

Supporting your child to manage their anxiety



Why do we experience anxiety?

- We all need a certain amount of anxiety and worry. It helps us to recognise things that we should be fearful of and act accordingly.
- Our brains are 'hard-wired' to manage anxiety as a response to dangers. This comes from early man, who had to be poised and ready to respond to attacks by sabre-toothed tigers and the like!
- Those 'response to danger' systems are still there in the human brain.
- Therefore if our brain senses danger, whether it is real or imagined, it will act.
- Whether the 'danger' is real or imagined, our physical reaction will feel the same because of our brain's natural response.



What are common fears and worries?

Age	Physiological and social factors	Common outcomes of anxieties	Principal anxiety disorders
2-4 years	Thinking imaginatively but difficulty distinguishing from reality	Imaginary creatures Burglars The dark	Separation anxiety
5-7 years	Thinking capacity to think in concrete terms	Natural disasters Media based fears Animals Injury	Animal and blood phobia Separation anxiety
8-11 years	Self-esteem centres on athletic and academic success	Inadequate athletic and academic success	School phobia OCD
12-18 years	Formal organisational thoughts Self-esteem derived from peer relationships Capacity to anticipate future dangers	Health and personal safety Peer relationship problems Being different	Social phobia Agraphobia OCD

What happens when we feel anxious?

Firstly, we feel a real or perceived threat or sense of danger.

Our brains compute this and we go into 'fight or flight' response. Our heart beats faster, which pumps oxygen around our body quicker which enables us to react quicker.

We begin to realise that the 'danger' is in fact harmless or we have it under control. This feeling can take a long time to come, depending on how heightened the reaction was.

The physical symptoms start to pass once sense of 'danger' has passed.

We return to normal.

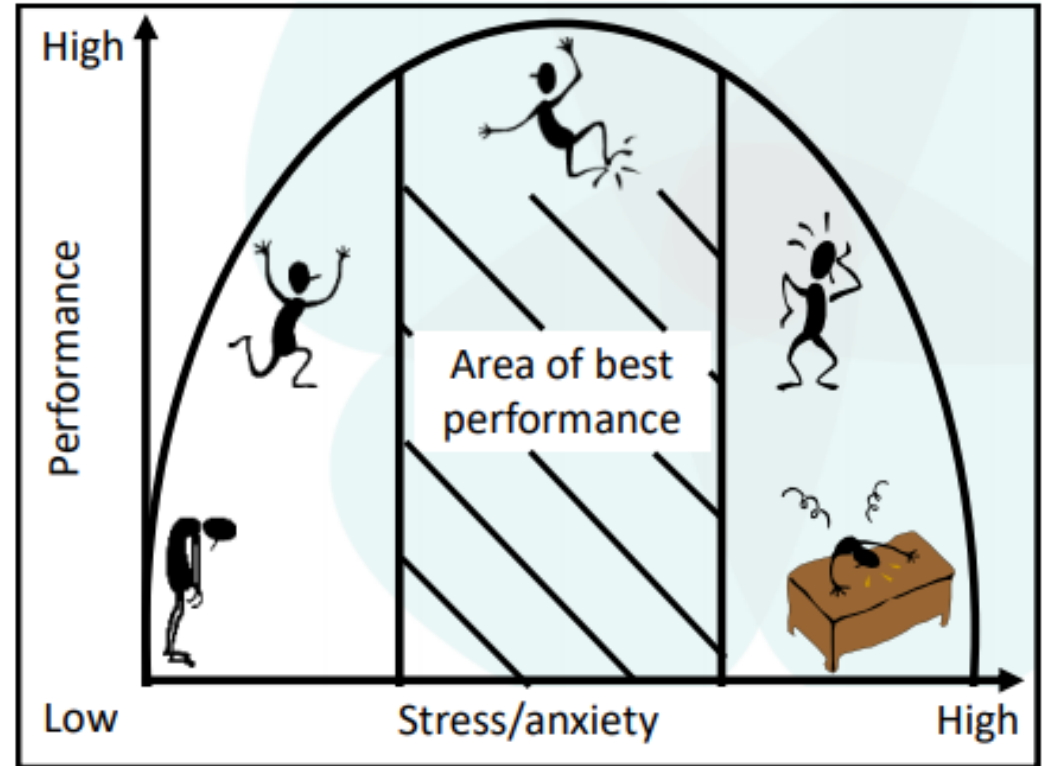


Why do we need stress and anxiety?

If we have no anxiety, we will have little motivation to engage with things around us, take healthy risks and try new things. A degree of anxiety pushes us on to challenge ourselves and can help us to perform better.

However, too much anxiety and stress will prevent us from performing well as we will be consumed by unhelpful thoughts and unpleasant physical symptoms.

Our best performance comes when we have a healthy balance of stress that we can manage.



What is anxiety?

Research, particularly research related to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, has broken down the complex tangle of anxiety into four stages.

