



## Understanding and Overcoming - Worry

### Understanding Worry

Worry is a normal emotion that everyone feels from time to time. Some more often than others. Worry is not all bad – it keeps us safe. It makes us more mindful and aware of the environment or situation we are in, how our actions may affect ourselves and others and it stops us taking reckless or risky behaviours.

What worries, fear and anxiety all have in common is that they involve an expectation that something bad is going to happen. This negative thought pattern also creates a physical reaction. When worry gets out of hand it can trigger our primitive Fight, Flight or Freeze reactions. The body will then start to release hormones called Adrenalin, which makes our heart beat faster in order to pump blood around our body quicker. This gets us ready to run (flight), hide (freeze) or fight by pumping more blood to your hands and legs and less blood to your brain. When this happens we tend to be less rational and sometimes we feel lightheaded. The brain also produces Cortisol, which is a stress hormone. **It can take over an hour for all these hormones to disperse and leave the body after we have calmed down.**

Other physical symptoms can include:

Headaches	Muscles tensing	'Butterflies in tummy'
Sweating	Feeling faint	Feeling sick
Crying	Heart racing	Tummy aches/cramps

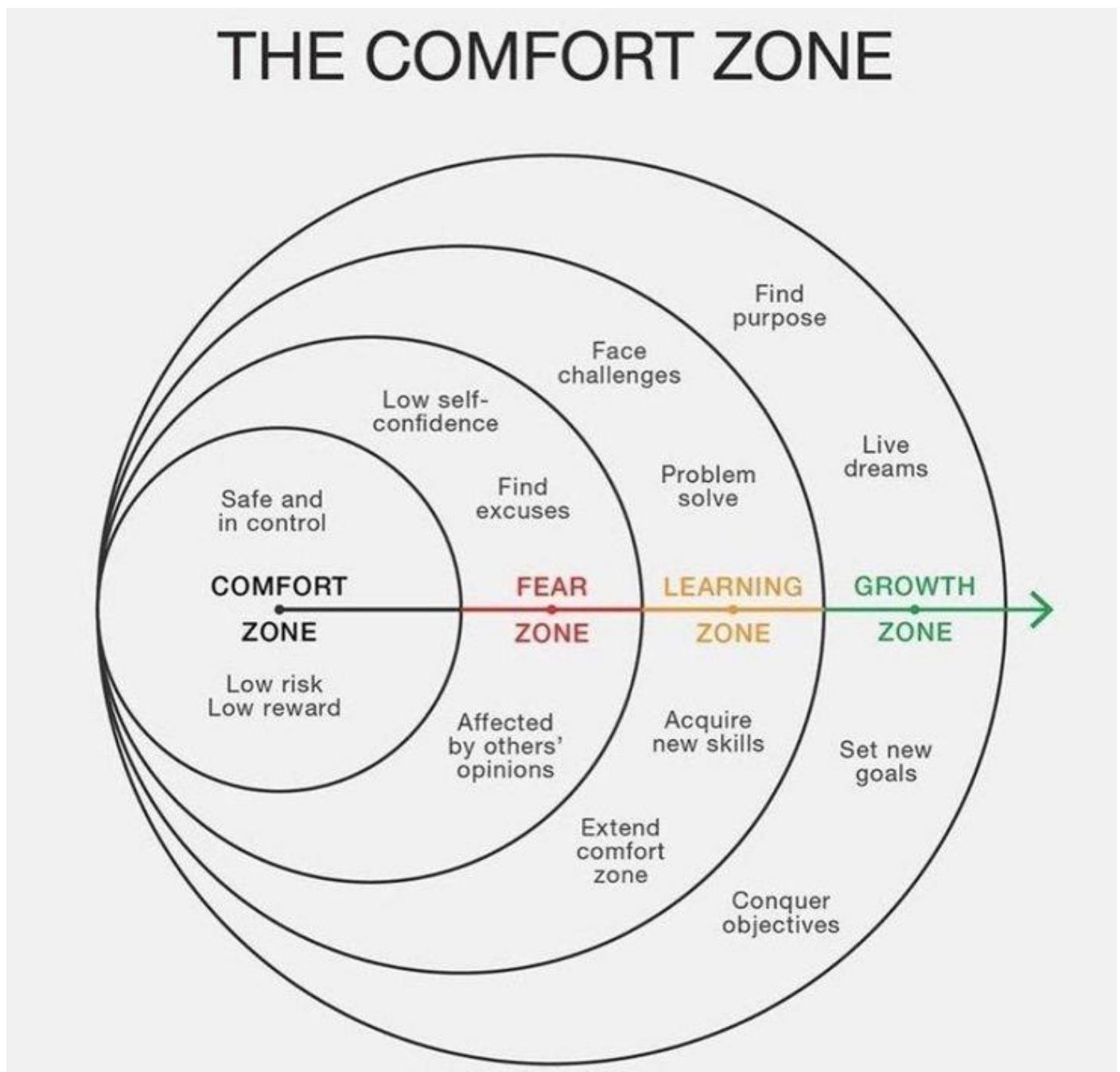
***How does it make you feel?***

## Overcoming Worry

**As a parent** - The first rule is to be patient!

You can help your child overcome this. You need to model calmness.

In all cases we must help our children help themselves by learning strategies to cope with their fears. They must learn to face their fears e.g dogs, sleeping alone, separation from parent(s) whilst at school etc. Avoidance will only make the problem worse. Children need to learn to stretch their comfort zone rather than staying in or shrinking it. Sometimes this might be just small steps in the right direction approach.



## **Quick tips for parents to help a child with anxieties**

- Try and stay calm, with them and in front of them. They will pick up on our own anxieties.
- Do not trivialise their fear/worry with comments like 'don't be silly.'
- Don't discuss your child's worries in front of them with others or label them as an anxious child in their ear shot.
- Confront fears gradually and consistently.
- Talk through the problem and help them to come to a possible solution rather than tell them what they should do. This will help with their problem solving skills.
- Ask what went well at school rather than what didn't. If it is an important worry to your child, it will come out naturally.
- Encourage your child to talk about school worries with adults in school, so that it can be dealt with in school.
- Have predictable routines for leaving and picking up children.
