-5 seconds through their nose, hold for another 2-5 seconds and exhale slowly through their mouth
- **Mindfulness** – the 'Body Scan' is a simple exercise which helps to only focus on the present moment. Start by having your child lie on their back and close their eyes. Tell them to tense all their muscles in their body as tightly as they can. Start with their feet, squeezing their toes, then encourage them to move slowly up through the rest of their body into their legs, knees, stomach and all the way up to their eyes. Guide them step-by-step through this process.
- **Writing down worries** and then tearing them up and throwing them away, can symbolically help to throw away any negative thoughts in the moments
- **Distraction techniques** – watch a favourite show or something funny on YouTube, play a game, sing a song, talk about a fun event coming up, take a shower, have a cold drink, or do a physical activity like jumping on the spot or on a trampoline

Looking after yourself

Supporting a young person who is struggling with emotionally-based school avoidance can take its toll on you too. Make sure to take time to look after yourself; it will make you better equipped to support your child and help you maintain a good level of mental wellbeing. It is important to build a good support network to help ease the emotional strain, and share your concerns and stresses with. Take time for self care, do things you enjoy and spend time with people you care about.



Resource Section

In this section you will find:

Useful Worksheets

Breathing Techniques

Mindfulness Activities

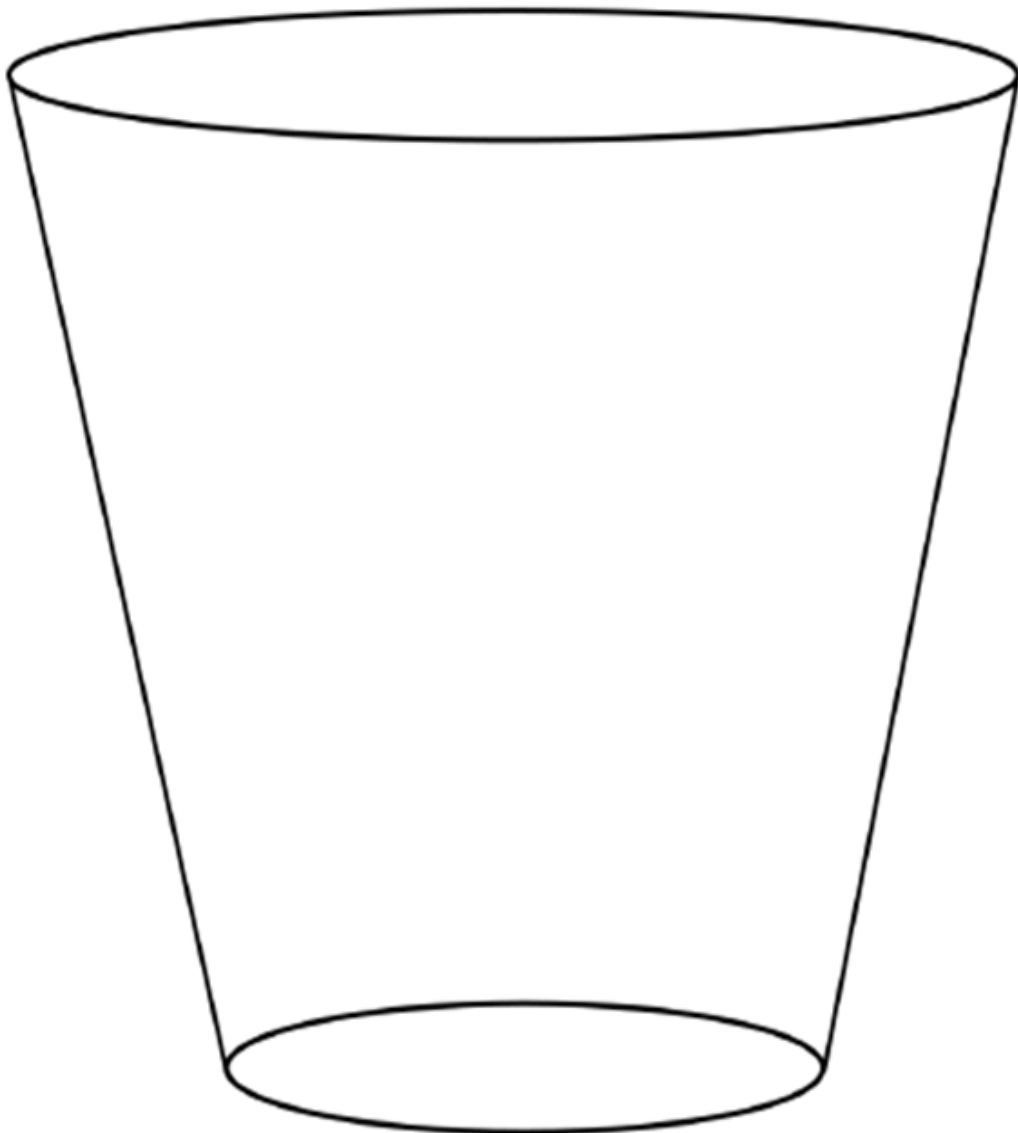
Online Support Links

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!		

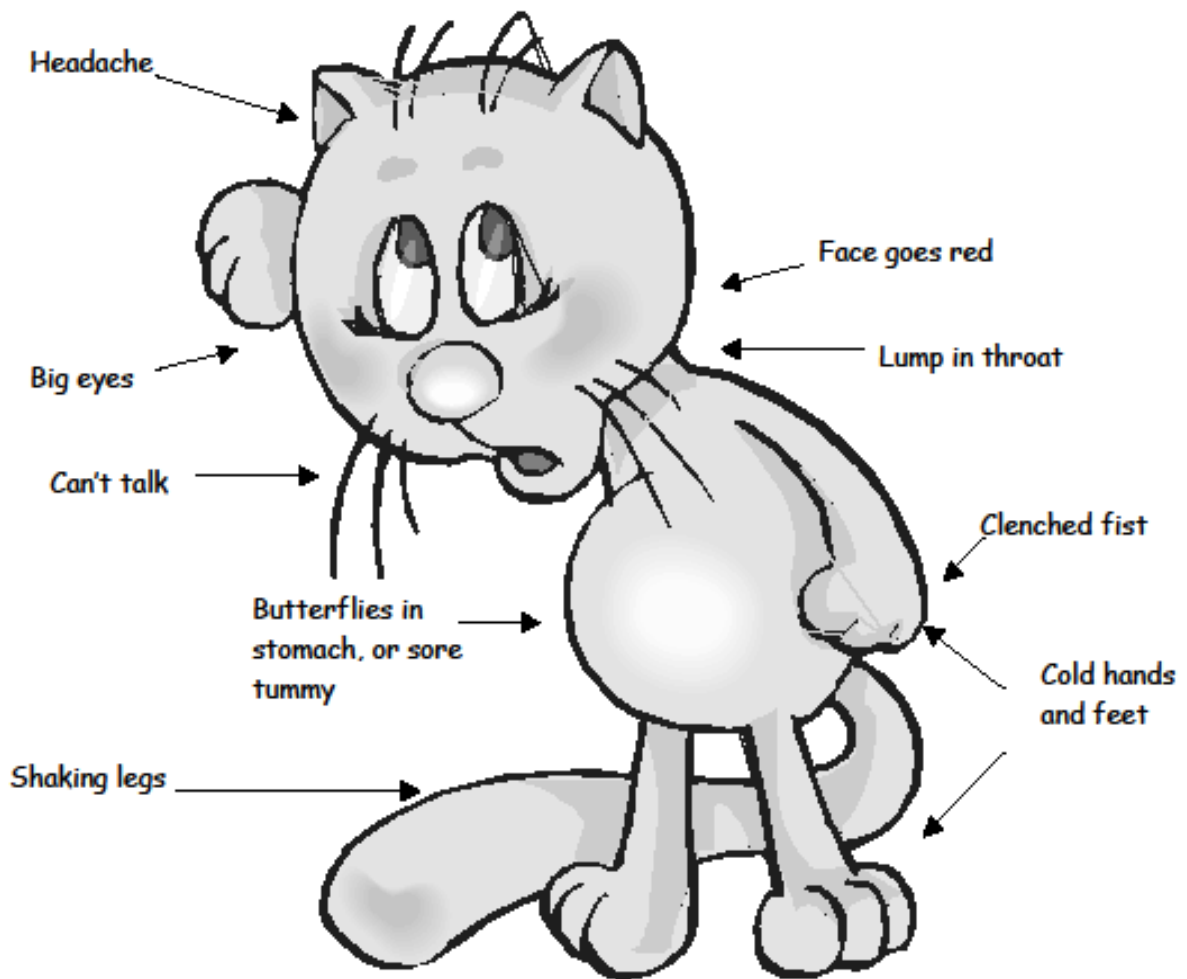
- | | |
|---|--|
| _____ Conflict or drama in relationships | _____ Not feeling prepared |
| _____ Being in a large crowd of people | _____ Being in tight spaces, like an elevator |
| _____ Meeting new people | _____ Being in wide open spaces |
| _____ Going to a new place for the first time | _____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