Thoughts – these can be negative, thoughts we have about ourselves and our actions or even when our mind goes blank

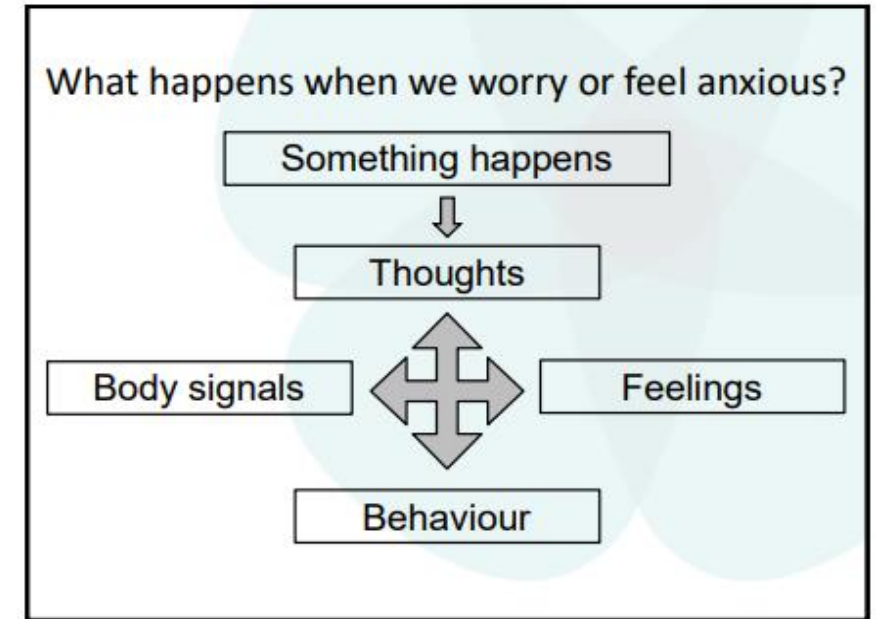
Feelings – frustration, worry, anger, sadness

Behaviour – running away, panicking, fidgeting, distraction, avoidance, anger

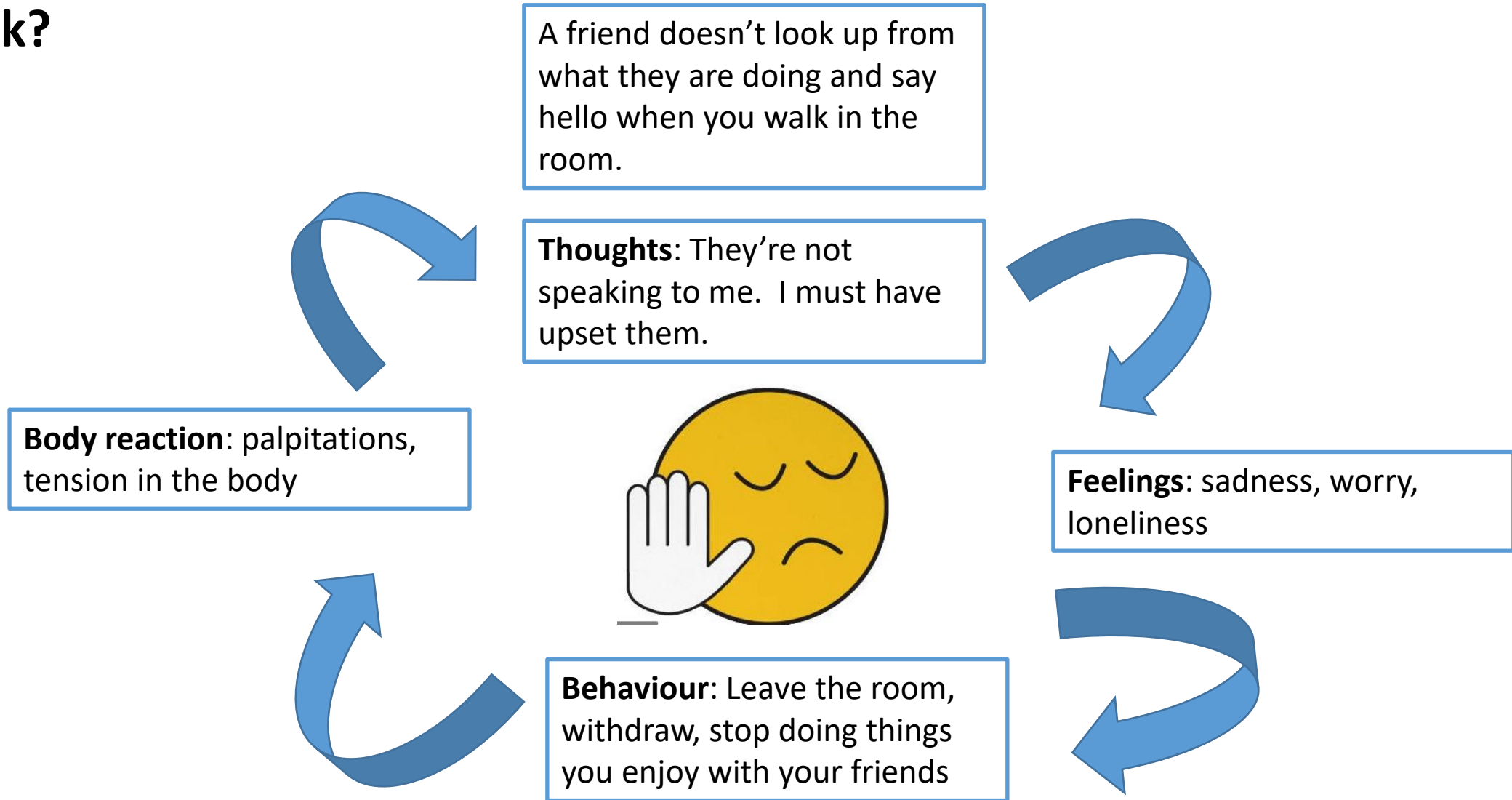
Body signals – sweating, feeling hot/cold, heavy breathing, butterflies, fainting

