

# Understanding and Coping with Anxiety



This booklet and the accompanying video have been made by Professor Paul Stallard, Isobel Greenhalgh and Jessica Tingley from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services provided by BaNES, Swindon and Wiltshire.

## Part 1. Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a **normal reaction**. Everyone will feel anxious at some stage. Anxiety is designed to **keep us safe** by preparing us to deal with challenges or situations that are dangerous or threatening. It does this by:

- **Keeping us alert** so that we are able to spot and avoid danger
- **Preparing our bodies** so that we can quickly take some action to keep safe
- **Helping us learn** how we can keep out of future danger and stay safe

When we perceive a threat our body prepares us to deal with it. This is often called the **fight or flight** response. This prepares us to **avoid or run away** (flight) or to **confront** and face the threat (fight). **For example:**

- You will need to jump out of the way of the car to avoid being hit (flight)
- You will need to quickly leave the building when the fire alarm sounds (flight)
- You may need to fight off an attacker (fight)

Fortunately, for most of us, there are relatively few real threats to our physical safety. However, many people feel anxious because they **imagine threat**. They **worry** about what might happen and imagine that:

- Things **will go wrong** – e.g. that they will get lost if they go somewhere new
- They will be **unable to cope** – e.g. won't know what to say to someone or they will laugh at them
- They will be **unsuccessful** – e.g. will get their work wrong

Because they are always imagining threat some people live in a constant state of anxiety.

### **Fight or Flight**

There are 3 core parts of the **flight or fight** anxiety response:

- 1. How we think.** This helps us to identify situations or events where there might be possible threat or danger. Often this is what we think will happen and how we will be unsuccessful or things will go wrong.
- 2. How we feel.** This is the response that prepares our bodies to take some action to deal with the threat. We may notice our heart racing, that we feel hot, short of breath or go red.
- 3. What we do:** We learn how to keep ourselves safe and out of future danger. Often this involves avoiding the situations or things that we worry about and which make us anxious.

## 1. How We Think

Children who are anxious are more likely to think that **they will be unsuccessful**.

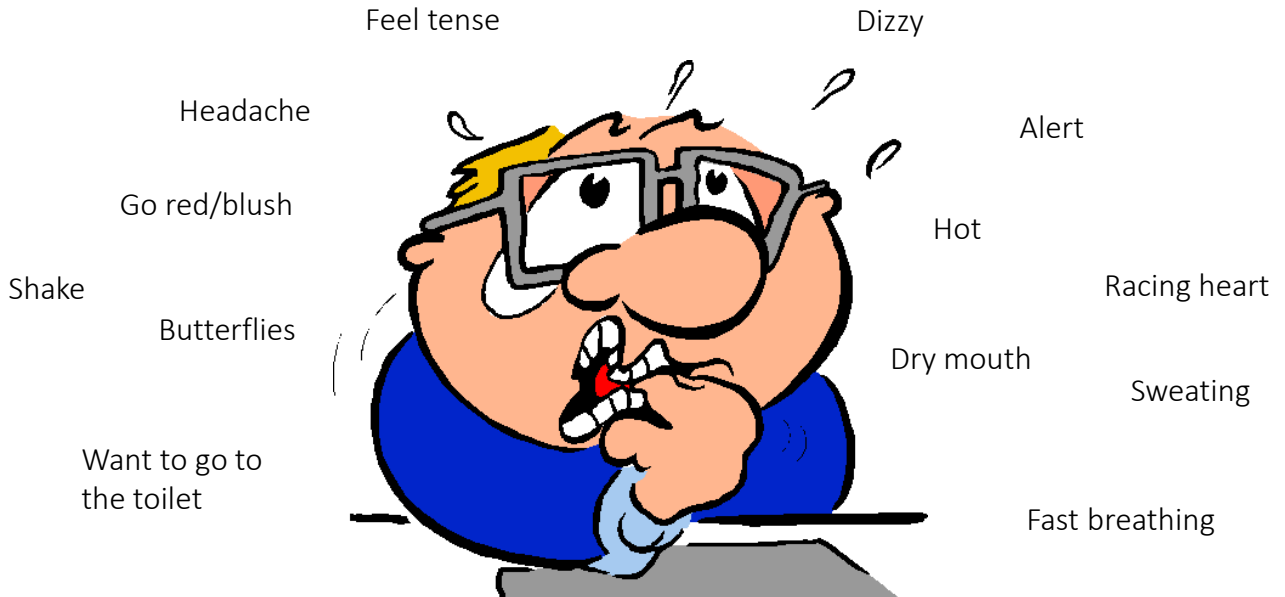
They are more likely to think that they:

