



# Is your child feeling anxious?

**Anxiety is the most common mental health problem experienced by children today. Siobhan Mason asks the experts what parents can do to help, including when and how to seek professional support**

**We're all familiar with the dry mouth, pounding heart, tense muscles and butterfly feeling that plague our body when we're feeling nervous.** Anxiety is a natural human response to stressful situations and we usually feel relief once the source of stress has gone. But in around one in six young people, those feelings crop up too often, go on too long and can pervade all areas of life.

Symptoms of anxiety come because our bodies are conditioned to physically respond to threats by releasing hormones; blood pressure,

muscle tension, blood sugar and heart rate all increase to give us the energy to 'fight' or 'flee'.

This was a useful response in caveman days when our main threat was a fearsome tiger; it can still be handy in the short-term if it improves concentration for a test or gives your child extra oomph for a sporting event. But if a child feels this way all the time, it can be physically and emotionally draining. They may be clingy, irritable and prone to angry and tearful outbursts. They may feel faint or shaky, suffer from constant stomach

cramps and diarrhoea, struggle to sleep, and wake at night.

### **Increasing figures**

"We all get anxious at times and for the vast majority of that time, we are able to manage it," explains Paul Stallard, Professor of Child and Family Mental Health at the University of Bath. "Children are most likely to feel anxious in times of change, particularly when they start or change schools, or have to perform in exams or in a play. Then there's when they start to become more independent and face the challenges of going to new places on their own, making new friends or doing things they have never done before. Typically, anxious children think that they won't be able to cope and expect the worst will happen."

"Anxiety is the top topic that we get calls about, though the reasons



### **Writer profile**

**As mum to a 12-year-old girl and 14-year-old boy, Siobhan Mason** is conscious of the need for that daily check-in to keep abreast of her children's increasingly independent lives and to make communication a priority.

behind those anxieties are many," says Jo Hardy, Head of Parent Services at youth mental health charity Young Minds. "When anxiety gets severe, it can limit a child's life; they can become withdrawn, miss education and lose friendship groups."

Why some children suffer anxiety more than others is a complex interplay between genes, experience and the way their anxiety is dealt with by those around them, according to Professor Paul Stallard.

"One of the key things we see with anxious children is that they cope by avoiding the things that make them anxious – which is understandable because it brings immediate relief," he explains. "But avoiding things doesn't help the child recognise that they can take their anxiety with them. When a child gets into that avoidance trap, they end up avoiding more and more, which means their life becomes restricted."

### Self-help techniques

What you do to help your anxious child depends on the severity of their symptoms, but a good starting point is to use some tried-and-tested self-help methods. "Relaxation, distraction and breathing techniques all work well," says Jo. "It's important that children learn to self-soothe, although some may need more professional help and therapies."

A well-recognised tool to help your child feel in control is a worry box. "A child can write their worries down and post them into a box. You can then designate an agreed amount of time to go through their concerns, rather than letting them seep into every part of their life," says Jo.

After months of her daughter Emily waking constantly in the night and going to bed with a 'funny feeling' in her tummy, mum-of-two Natalie sought counselling to unpick the causes. She then backed it up with breathing, relaxation and visualisation exercises.



*Understanding how to manage feelings of anxiety can prevent symptoms from getting worse*

"I'd get her to visualise her worry as a grey cloud," says Natalie. "It helped her see that her worry wasn't part of her, but something outside her that comes and goes. I explained that when she goes to the shop on her own for the first time, she was likely to take her worry with her. But there are times when she might not want it to be

there, such as when she's going to sleep. Then, she would say, 'Buzz off, I don't need you here now.'"

"We also used breathing exercises: one involved having her hold her left hand in front of her, and run a finger from her right hand around it, breathing in as she goes up one finger, and out as she goes down. It was a calming exercise she could also do under her desk if she was feeling anxious at school."

## Anxiety: the tell-tale signs

- Feeling frightened, nervous or panicky all the time
- Difficulty sleeping
- Lack of appetite
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Being tired and irritable
- Wetting the bed
- Having palpitations
- Experiencing dry mouth
- Feeling faint or shaky
- Being tense and fidgety
- Using the toilet often
- Lacking confidence to try new things
- Angry outbursts
- Avoiding every day activities such as seeing friends or going to school

## "Anxious children think they won't be able to cope or expect the worst"

"To help her sleep, she'd tense then relax her body, starting at her feet and working her way through her whole body, ending up visualising herself laying on a field looking up at the sky."

Since going on a mindful parenting course, Natalie also encourages Emily to be in the present. "We notice things together on the walk to school, such as the leaves turning, instead of me saying, 'When I pick you up later, we'll do this, and have you got your science book etc.'"