One of these factors can trigger all the others. For example, if we start to have a negative thought it will make us feel frustrated or angry. Or if we start to feel hot then we can start to feel panicky.

It also means that if we can work on just one of these factors, we can reduce the others and have a reduced stress response.



How might the cycle work?



What do we need when we are anxious?

It is natural for us to either seek reassurance or avoid situations if we are anxious.

This gives us short term relief which makes us feel better in the short term.

However, reassurance and avoidance do not help with anxiety in the longer term.



How might the avoidance cycle work?

I told you I'm no good at spelling!

Body reaction: tension in the body, distraction, shouting

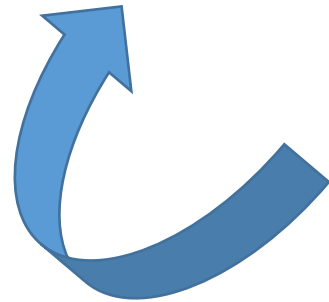
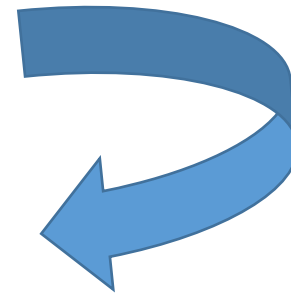
Your child does not achieve a high score on their spelling test.

Thoughts: I'm not good at spelling.