- Will be unable to cope
- Will get things wrong
- That bad things will happen
- That people will laugh at them or be unkind
- Are constantly looking for signs of danger

These ways of thinking make the child believe that they are living in a dangerous world which they are unable to cope with.

## 2. How we feel

There are many possible symptoms of anxiety, including:



Other possible symptoms of anxiety include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Problems sleeping
- Not eating
- Complaining of feeling unwell or a poorly tummy
- Being irritable
- Temper outbursts
- Talking about worries

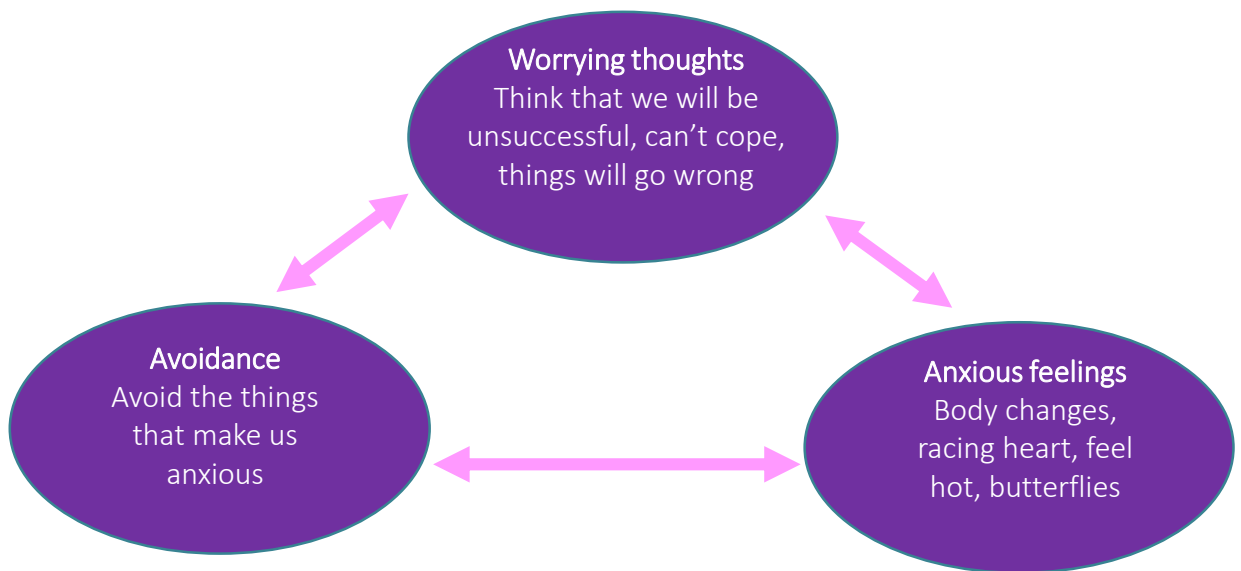
### 3. What We Do

We learn from what has happened and use this information to deal with future or similar events. For example,

- if you were laughed at in class for wrongly answering a question you might not answer future questions as you may think that you will get it wrong. Or,
- if you had a panic attack when you were shopping, you might stop going to the shops. You may think that you won't be able to cope and so decide to stay at home. Or,
- if your mum was very late picking you up from school, you might think that she has had an accident. You may want to stop going to school so that you can stay with her and make sure she is OK.

We learn to **avoid or stop** doing things that make us anxious.