"We know that ideas such as the worry box, relaxation techniques, and understanding what your body's telling you are really helpful,"



Talking therapies can be a good way to teach children techniques to manage overwhelming feelings



Taking the time to regularly talk to your child can mean you uncover problems before they get too bad

affirms Paul. "They won't work every time. But the more you practice, the more help they will become."

Natalie feels they have made a big difference. "Emily hasn't got much anxiety at all at the moment. But if it arises again, both of us will be better equipped to deal with it. And if she feels anxious when she's away on her Year 6 residential trip, she has a bank of techniques to draw on."

### When to seek help

Sometimes self-help techniques aren't enough, and children need extra support from a professional – but how do you know when?

"Look out for a sudden change or a slower progressive decline," says

Young Mind's Jo Hardy. "If you are concerned, if your child is frequently distressed, trust your instincts and have a chat with your GP or school. Are there things that have changed that you need to be aware of? It's good to identify the problem before it becomes really entrenched."

By the time parents have phoned the Young Minds helpline, their children have often been suffering for a long time and Jo urges them to see their GP, the gateway to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

"The earlier you get to the problem, the more you can do," says Jo. "You may go from having a child who has gone from not feeling great about going to school to flatly

refusing. We're increasingly getting calls about school refusal – parents can't get their child to school because of the levels of anxiety they're feeling and are struggling to know what to do."

"We advise parents to log their concerns: so instead of telling their GP 'my child has anxiety', they can explain exactly what's happening, how often and the impact it's having on day-to-day life."

"If there's a long waiting list, your child may be OK by the time a referral comes through. But that problem could have got a lot worse. Get them on the list in case the problem doesn't just resolve itself and actually becomes more deep-rooted."

Your GP and CAMHS aren't the only support though. Off The Record (OTR), BaNES offers easily accessible 'Listening Support' and free counselling sessions at their offices in Bath, Midsomer Norton and Keynsham, as well as at 16 schools and colleges in the region.

Siobainn Chaplin, Operations Manager at OTR, BaNES believes that creating space to actively listen to young people, allowing them to process their feelings and share what is going on is the key to dealing with anxiety.

"Sometimes it can be helpful to get professional counselling support, to talk things through with someone not involved, who can also