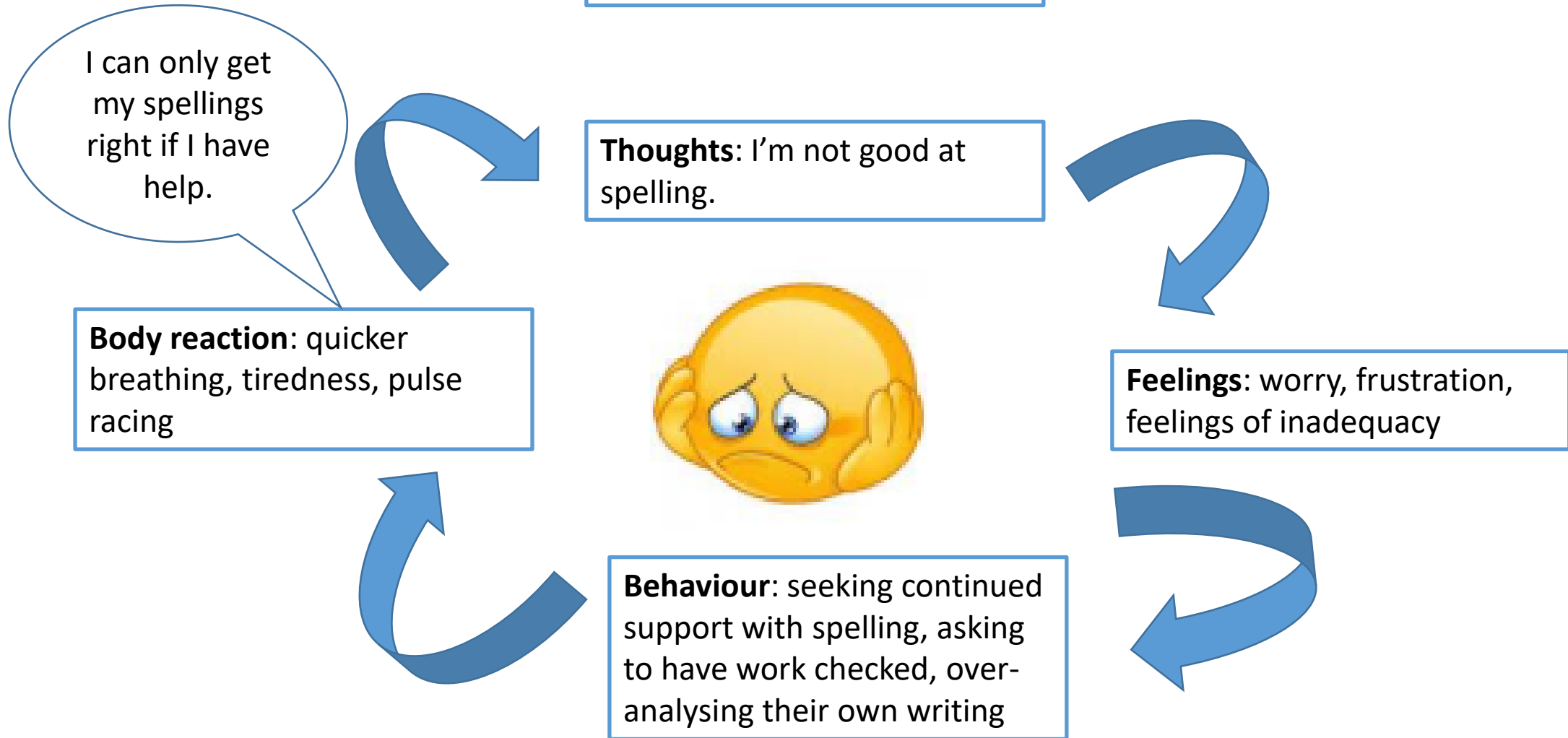


Feelings: worry, frustration, feelings of inadequacy

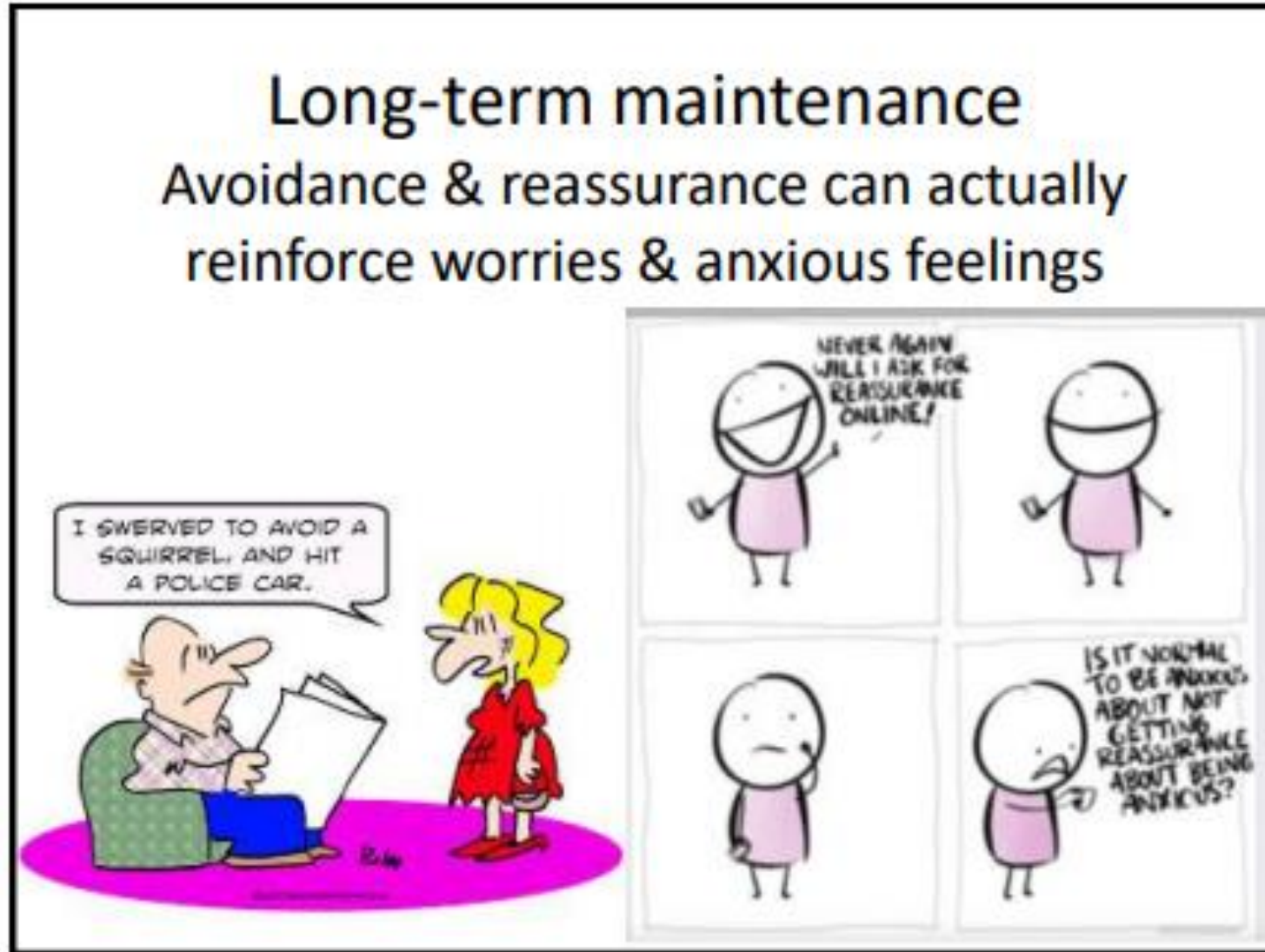
Behaviour: Avoid practicing spelling, become distracted in spelling test



How might the reassurance cycle work?



What impact could avoidance and over-reassurance have on anxiety?



Even though experiencing our 'worst case scenarios' can be difficult, if we never do that then we don't believe we can manage them and cope.

What can I do to support my child with their anxiety?

Feelings are often in a mix – we feel lots of things at the same time.

It is quite likely that we are feeling a combination of things at the same time – some positive and some negative.

It is hard to isolate a specific feeling sometimes and therefore manage it.