### The Anxiety Trap



### How does anxiety affect the family?

Anxiety is difficult for your child but can also effect family life.

- **Limits everyday activities.** Parents may organise their life around the child's worries and may be unable to take their child out shopping, to leave their child and go out on their own or to spontaneously go somewhere new.
- **Strain family relationships.** Family members may feel jealous of the attention the anxious child receives, resentful that the child's anxiety interferes with what they want to do or cross that the anxiety dictates family life.
- **Impact on leisure activities.** The child's anxiety may prevent or interfere with leisure activities such as going to the cinema, out for a meal, or where you can go on holiday.

## Types of anxiety

Younger children worry about **fear and threats** to their physical safety or security.

- They may worry about being away from their main carer, that they may not be able to cope or that something terrible will happen to them. This is called **separation anxiety**.
- They may develop specific worries and fear things like dogs, loud noises or balloons etc. These are called **specific phobias**.

Adolescent worries are more abstract and relate to **negative outcomes**.

- They may worry about anything and everything and expect that things will go wrong. This is known as **generalised anxiety**.
- They may worry about what other young people think about them and become anxious talking with them. This is called **social anxiety**.
- Or they may worry about intense episodes of fear where they worry about being out of control, having a heart attack or even dying. These are known as **panic attacks**.

## Causes of anxiety

There is no single reason why a child becomes anxious. Often it is a combination of factors including:

- **Genetics** – anxiety disorders are heritable. Research with twins has shown that children may inherit a predisposition to be anxious.
- **Life events** – anxiety can be triggered by stressful events. These could be anything such as friendship and bullying issues, physical injury, bereavement, house or school moves or family problems.
- **Family factors** – anxiety disorders run in families. Anxious children are more likely to have anxious parents who might model fearful behaviour and avoidant coping.
- **Attachment and temperament** – anxiety is associated with behavioural inhibition and insecure attachment. Temperamental factors in the child such as shyness, withdrawal from new or unfamiliar situations or people increase the risk of anxiety.

## Part 2. How parents can help

Anxiety is frustrating for everyone. Your child doesn't want to feel like this and parents may feel frustrated that they are unable to help their child. **Be supportive** and let your child know that:

- You understand how they are feeling
- Everyone worries and feels anxious, including you

**Be positive** and let your child know that:

- There are things they can do to make themselves feel better
- Together you will be able to beat anxiety

**Try not to:**

- Get angry. You may feel frustrated but try and stay calm. Remember your child isn't deliberately trying to frustrate or annoy you. They are feeling worried and need your support.
- Say it will be OK. Parents want to help their children and encourage them to do things and may say it will be OK. The reality is that your child will feel anxious. Be honest, say that they will feel anxious but that they will be able to cope.
- Say don't worry. Your child would stop worrying if they could. The problem is that they can't so this only makes things worse.

### **Tip 1: Show your child how to face, cope and overcome their anxiety.**

You will have your own fears and worries and so it is a good opportunity to model and show your child how you cope with your anxiety. Instead of showing your child how anxiety takes over and stops you from doing things, show them how you cope.

For example, if you are feeling anxious about telephoning someone you can use this as a way of teaching your child how to cope. Talk them through how you will deal with this.

1. Acknowledge how you are feeling – “I'm feeling a bit worried about making this call”.
2. Name the feeling – “I am feeling anxious and notice that my heart is racing and I am hot”.
3. Name the worry – “I am worried what this person will ask me and that I won't know the answer”.
4. Make a plan – I will write down what I want to say on a piece of paper in case I forget. I need to remind myself that I have done this before and it was OK. If I don't know the answer I will just say “that's a good question I will find out”.
5. Do it – show your child that you will make the call and not avoid it.
6. Celebrate – afterwards praise yourself. “I am really pleased I did that”.

**Tip 2** Instead of avoiding the things that make them anxious encourage your child to **face their fears** and to be brave.

