

Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey Wellness

Managing Anxiety in Children & Teens



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The Facts

Anxiety is normal!

- Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It tells us when we are in danger, or if there is a threat and helps us reach important goals. It is normal to feel anxious when encountering a bear on a hike, or before taking an exam.
- Anxiety isn't DANGEROUS. It feels uncomfortable, it is temporary and will eventually decrease. What our body feels when anxious is designed to keep us SAFE. It is our natural survival response mechanism.
- Do not AVOID anxiety. It is important to not allow your child to avoid challenges or escape scary situations. Short term it may make them feel better but in the long term it makes things worse as your child won't learn to handle the tuff stuff. Coping with anxiety is a critical life skill.
- Anxiety can TAKE OVER. It is possible for some children it can take over. It can flood children with unpleasant physical feelings, unwanted thoughts, and result in avoidance or opting out of important routines such as playing a sport, making friends, going to school, and more.

The ABC's of Anxiety

Trying to eliminate all anxiety from your child's life is near impossible in our busy lives. However, for some youth their worry is excessive and can cause significant disruption in the following 6 ways:

1. **AFFECT:** Emotionally & physically-we we feel in our body. This can include upset stomach, headache, or other physical ailments.
2. **Behaviour:** What we do or our actions, such as crying, clinging, or tantrums, seeking-reassurance about safety, and resistance/refusal to attend school, activities, or social events.
3. **Cognition:** Thinking-worrisome thoughts or beliefs that go through our mind such as "I'll mess up," "It'll be awful," "Everyone will laugh at me."
4. **Dependence:** Relying on parents or trusted adults too much-children and teens come to depend excessively on parents/adults and fail to develop their own internal compass, determination, and resilience.
5. **Excess and Extreme:** Anxiety becomes a problem when it is excessive and extreme in relation to the situation. Example: having an 1 hour tantrum prior to attending a 30 minute gymnastics class.
6. **Functioning:** Daily coping-how your child manage demands such as going to school, making friends, playing, etc.





What anxiety looks like:

Anxious Feelings (What you feel in your body)

- ☐ Racing heart
- ☐ Trouble breathing
- ☐ Feeling like choking
- ☐ Dizzy or lightheaded
- ☐ Sweating
- ☐ Blushing
- ☐ Heavy or tired muscles
- ☐ Trembling or shaking
- ☐ Upset stomach
- ☐ Tightness in chest
- ☐ Numbness or tingling in hands or feet



Anxious Thinking (What's going on in your mind)

- "I'll fail my exam."
- "My mom might forget to pick me up after school."
- "My teacher will yell at me and the kids will laugh."
- "That dog might bite me!"
- "The world is a dangerous place."
- "What if I fall off my bike and everyone laughs?"
- "What if my mom or dad dies?"
- "I can't do it."

Anxious Actions (What you do)

- Not asking or answering questions in class.

- Trying to be "perfect" in appearance and schoolwork
- Rechecking things to make sure they are done correctly
- Not hanging out with other kids or having few friends because of social fears
- Not sleeping in own bedroom or refusing to attend sleepovers
- Refusing to go to school for any number of reasons (ex. exam, presentation, bully, having to talk to others, etc.)
- Refusing to participate in activities or performances
- Asking lots of questions to try to be certain about things (ex. What will happen at the birthday party? Who will be there? What will we be doing?)

3 Types of Calming Strategies

- 1. Relaxation Tools:** These exercises help your child or teen relax their bodies, which helps reduce the unwanted physical sensations of anxiety.
- 2. Mindfulness Exercises:** Mindfulness involves helping your child or teen learn to pay attention to what's going on in a different way: focusing on the present moment with purpose and without judgement, which can help them get out unstuck worries about the future. Within MK we have professionals such as myself trained in Mindfulness and yoga.
- 3. Self-soothing Strategies:** Using your child or teen's five senses, these strategies help them soothe themselves, which makes riding out the physical sensations of anxiety easier.

Activity:

Sit down with your child or teen and make a list (or collage) of all the things that they find relaxing and helpful for dealing with the physical sensations from anxiety. For example, taking a calm breath, doing yoga stretches, listening to music, having a hot bath or shower, writing, drawing, singing, biking, skateboarding,

watching TV, etc. If your child or teen has trouble coming up with a list, share some of these ideas or ones that you personally like. Once your child's list is made, post that list or collage in your child's room or write it on an index card that they can keep in their backpack. Encourage your child or teen to use these strategies whenever they're feeling lots of anxiety in their body. You may need to start by doing these activities with your child or teen to get them in the habit of using them routinely when anxiety hits.





Calm Breathing

This technique involves having your child slow down their breathing. When we're anxious, we often take short, quick, shallow breaths leading to over-breathing, also known as hyperventilating. Over-breathing can increase physical symptoms associated with anxiety such as chest pain or shortness of breath, which are harmless but can feel scary. Calm breathing, on the other hand, can decrease unwanted physical symptoms, and reduce anxious feelings and worry thoughts.

Tense and Release

When we are holding onto worries and stress, it can cause tension, headaches, stomach aches, and exhaustion. You can feel like you just ran a marathon! This exercise involves tensing your muscles and then relaxing them, you can feel even more loose and relaxed.

Visualizations

Visualizations involve imagining something meaningful, powerful, or calming in your mind for a few minutes, which can help soothe your child or teen. One helpful visualization involves taking a mental vacation.

* You can find more information on these techniques at the back of this brochure.