It is important to be able to name feelings so that we are better equipped to identify and manage them.



How do I talk to my child about anxiety?

Firstly, don't worry about your response and saying the 'right thing'. What is important to your child is that you have given them time and space.

Have conversations – make time and a safe space. Often saying things out loud makes us see that we are having unhelpful thoughts.

Actively listen – show you are listening, repeat back or paraphrase, don't interrupt

Be honest – it's okay to say you don't have the answers and cannot make something better

Validate your child's feelings – say that you can notice they're finding things hard, name the feelings they are having for them. A useful phrase is 'I wonder if you are feeling ...'

'Be with' – make time and space for your child to talk to you even if what they are saying is uncomfortable

Normalise – let your child know that it is okay to have those feelings, make it a normal part of family life to talk about feelings. Talk about your feelings and how you are managing them

Clarify/question – question in a way that helps your child to find solutions for themselves, for example 'What would you say to your best friend if they felt like that?' or 'Are their times when you don't feel like that?'

Encourage next steps – but not too soon. You need to have built the connection and your child needs confidence before they can move onto actions

Thank them for sharing – tell your child you are proud of them for sharing and you will be there for them if they want to talk again.



How can I change my child's unhelpful thinking pattern?

Unhelpful thinking can fall into one of these categories:

Catastrophising – blowing things out or proportion. *Ask your child: what is the evidence to support what you are thinking?*

Labelling – naming things e.g. 'I'm stupid'. *Again, ask your child what evidence there is to support their thinking.*

Jumping to conclusions – predicting what the outcome will be. *Ask your child to test out their theory with you.*

Mind Reading – assuming we know what others are thinking. *Again, ask your child to test out if what they think is absolutely accurate.*

Filtering – only hearing the bad and not the good. *Question your child to try and get them to identify the good for themselves.*



Why do we believe our worries?

We will always have worries – it's part of life and we need a certain amount so we can manage potential dangers.

We are hard-wired to have anxiety in response to potential dangers, whether they are real or imagined.

We need to problem solve when we are faced with a 'danger' but worry stops us coming up with solutions.

We need control so we can focus on the solution rather than the worst case scenario.

Control makes us feel calmer.




How else can I support my child's thinking?

Catch their thought – identify what happened that made them feel that way, for example ‘What’s making you think you don’t have any friends?’. This will help you break the cycle.

Check – ask questions and use the ‘I am wondering if...’ strategy to try and get your child to think about whether their thought is accurate. Is it a helpful thought?

Change – ask questions to help your child look at the evidence they have. Compare to other situations, for example ‘Is this like the time when your friend didn’t play with you but you played together the next day?’ By asking questions you are encouraging them to look for a more balanced thought.

 **atch**
Identify the thought that came before the emotion

 **heck**
Reflect on how accurate and useful the thought is

 **hange**
Change the thought to a more accurate or helpful one as needed

How can I put my child's thoughts on trial?!

Evidence FOR the thought	Evidence AGAINST the thought
I shouted at them.	I remembered their birthday last week.
I reminded them of a mistake they made.	I asked them how they were when they were sad yesterday.
	I let them share my snack recently.
	We shared a book together after school and it was good fun.

I've upset my friend and they won't speak to me again.



Balanced thinking – questions to ask yourself (and others!)

What's the best that
can happen here?
What's the worst that
can happen?
What's the most
likely to happen?



Is that a thought
or a fact?
What's the
evidence for that
thought?

How can you respond to your child's worries?

You need to validate your child's response and understand that they cannot always distinguish a real 'danger' from an imagined one. You could start by saying, 'That sounds like a real worry for you. What could we do about that?'

Try not to brush off your child's worry by saying, 'You don't need to worry about that!' They are worried about it so it is important to them.

Questioning them to explore their worry is more effective than reassuring them. Ask, 'What has happened that tells you that's the case?' or 'Is there another way of looking at this?'

Even if there is a simple solution, don't jump in and give it. It is important that your child forms their own solutions, with your support, as this will help them to manage anxiety longer term.



How should I respond to my child?

There is no right or wrong response. Your child just wants your attention and the time to talk to you. Try not to worry that you will respond in a way that will make things worse.

A helpful thing to do it to try and question your child so that they can think of a small thing they can do to help. Making steps small and progressive is important. You should not aim for your child to make a big step forward in one go.

Think of the steps of progress as a ladder. By making steps small, each 'rung' of the ladder will feel manageable. Also, if you your child cannot achieve the next 'rung' at any point, they will still see they have made some progress. If the steps are too big and they cannot make the next step, they may feel like they have gone back to the start.

An example might be that your child is afraid when they see dogs running off their lead in the park. Instead of avoiding going to the park, put in small steps. Initially you might just go to the edge of the park and watch. Then they might walk around the edge of the park, then go to the fenced off play area in the middle, then play in the middle of the park.

You might have to repeat each step until it seems easy before you move on.