Rather than letting their anxious feelings stop them doing things encourage them to take their anxiety with them and to face their fears. Remember that your child will feel anxious as they face their fears. This is normal. What is different is that instead of being bossed around by their anxiety your child is taking steps to reclaim their life. Don't let anxiety win. Help your child learn to face and deal with the things that make them anxious.

**Tip 3:** Be **supportive, positive and encouraging** When we feel anxious we often spend more time talking about what we haven't done, what has gone wrong or how bad we felt rather than what we have been able to achieve. Our talk is about failure, being unable to cope and feeling anxious which strengthens your child's beliefs that:

- They cannot be successful
- They cannot cope
- They cannot beat their anxiety

We need to shift the focus and to spend less time talking about failure and anxiety to more time talking about **being brave and coping**. Steer the conversation to:

- What your child achieved
- How they coped
- How they managed to beat their anxiety

Keep a positive focus and praise them for being brave and trying to beat their anxiety.

**Tip 4:** Help your child learn to **tolerate anxiety**. Anxiety is normal and will always be there. If your child avoids the things that make them anxious they may feel better for a little while but the anxiety will return. You can't take anxiety away or protect your child from experiencing it. Help them experience anxiety and learn to tolerate it. This will help your child learn that whilst anxiety is unpleasant it is bearable.

So don't avoid or work around situations that create anxiety. If your child is anxious in shops don't avoid taking them shopping. Try to reduce the anxiety by taking them to smaller shops, on shorter shopping trips or going at times when the shops are less busy. But make sure that they experience anxiety and **learn to cope** with it. Afterwards, it is not uncommon for children to say "that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be".

**Tip 5:** Encourage and support your child to find ways **to solve their problems**. Anxious children often feel that they can't cope and don't know how to deal with problems. As your child needs to learn to tolerate anxiety, they also need to learn that they can cope and find solutions.

Teach your child to be independent and support them to find and try their own solutions. If your child is worried about inviting a friend over don't do it for them. Sit down and work through their worries. For example, what they would say if someone unexpected picks up the phone or if their friend is busy. Then ask them to call as you stay with them. If your child is going on a school trip and is worried about where they will sleep don't ask the teacher for them. Sit down and ask them to write their questions down and then arrange to meet with their teacher so they can ask their questions.

### What about reassurance?

As a way of dealing with anxiety and worries many children seek reassurance from their parents that everything will be OK. For some children brief reassurance can be helpful. A short, positive and encouraging comment can help children to feel safe and help them to face their worries.

There are other times when reassurance can be unhelpful. Some children seek constant reassurance and no matter how many times parents reassure them it never seems enough. The child asks more and more questions and is never reassured. When this happens reassurance is making the anxiety worse since the child is constantly talking about their worries.

If brief reassurance helps a child to feel less anxious and encourages them to face their fears then this should be continued. However, if the child constantly seeks reassurance and continues to feel anxious and avoid things then reassurance isn't helping. When this happens limit reassurance and reduce the time spent talking about worries. Reassure them once, reassure them twice and then distract or deal with future attempts to seek reassurance with a short encouraging statement "we have talked about this and it will be OK".

