

## **Overcoming Your Child's Fears And Worries**

Based on the book *Overcoming Your Child's Fears and Worries: A Self Help Guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques* by Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willetts

**This uses a Cognitive Behavioural Approach**

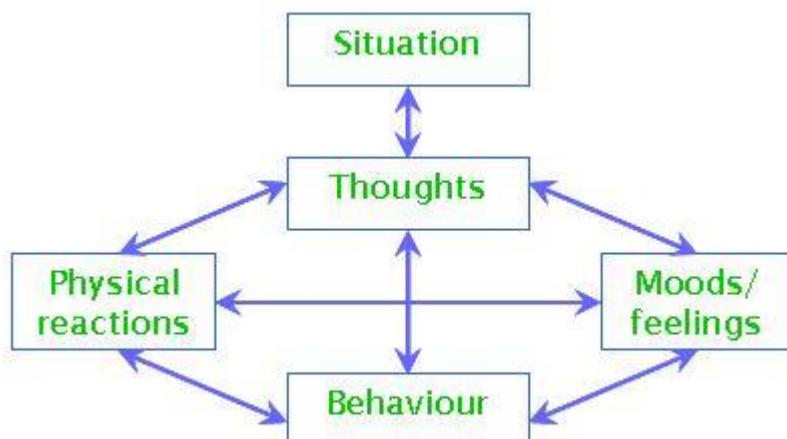
**There are 5 steps**

1. Learning to spot your child's anxious thoughts
2. Helping your child to evaluate the thought and consider other points of view
3. Encouraging independence and 'having a go'
4. Developing a step by step plan with your child
5. Problem solving

### **Step 1**

Anxious children are on the 'look out' for threat and 'jump to conclusions' and if what is going on is not absolutely clear they can interpret the situation as threatening.

It can be helpful to think of thoughts, feelings and behaviour linking up in a cycle like the one below.



**What is happening?**

**What is your child thinking?**

**What is your child feeling?**

**What does your child do?**

## Spotting Unhelpful or Spiky Thoughts

Open ended questions are good!

What is going through your mind?

Why are you worried?

What do you think will happen?

What is it about this situation that makes you worried?

- How you ask is also important - their fears are real to them. They need to know that you are asking because you want to understand the worries better in order to help.
- Use creative ways for your child to express their thoughts and feelings, e.g. worry box, thought diary etc. If they try to suppress their thoughts they are likely to feel more anxious.
- You could structure in some talk time so you can help your child contain some of their thoughts and feelings.

### Key points -

1. Ask your child to express what is worrying them during the event or as soon as possible afterwards.
2. Show your interest and support in the way you ask the questions.
3. Keep an open mind - Don't assume you know what they are thinking.
4. Ask open questions - 'What' and 'Why'.
5. If necessary make suggestions - wonder out loud with your child
6. Repeat your understanding back to them to make sure you have understood correctly.

### Step 2

The next step is to evaluate your child's anxious thoughts. It is all about more helpful ways for your child to think about the situation. Help your child consider alternative thoughts.

- **What is the evidence for and against that the thought is true?**  
What makes you feel that (the feared situation) will happen?  
Have you seen that happen to anyone else?  
How likely is that (feared situation) likely to happen?  
You can ask them to rate out of '10' how definite they are.  
Could you live through it?

What's the best that could happen?

How does believing this thought impact on you?

How could changing this thought impact on you?

How would someone else you respect think about this situation?

What actually happened the last time you were in this situation?

What if it does happen/ if it is true, what would be so bad about that?

Encourage them to draw on previous positive experiences.

Are you assuming that you know what other people are thinking/ what it will be like without actually finding out?

- Encourage your child to rate how definite they are that their thought is true and after some thinking time ask them whether their rating has changed. You can use a visual scale like a ladder.
- **Work as a team** and try to hold back from drawing conclusions for your child. If your child thinks things through by himself/ herself they are more likely to remember.
- **Be aware of safety behaviours - your child may do very subtle things to help them feel safe but by doing this they will not disconfirm their thoughts and beliefs.**
- If your child doesn't know what will happen encourage them to set up an experiment.
- **HOLD BACK REASSURANCE**
- Be creative and make it fun when possible

### Step 3

This next step is about encouraging independence and 'having a go'.