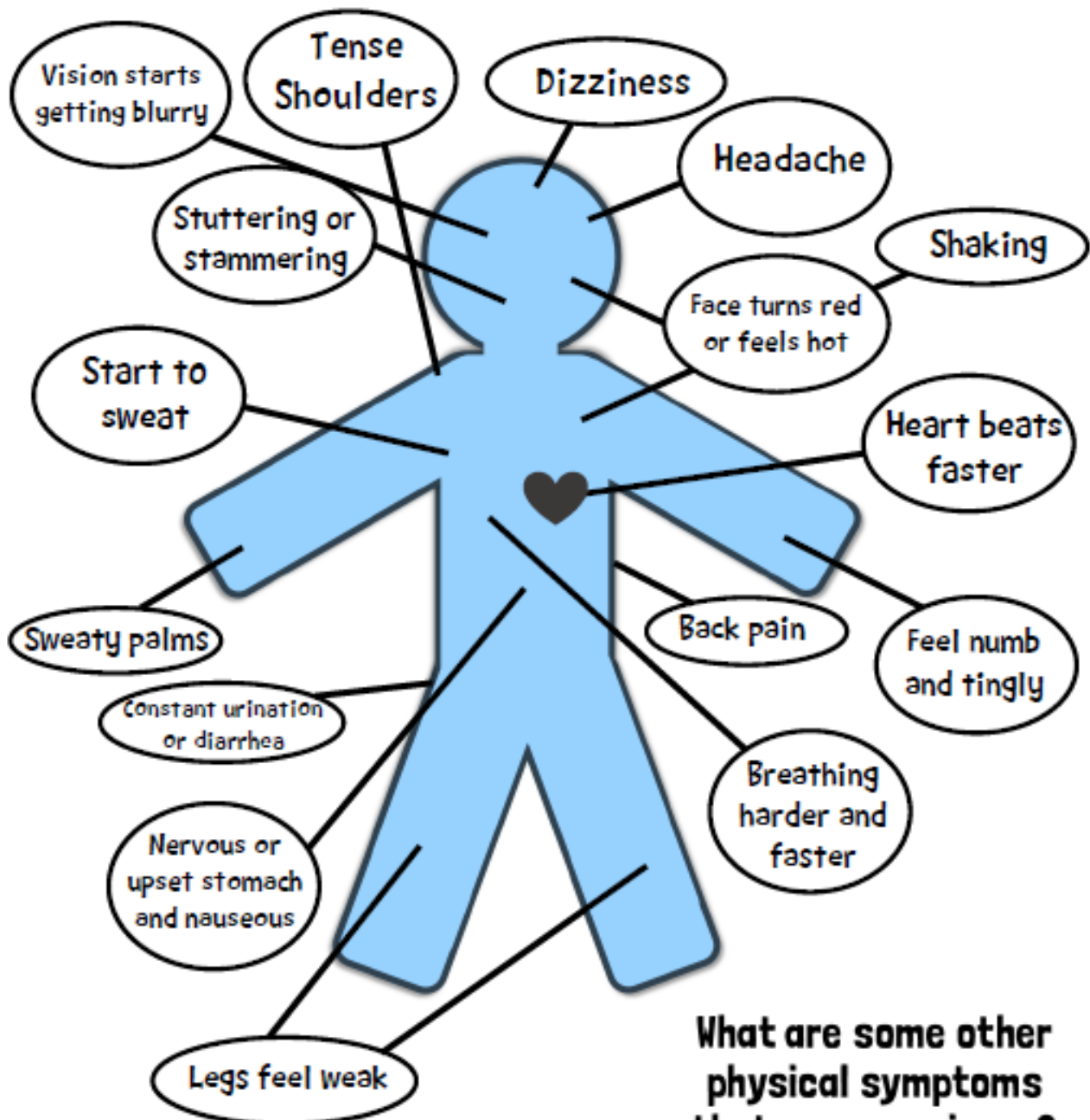
Chester the Cat feels anxious! How does Chester feel anxiety in his body?