## Part 3. Learning to beat anxiety

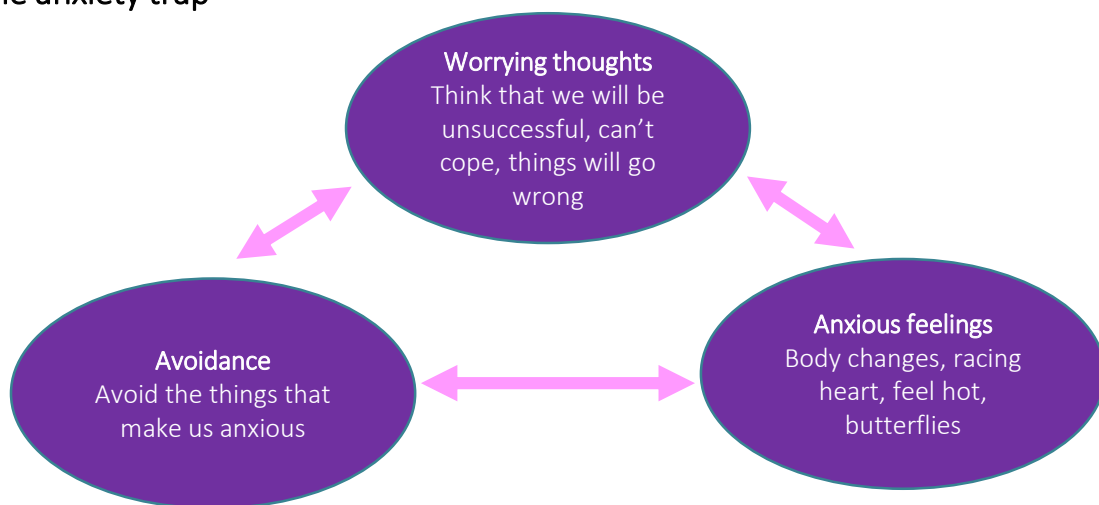
The recommended treatment for anxiety is **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)**. CBT targets the three key parts of the anxiety response:

- The way we **think**. It helps us to question the way we think about events and situations and the perceptions of threat and danger we make
- How we **feel**. It helps us to understand, manage and tolerate our anxiety symptoms
- What we **do**. It helps us to change what we do by confronting and facing our fears

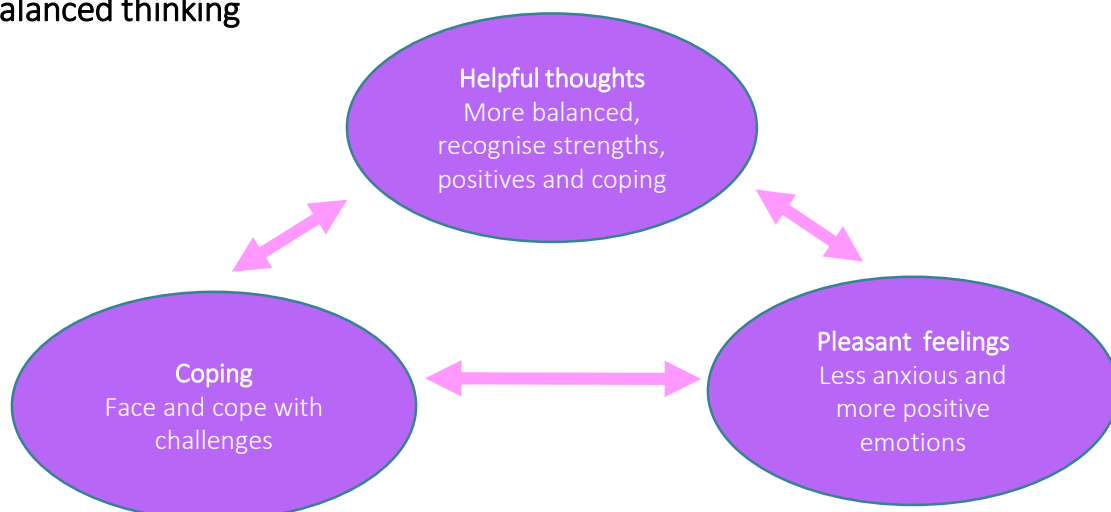
It helps to break out of the anxiety trap to a way that is more balanced and helpful.



## The anxiety trap



## Balanced thinking



The goal is to learn to **cope with anxiety** not to get rid of it. Children will continue to feel anxious. This is normal, and as we have already seen, anxiety can be helpful.

The aim is to help your child tolerate and manage their anxiety so that it **no long stops them from doing the things they want to do**.

## The Worksheets

Alongside this booklet are some worksheets that can help you and your child learn to manage and beat their anxiety. These will take you through the following **4 steps to coping with anxiety**:

1. Understanding anxiety
2. Learning to stay calm
3. Identifying and challenging anxious thoughts
4. Facing your fears

## Step 1 Understanding anxiety

The first step is to help your child find out more about their anxiety.