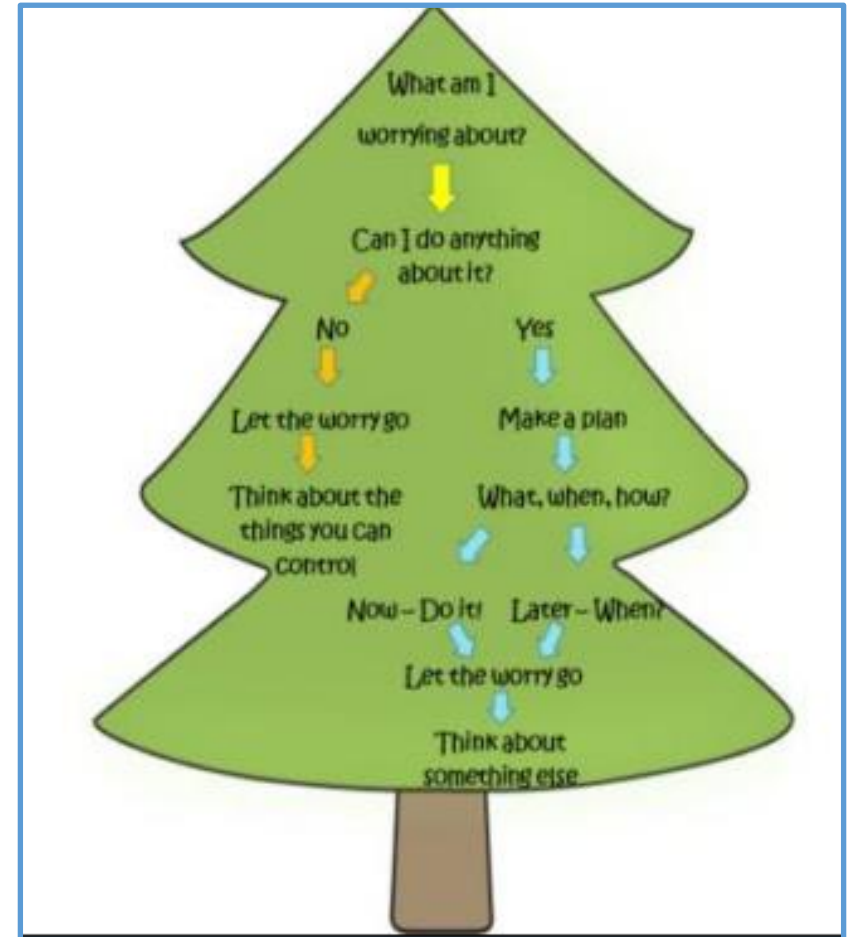
How can I structure a conversation with my child about their worries?

The worry tree process can be a useful way to structure conversations with your child and even add a visual 'plan'.

Even if you have a solution yourself or if you think your child does not have to worry, go through the process.

That way you are building your child's confidence that they can find solutions for themselves and building resilience.

Again, a really useful phrase is 'I wonder if you are feeling'. You are supporting your child to develop a vocabulary in a positive, empowering way.

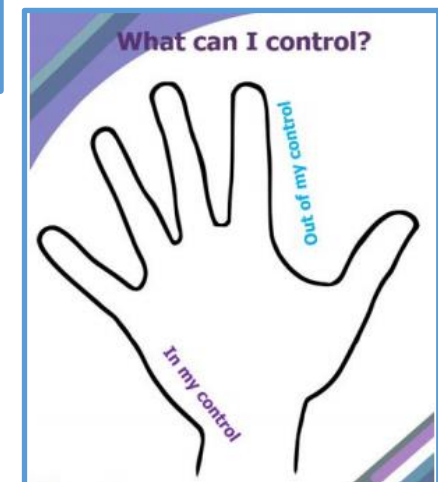
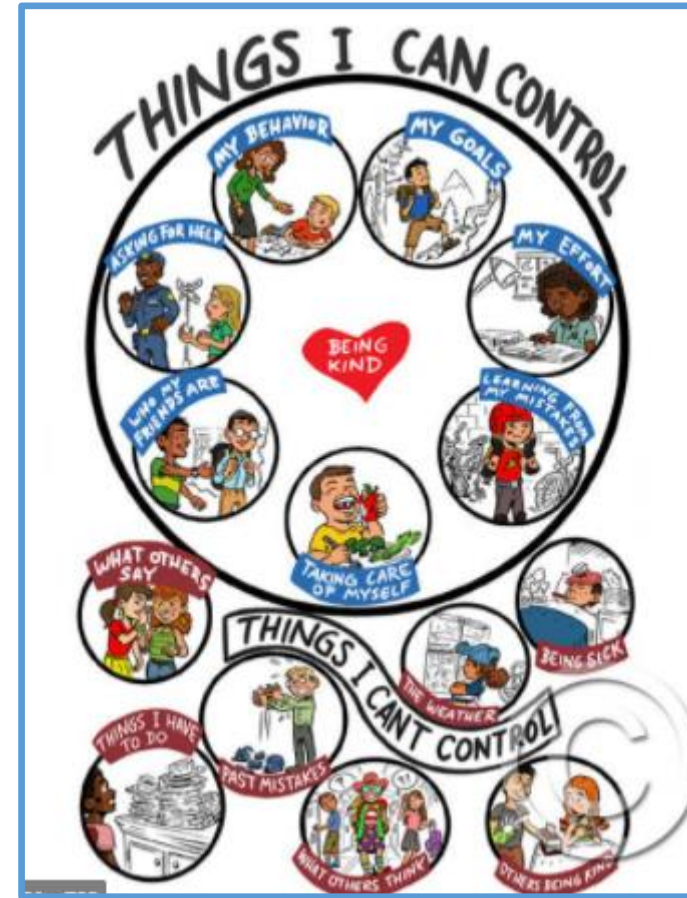


How can I change unhelpful thoughts?