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.

ANXIETY AND MY BODY

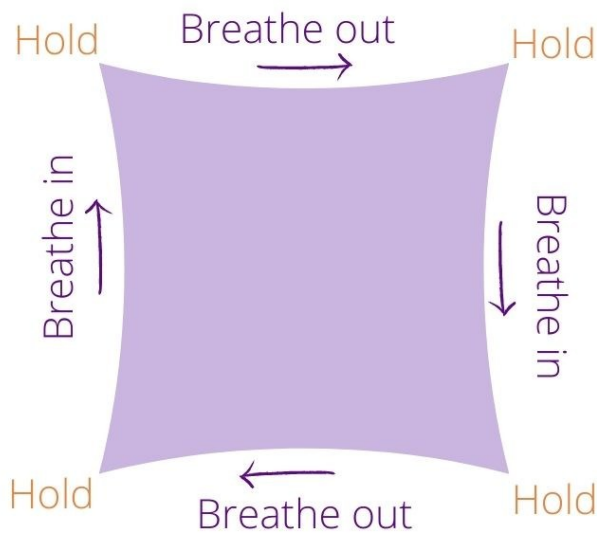
Color in the reactions that happen to your body when you start getting anxious.



14: Breathing Techniques

When we feel scared or anxious our heart rate increases and we breathe faster.

Try out these breathing techniques to slow down your breathing:

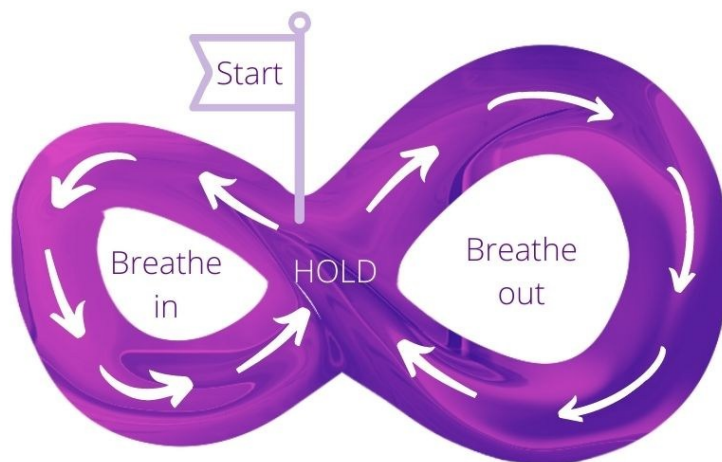


Breathing to shapes

Try to slow your breathing down.