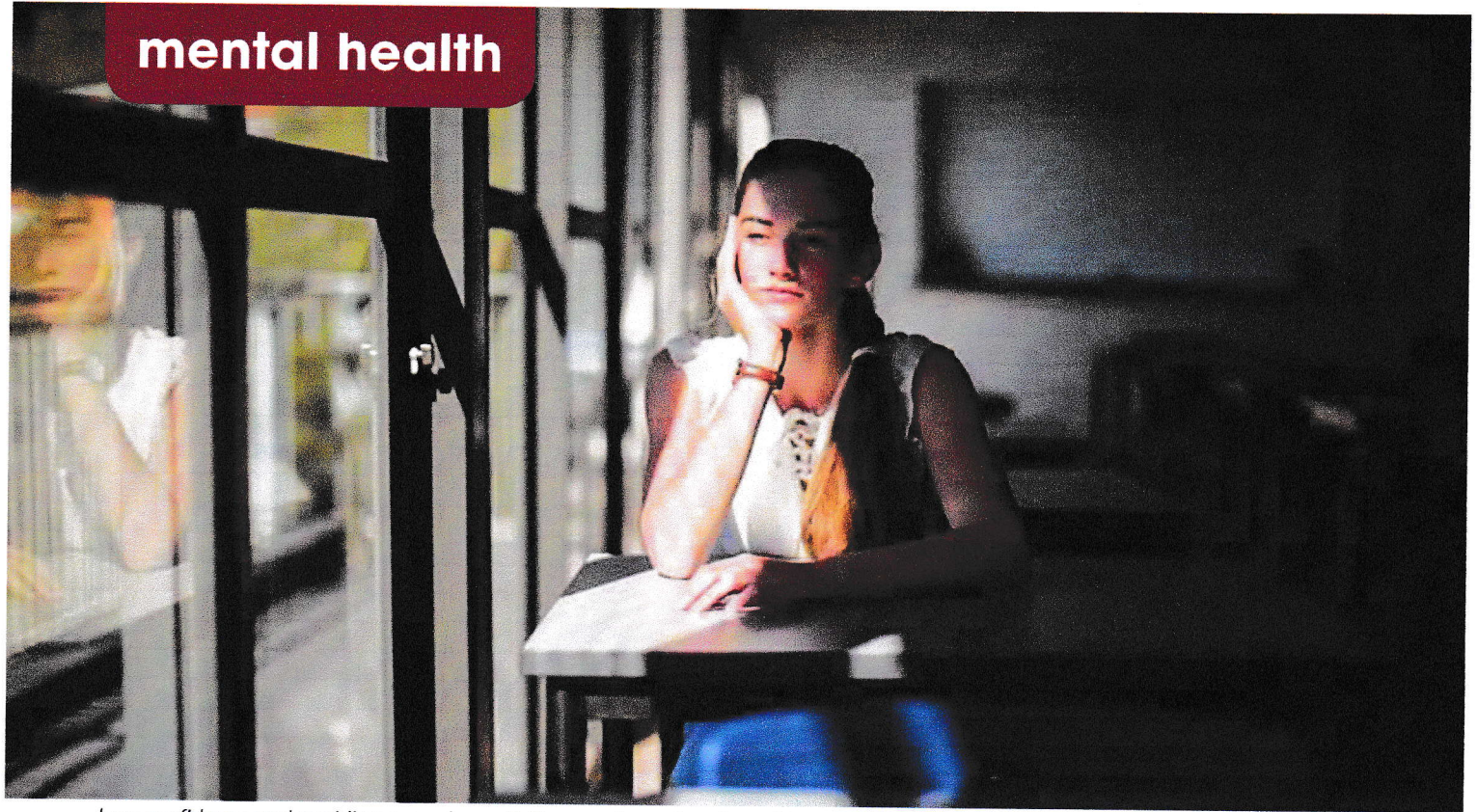
## Let's talk about mental health

**"Talking about anxiety with a non-communicative teenager can be difficult," says Young Minds' Jo Hardy.** "Our Take 20 campaign encourages parents to spend 20 minutes doing an activity with them, starting when their child is very young.

"It isn't about you sitting your child down and interviewing them about their mental health. It's about giving you both an opportunity to check in.

"Do something they enjoy, whether that's going for a walk, kicking a football about, doing some art and craft, or baking. Giving older kids a lift and chatting en route is really helpful so you're not directly interrogating them.

"Keep those channels of communications open. Involve your child in decisions. Even with anxiety, you can ask what they think might help them."



*Low confidence and avoiding everyday activities can be a sign that all is not well*

offer tools and resources that help manage anxiety triggers," she says. "If a child understands themselves and what they are feeling, it gives them a sense of confidence. This helps them to stay more present in their bodies and not be so dominated by mental fears and 'what ifs'."

In 2017, OTR, BaNES helped 1,688 young people improve their communication, confidence and resilience, and helped prevent future mental health problems.

Children that do get referred to CAMHS, however, have anxiety that is out of control and limits what they do, in which case their first line of treatment would be Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

"This helps children understand the link between how they think, what they feel and what they do," says Professor Paul Stallard, who has contributed to the development of CBT in many countries.

"When they face a situation they're worried about, they may start to think in particular ways that are unhelpful and make them feel that they'll be unsuccessful. This then increases anxiety feelings and because it feels so horrible, they avoid or stop doing the things they get frightened about."

"CBT helps children better understand their emotions, and their body's signals. Once they understand the 'fight or flight' reaction, they can learn techniques and methods to manage those unpleasant emotions."

"The therapy then focuses on the worrying thoughts and helps children check whether they've fallen into negative thinking traps. Often, they don't see the whole picture or recognise that they have successfully done something similar in the past."

"The final bit is about supporting them to find more helpful ways of thinking. We'll talk through, face and overcome particular situations that they find anxiety-provoking."

CBT has a good track record in helping anxious children, but it isn't the only way. Positive change can be achieved through self-help techniques, counselling, parent support groups or CBT, though Paul emphasises that the aim is not to take the child's anxiety away completely.

"The goal is to support children to do things, and turn down the volume on those unpleasant anxious feelings," he says. "That way, they can get on with everything they want to do." ■

## Further information

**Young Minds** have a free parent helpline 0808 802 5544 (Mon to Fri, 9.30am to 4pm).  
[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Children over 10 can self-refer with **Off the Record**, BaNES by calling 01225 312481, texting 0775 389 1745 or emailing [OTRsupport@offtherecord-banes.co.uk](mailto:OTRsupport@offtherecord-banes.co.uk). They also run parent workshops to help parents improve relationships with teenage children.

**No Panic** helpline for anxiety related disorders such as OCD or phobias 0844 967 4848 (parents) or 0330 606 1174 (13-20 year olds).  
[www.nopanic.org.uk/childrens-anxieties-phobias](http://www.nopanic.org.uk/childrens-anxieties-phobias)

**Mood Café** has some great relaxation exercises for children, including a printable leaflet on how to 'relax like a cat'.  
[www.moodcafe.co.uk](http://www.moodcafe.co.uk)