Try putting things you can control in a tricky situation in a circle. Filling up the circle with lots of ideas helps us to feel more in control which then can make us calmer.

Put things we cannot control on the outside. We need to let go of these. You might need to talk to your child about how to let go of them and strategies they can use for letting them go. Give examples of what you do. Model it in everyday life, for example 'I've got a really tricky meeting to do tomorrow, so I'm going to make a to-do-list for the morning and then I won't have to think about it anymore tonight'.

Drawing around your child's hand or even their body on large paper can also be used for this, with things they can control in the middle and things they can't on the outside.



How can I support my child to calm?

In the model of thoughts-feelings-behaviour-body reaction, our body reactions can be the best one to calm first. This is because we often experience them early on when we feel anxious. Also, if your child does not have the language to name their feelings, they can still often describe how their body feels.

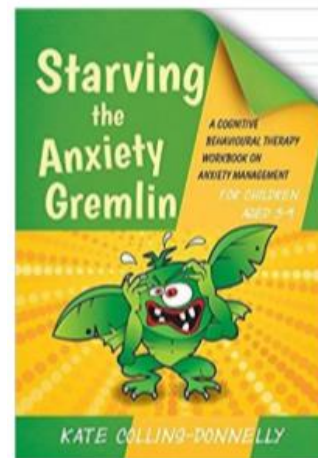
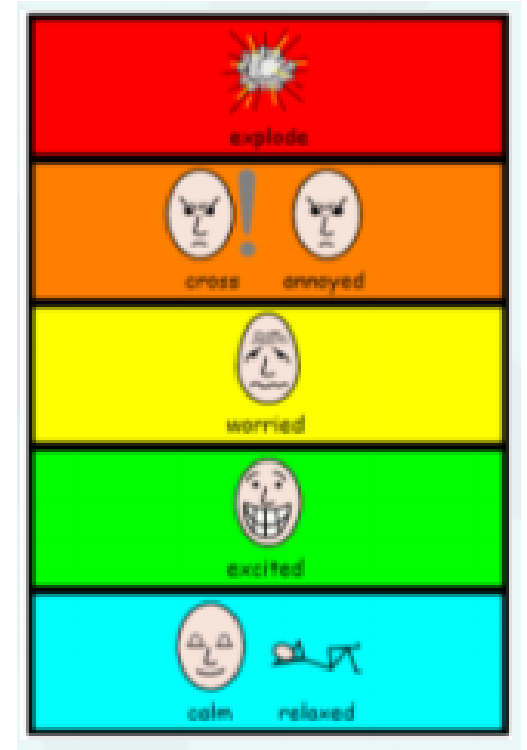
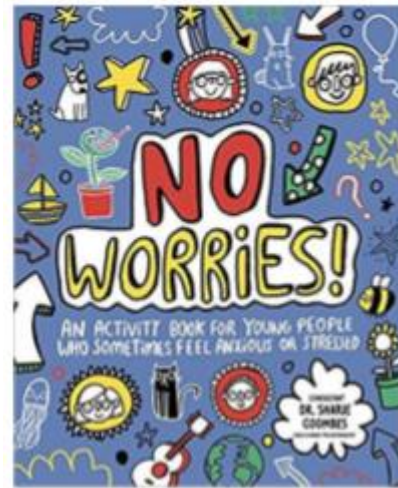
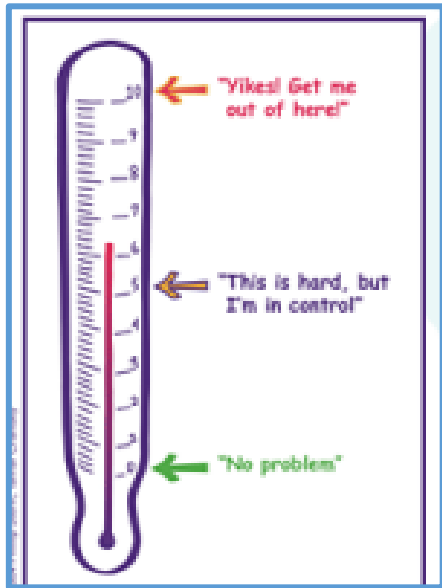
When our body senses 'danger', it starts to react quicker so that it can deal with it. This is the inbuilt body response – you might breathe quicker, pumping oxygen around your body quicker, which gives you additional energy. But that additional energy can make us react quickly without thinking through the best response.

It is helpful if your child starts to recognise their anxious body reactions e.g. biting nails, sweating, fidgeting. They need to then see that as a time to pause and think about their thoughts that are causing that reaction.



How can I support my child to name their feelings?