- How often and when do they feel anxious?
- What makes them feel anxious?
- What thoughts race through their mind when they feel anxious?
- What do they do when they are anxious?

A helpful way of doing this is to keep a diary like the one below. "**A diary**" is included in the accompanying resources

Day and Time	What were you doing?	What were your hot thoughts?	How did you feel?
Monday 7.30	Getting ready for school	I am sure I have forgotten something	Hot, racing heart, sweating

After completing the diary make time to **review it with your child** and to look for any patterns.

- Are their particular days or times when your child feels anxious?
- Are there common situations which make your child anxious?
- Are there any common thoughts when they become anxious?
- What are their strongest and most common anxiety body signals?

The second part of understanding anxiety is to help your child identify their anxiety signals. If they can become better at spotting when they are anxious they can do something before it becomes overwhelming to help themselves feel better.

Have a look at the worksheet, "**My anxiety signals**", and help your child to identify their strongest anxiety signals.

## Step 2. Learning to stay calm

Now that your child is better at spotting when they are anxious the second step is to do something about it. There are many ways that we can help ourselves to feel better and to relax. There is no one way that will always work. Encourage your child to develop a toolbox of methods so that if one doesn't work they can try another.

The "**Control your Anxiety**" handout provides a number of different ideas. Find out which work for your child. Remember, the more they practice the better they will become at relaxing. Try to build relaxation times into the daily routine, perhaps as they go to bed each night.

## Step 3. Identifying and challenging anxious thoughts

The third step is to help your child find out more about their worries and the way they think. We all have negative, critical and worrying thoughts at times. This is normal. The difference with anxious children is that they **think like this all the time** and never seem to recognise their successes or when they cope.

They become trapped in these negative and unhelpful ways of thinking. Anxious children are more likely to think that they:

- Will be **unsuccessful** – "there's no point trying I know I can't do that"
- Will be **unable to cope** - "I won't know what to say if my teacher asks me a question"
- That **bad things will happen** – "what if I get lost" or "become ill"
- They will **get things wrong** - "I never get this work right"
- Other people are **negatively judging them** – "people think I look stupid"

Thoughts like these are unhelpful:

- They make your child feel unpleasant and **increase their anxiety**
- They are demotivating and **don't encourage** your child to try
- They **stop** your child from doing things

To help your child get out of this negative trap they need to develop more balanced ways of thinking.

Instead of looking all the time for evidence that they are unsuccessful and can't cope they need to actively search for those **times they have been successful and coped**.

Instead of simply listening to the unhelpful thoughts that tumble around their head they need to **check them out** and see if they are seeing the whole picture.

## A record of achievement

To counter your child's tendency to focus on not coping or being unsuccessful you can encourage them to keep a **record of achievement**. Each day, ask them to identify two or three positive things that have happened. These could be examples of:

- Coping with a difficult situation or task
- Facing a situation that made them feel anxious
- Having a go at something new
- Being successful

Because your child is so used to looking for evidence of being unsuccessful they may find this difficult. You will need to help them think through their day and help them discover the positives that have happened. It is a nice task to do with your child as they go to bed. As they fall asleep they will be focusing on their achievements rather than worries.

Watching the list grow will help your child to recognise that although things are hard they can be successful, cope and face their fears.

A "**Record of Achievement**" is included in the accompanying resources.

## Check out the way you think

Because we hear our negative and unhelpful thoughts so often we simply believe them and don't stop to check them out. Encourage your child to check out what they are thinking and to discover whether there may be a more balanced and helpful way of thinking.

This can be done by using the "**Catch it, Check it, Challenge it, Change it**" worksheet in the accompanying resources.

1. The first step is to **Catch** the unhelpful thought that is making your child feel anxious.
2. The next step is to **Check** out whether your child is making things out to be worse than they really are.
3. The third step is to **Challenge** it and to look for any evidence that supports and challenges this way of thinking. Is there something positive and helpful that your child might have overlooked?
4. The final step is to **Change** it. On the basis of the above, is there a more balanced and helpful way of thinking about this?