- By this time he/she has started to think about things slightly differently but may be reluctant to go any further and confront things. This isn't surprising as they have developed a good habit of avoiding the things that frighten them.
- Avoidance creates a negative cycle which can fuel the anxiety. Avoidance is often inadvertently and not surprisingly encouraged by adults and parents around them. Give positive attention to your child when they have a go.

- Attention and praise are probably the most effective way to influence a child's behaviour
- **Praise**  
Be clear and specific rather than general and vague e.g. 'I bet .....was really scary, but you didn't let that stop you. Well done.'
- **Rewards**  
They do not need to cost money! Small goals are rewarded with small rewards. Negotiate with your child. Rewards should be given as soon as possible after the achievement.

#### Key points -

1. Be on the look out for when your child is 'having a go', i.e. not avoiding fears.
2. Praise and reward 'having a go'
3. Set a good example of how to manage fears/ worries
4. Give a clear message that they can have a go and that they can cope

#### Your Response

- Reassurance from somebody else may help your child initially feel better but as they continue to seek reassurance then it perhaps shows that they have not used this information to change or update their belief, but have used it for only short-term relief. Over reassurance can also fuel anxiety by making them feel that there is something to be worried about.
- Wonder with them and help them reflect on their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.
- Help them find alternative thoughts
- Praise
- Stand back and let them have a go
- Try to manage your own anxieties
- Offer rewards

## Step 4

### Facing Fear

- Fears don't go away unless we face up to them
- If we always avoid the things that frighten us then we never find out whether they are as bad as we thought or whether we could have coped with them.
- Taking a gradual approach is important, and try not to have too many steps.
- Start with a step the child does some of the time already
- Make a plan - Draw up a clear step by step plan together focusing on the goals you are aiming for
  1. Identify your child's ultimate goal and ultimate reward
  2. List steps towards the ultimate goal
  3. Ask your child to rate the steps from the least difficult to the most difficult (Scale from 0-10).
  4. Specifically reward each step
  5. Take your time
  6. It's a good idea to repeat each step until the child feels confident.
  7. What if the steps do not go well? - It is still important to praise for having a go

## Step 5

### Problem Solving

It is tempting to solve the anxious child's problems for him. That's not to say they shouldn't ask for help - that's part of problem solving.

### Step By Step

1. Be clear what the problem is
2. Think of many solutions as possible with your child
3. Weighing up the pros and cons of each possible solution and decide which is the best.
4. Give gentle prompts - What would someone else do in this situation?
5. Helpful questions -

What would happen if you did.....?

What would happen in the end.....?

What would make the difference.....?

How would that change how you would feel if that problem came up again?

### **Managing your own anxiety**

1. If a parent is very anxious this can make it more difficult for them to help their child overcome their anxiety
2. Let your child know that everyone experiences some fears and worries sometimes
3. Demonstrate to your child how you deal positively with your own fears and worries
4. Set your own goals
5. Reward yourself!!!

### **Keeping it going!**

- When progress is slow, go back over your original thoughts and plan. Reflect on times when things have been better - what is happening at these times?
- Think about other factors that might be keeping the problem going. Would your child or family miss anything if the problem was no longer there?

### **Other ideas -**

- Support your child to externalise their difficulties by talking about their 'worry bully' and what he/she can do to help it be less powerful. Find exceptions when your child has not listened to it or has done something which shrinks worry bully!!
- Encourage your child to imagine something which might be anxiety provoking and explain that they are watching it like a film. You can then ask them to play, stop, pause, rewind etc and ask them what is happening. You could then ask your child to record over it in their mind and imagine them coping with the situation or doing something different.
- Any type of relaxation exercises may be helpful - these aim to reduce muscle tension, control breathing and create calming mental imagery. Encourage your child to visualise a happy/calm place or something that they have overcome etc.
- Create a visual reminder for your child of different things they can do to help them feel more settled/ relaxed and direct them to this.