Remember feelings are on a scale – we are not either happy or sad, or anxious or calm. So children need a wide feelings vocabulary to understand the ‘shades of meaning’.



How else can I support my child to calm?

There are lots of ideas out there for helping your child to calm. It is best to build them into your daily routine, even if your child seems okay, rather than just using them when they are heightened.

There are lots of resources related to The Zones of Regulation on the school website. This is the program we use in school to help children regulate their feelings.

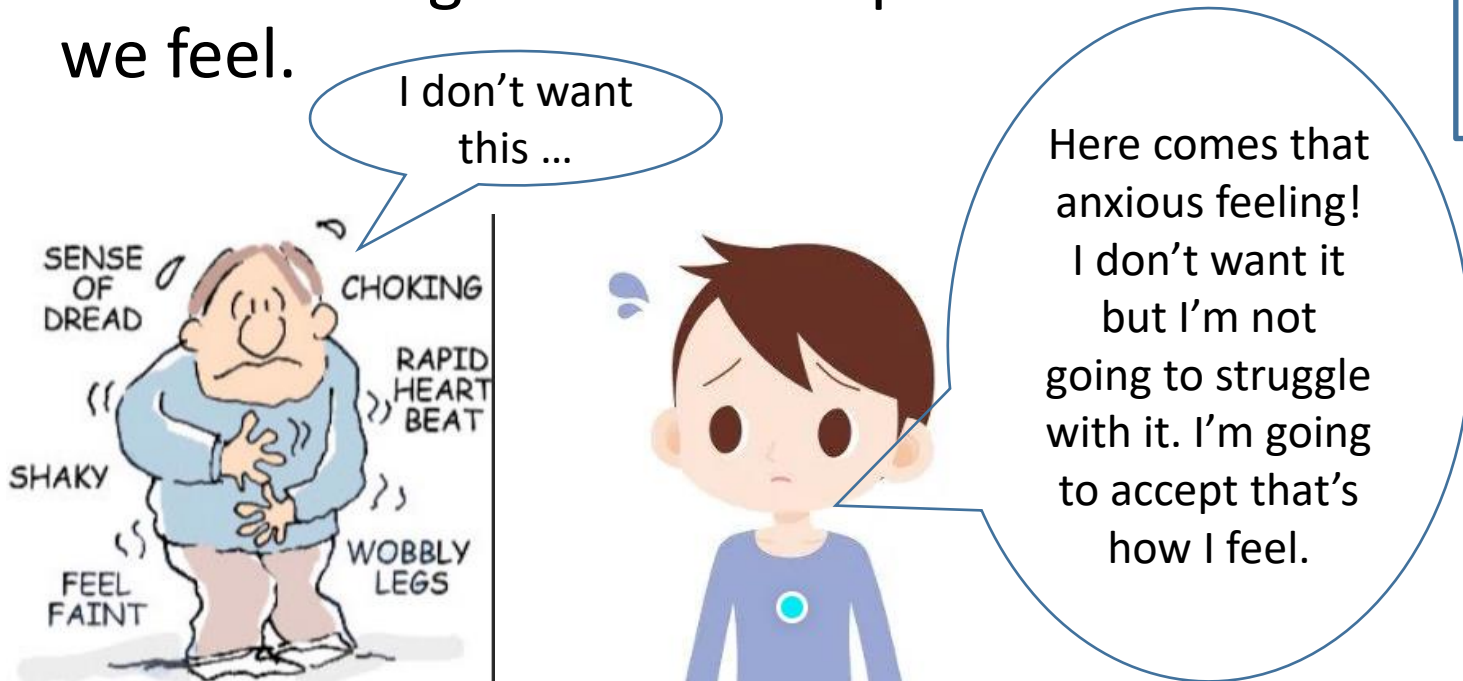
Each child will have different things that work for them; it's about knowing your child.

Calming Strategies



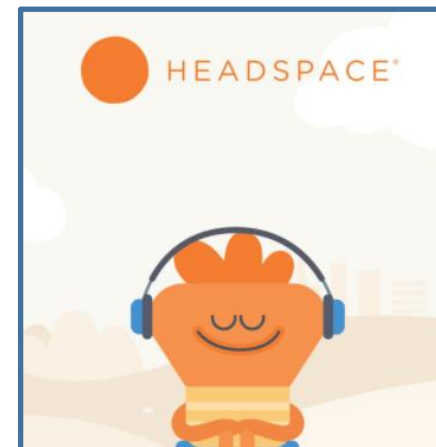
Why mindfulness?

Mindfulness can help children to notice and observe their feelings and thoughts without judging them. It isn't about pushing the feeling away. It is about stopping and having the time to recognise and accept how we feel.



A mindfulness strategy

What 5 things can you see?
What 4 things can you feel?
What 3 things can you hear?
What 2 things can you smell?
What 1 thing can you taste?
How are you feeling?



Other helpful websites and resources...

- www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog/ - guided 'meditation' for younger children
- Cbeebies – 7 ways to keep kids calm
- MyLife – calming app to download
- Save the Children – <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/stress-busters>
- Anna Freud Centre website
- CAMHS website
- Headspace for Kids
- Smiling Mind app
- School website