- Talk about any changes to routine beforehand.
- Always return when you say you will.
- Express confidence in your child's ability to cope with fearful situations.
- Minimize attention to separation tantrums.
- Be mindful that any physical symptoms e.g. tummy ache may be a sign of stress or avoidance. Be sure to check with doctor if you are unsure.
- Teach your child brave self-talk for facing fearful situations.
- Teach your child positive imagery (them overcoming fear) and relaxation strategies to use.
- Provide positive role models of other children who are not afraid of the situation or object. Ask them what makes them brave?
- Reinforce brave behaviour with your praise and encouragement.
- Promote their own problem solving strategies. Avoid always being the rescuer and constantly reassuring them.
- Set up an incentive system to get your child started in the steps needed to face the feared situation.

## Suggested Reading for parents

Overcoming Your Child's Fears and Worries – Cathy Creswell & Lucy Willetts

Why Smart Kids Worry – Allison Edward

The Incredible Years – Carolyn Webster-Stratton

## Books to share with your child

The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside

Happy Confident Me Journal – Annabel Saad Rosenhead & Nadim Saad

Don't Worry Be Happy – A Child's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety – Poppy O'Neill

CBT Workbook for Kids – 40+ fun exercises and activities to help children overcome anxiety, face their fear, at home, at school and out in the world – Heather Davidson

What to do When You Worry Too Much – Dawn Huebner

Colour Away Your Worries – Dr Leslie Ironside



## Further reading and tips on helping your anxious child:

### **1. Encourage your child to face his/her fears, not run away from them.**

When we are scared of situations we avoid them, but avoidance makes anxieties worse. When we avoid a situation we never realise that the situation was not as hard as predicted or that we can overcome it. Instead, if the child faces his or her fears, the child will learn that the anxiety reduces naturally on its own over time. The body cannot remain anxious for very long periods of time as there is a natural system in our body that calms us down. Usually anxiety reduces within about 10-45mins if you stay in the anxiety-provoking situation.

### **2. Encourage imperfection – everyone makes mistakes!**

It's OK not to get it right all of the time and our failures as well as our mistakes make us who we are. It is important to encourage your child to work hard but equally important to accept and embrace your child's mistakes and imperfections. Children are learners and of course we want our children to succeed in sports, academia and in performances but sometimes we forget that good enough can be fine too.