Trace the shape with your finger as you breathe in, hold and breathe out.

Here's a different shape to try: breathe in round the shorter loop, breathe out round the longer loop



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 toolkit.

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!



Use polymer clay to make a worry stone. These can help as a fidget toy or be used as a grounding technique by providing a “touch sense” to focus on when anxious. Keep them in your pocket or bag to hold when needed for comfort.

2-4-6-8-10

GROUNDING EXERCISE

Tell yourself **2** kind or encouraging words.



Take **4** square breaths
(Breathe in for 4 - hold for 4 -
breathe out for 4 - hold for 4)



Imagine **6** different foods you enjoy.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

6 _____

Tense and relax **8** different muscles in your body for
4 seconds tense, 4 seconds relax.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

6 _____

7 _____

8 _____



Find **10** items in the room of a particular color.



1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

6 _____

7 _____

8 _____

9 _____

10 _____

5 Additional Grounding Techniques

1. Splash water on your face or run your hands under cold water.
2. Keep small objects with you like a rock or pine cone and notice colors, textures, weight, and every detail about it.
3. Cross your arms, making an X on your chest, and tap your collarbones with your fingertips. Breathe deeply.
4. Press your palms together. Press them harder and hold this pose for 15 seconds. Pay attention to the feeling of tension in your hands and arms.
5. Count backwards by 7 starting at 100. Count to 200 by 3s or 7s.

5 4 3 2 1

SLOW DOWN & CALM DOWN

FIRST- TAKE 3 SLOW BELLY BREATHS!

5 List 5 things you can SEE



4 List 4 things you can FEEL



3 List 3 things you can HEAR



2 List 2 things you can SMELL



1 List something you like to TASTE



FINISHED? - TAKE ANOTHER 3 SLOW BELLY BREATHS





GOOD FOR YOU, MEDITATION IS.

Set a timer for 10 min.

Sit comfortably.