## So how does this work?

**Catch** it: A young person who feels anxious talking with others caught the following thoughts. “I don’t know what to say. I will make a fool of myself and they will laugh at me”.

**Check** it: “They have laughed at me in the past but this hasn’t happened for a few months. People seem to be getting on OK at the moment”.

**Challenge** it: “The last couple of times I talked about playing my guitar and they seemed interested”.

**Change** it. “I do feel anxious but I can talk about that new song I learned on my guitar”.

This process acknowledges that:

- the young person does feel anxious but helps to put things in perspective.
- They had been teased but this was in the **past** and has not happened for a few months.
- The **situation has changed** and people are getting on better.
- They do have **something to say** which others seemed interested in. This way of thinking is more balanced and helpful and reduces their anxiety.

## What would my best friend say?

Another way we can check our thinking is to ask ourselves what someone we respect or value would say if they heard our negative thoughts. Many of our thoughts stay in our heads and we don’t say them out aloud or question them. Use the “*What would my best friend say*” worksheet in the resource pack.

Write down the anxious thoughts. Now ask your child to imagine what their best friend or someone they value would say if they heard them thinking this way. If they find it hard to imagine what someone else would say, ask them to imagine what they would say to their friend if they heard them thinking this way instead.

## Step 4. Face your fears

The final step is to encourage your child to face their fears. Instead of avoiding the things that make them anxious, support your child to face their fears and reclaim their life. At the moment their anxiety is in charge and bossing them around. It stops them from doing the things they really want to do.

Facing your fears changes this. It puts your child in charge so that they are able to do what they want. Instead of anxious feelings stopping your child from doing things they will now learn to take those anxious feelings with them.

You need to be honest and clear with your child that they will feel anxious. It is only by confronting this anxiety that your child will learn that:

- They **can cope** with anxiety
- Anxiety is **not as bad** as they imagine
- Anxious feelings **will fade** over time

To make this as easy as possible it is helpful to break your child's fear into a series of **small steps**.

Use the "**Small Steps**" worksheet in the resource pack and write in the first box what it is that your child wants to do.

In the next box, help them to write down a series of small steps that will help them to achieve this goal. You can have as many steps as you like. The important thing is that the steps are not too large. We want your child to be successful.

In the final box arrange the steps in order of difficulty. Put the easiest at the bottom and the hardest at the top.

### **So how does this work?**

A young person had to give a short presentation at school but was very anxious about talking to the class. They broke this challenge into the following small steps:

What I want to do (goal): Present to the class

Step 5: Ask my teacher if I can run through my presentation with her

Step 4: Ask two friends round and practice our presentations to each other

Step 3: Make my presentation to mum

Step 2: Stand in front of the mirror and practice saying it to myself

Step 1: Prepare my presentation and make sure it lasts 2 minutes

### **Face your fears**

The final step is where your child actually does it and faces their fear. You can use the "**Face your Fears**" worksheet in the resource pack to plan how to do this.

- Start by identifying the fear your child wants to overcome, their goal.
- Use small steps to break this into smaller, more manageable steps. Now select the step your child wants to tackle.
- We have already discovered how unhelpful thinking can make us anxious. So challenge those anxious thoughts and think about this in a balanced and more helpful way.
- If those anxious feelings build up and start to feel unbearable, encourage your child to use some of their relaxation strategies.

- As they relax, encourage them to imagine themselves being successful as they face their fear and achieve their goal.
- Now, agree a day and time and do it. Don't wait until your child decides that they can do it. They will feel anxious and if they are waiting for their anxiety to go they never take this step.
- Afterwards, praise your child for facing their fear and for trying to reclaim their life.

Now that they have taken their first step, encourage them to take the next until they have achieved their goal and reclaimed their life.

## **Good luck**

We hope that this video and booklet has been helpful and that it has given you some ideas about how you can help your child and what your child can do to manage their anxiety.

Find the ideas that are helpful for your child.

This will be hard work but by working together as a team you will be able to support your child and help them to be successful.