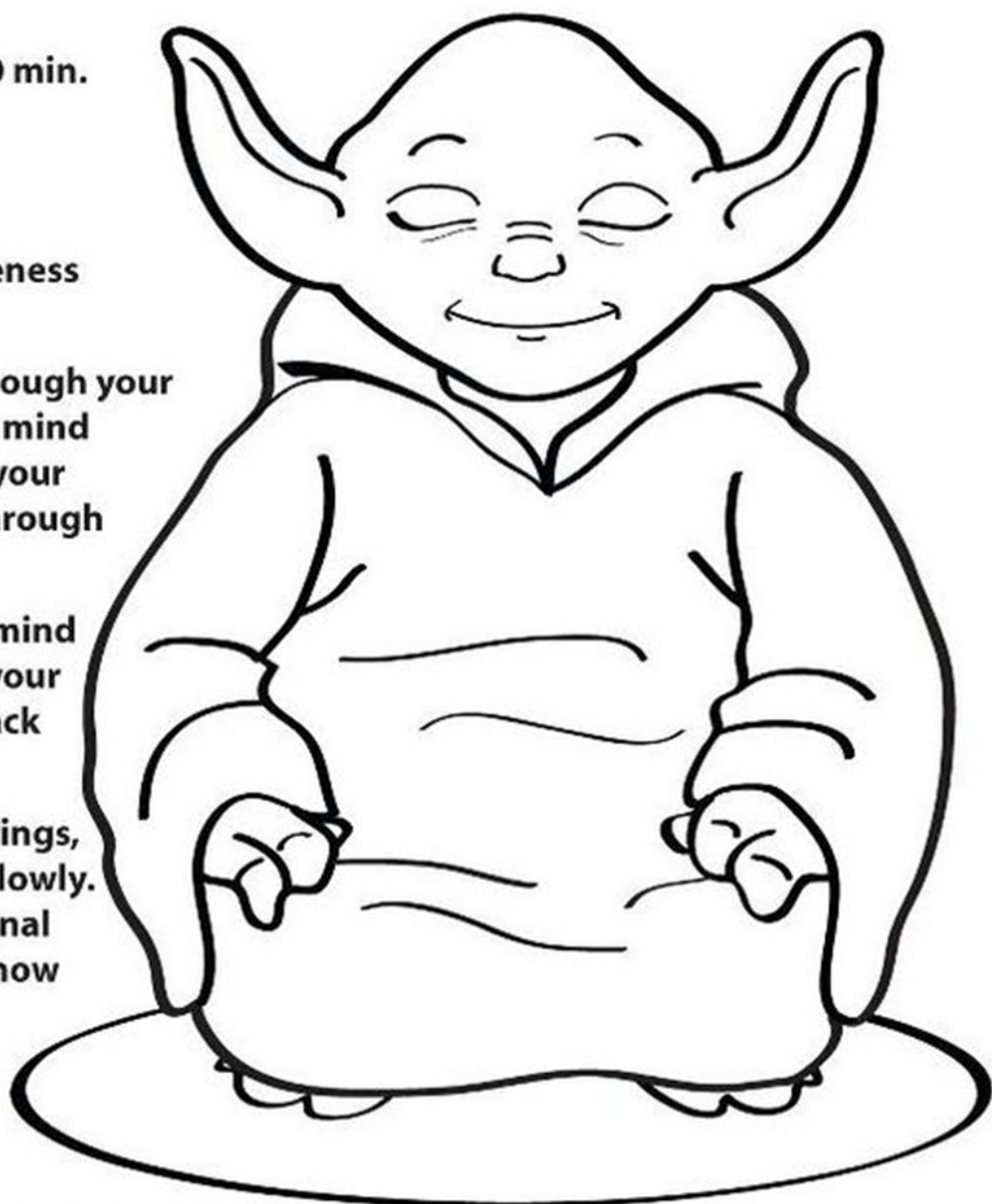
Close your eyes.

Bring your awareness
to your breath.

Slowly inhale through your
nose. Focus your mind
on the sound of your
breath. Exhale through
your nose.

Every time your mind
wanders, bring your
concentration back
to your breath.

When the timer rings,
open your eyes slowly.
Keep a daily journal
and write down how
meditation
makes you feel.



It might be challenging at first. But
don't give up! With steady practice,
you'll soon be able to meditate just
like Yoda!

COLOR YODA!

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:

Bolton Council Emotionally Based School Avoidance: A resource for parents and carers - <https://www.ssam.bolton.sch.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EBSA-Parent-resource.pdf>

Not Fine in School was created as a resource for the growing numbers of families with children experiencing school attendance barriers - <https://notfineinschool.co.uk/home>

Swindon Borough Council school attendance - https://www.swindon.gov.uk/info/20032/schools_and_education/1275/school_attendance/2

BBC Bitesize - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zdkn3qt#z2d346f>

Anna Freud - <https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/school-attendance-and-mental-wellbeing/>

Swindon SIAS: The SEND Information, Advice and Support service (SIAS) provides information, advice and support about education, health and social care for children and young people from 0-25 with SEND - <https://www.swindonsias.org.uk/>

Swindon SEND families voice - <https://swindonsendfamiliesvoice.org.uk/>

BeU Swindon - <https://beuswindon.co.uk/>

Young Minds - <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal/#:~:text=If%20you%E2%80%99re%20in%20this%20situation%2C%20we%E2%80%99ve%20got%20advice,need%20if%20your%20child%20can%E2%80%99t%20go%20to%20school.>

Parent talk - <https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/school-life/school-behaviour-wellbeing/coping-school-refusal/>

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