### **3. Focus on the positives (not the worry).**

Anxious children tend to find themselves caught up in thinking about worry and fear so much so that they forget to look at what they can do and are good at, so parents can usefully remind them. The more that the adults around them focus on the positives then the children will find it easier to follow and also think about 'glass half full' evaluations.

### **4. Make time for relaxing and fun activities as worries can be forgotten.**

Playing purely for the sake of play, fun, laughter and music, just because. Sometimes an anxious child may become caught up in the competition of sports, school and achievement. Helping them to enjoy relaxing times without worries about performance can be inspiring and hugely stress relieving.

## **5. Enrich their opportunities.**

Learning a new skill in one area can be a hugely helpful to boost confidence in another. Nurturing and developing physical, musical or artistic talents can show a child that they can be 'successful' in many different ways and encourage the brain to grow and develop in all areas.

## **6. Model looking after yourself, thinking creatively (problem solving) and being positive (your children will copy you).**

Children learn a lot from watching and copying others, especially parents, so paying attention to your own needs is really important. Talking to your child about how you make time for your own needs, cope with stress and manage when things go wrong can give them good ideas about how to manage their own feelings. If you model facing a fear then they can learn and copy you. If you stay relaxed, take some deep breaths and look unconcerned then chances are your child may learn how to do this too.

## **7. Recognise and reward your child's bravery.**

What rewards your child? Is it a hug, praise, telling granny or deciding what is for tea? Your child probably does not need material rewards but they do need to know that you are proud of them for trying something that is hard for them. Rewarding the behaviour and the effort will encourage them to do it again.

## **8. Encourage healthy habits for sleeping, eating and exercise.**

Healthier lifestyle choices fuel and maintain our bodies and they also help to ensure that we can think clearly. Having 'wind down' relaxing bedtime routines can help your child to sleep more easily. Ensuring they are well fed and watered can help them to focus clearly on what they want to do.

## **9. Acknowledge and then encourage your child to talk about his/her fears so they can explore other ideas about the situation.**

Just like adults, children do have fears and worries. Giving your child time and space to share their thoughts can be invaluable to help you understand what it is that may be worrying them. Often a child's worry may be very different to what you expect. Sometimes a child may feel relieved just to share their worry and to have their feeling acknowledged

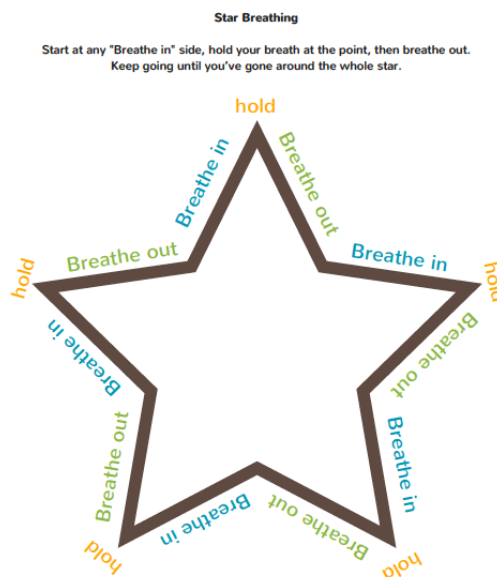
and not laughed at. Once you have validated the worry then you can begin to help the child to think of different ways of looking at the situation.

### 10. Support your child to problem solve for themselves.

This is about giving your child practice at solving problems. It is important to let them come up with their own ideas but if they can't then perhaps give them some examples of possible solutions and let them help you evaluate them. Don't jump in too quickly though; give them thinking time. You can also use hypothetical situations or characters from stories of others in trouble who need some help in solving their problems. Solutions though must belong to them.

### 11. Practice relaxation strategies with your child.

These can be breathing techniques, progressive muscular relaxation, or using imagery and imagination to reduce physiological and mental arousal. Practice, practice, practice – the more you do it the easier it becomes and the more likely your child will be able to use it if they begin to feel anxious.



### 12. Stay calm, share with others and don't give up!

You are probably not the only one who can help your child. Often relatives, teachers and other people involved in your child's life can help out. It's important to allow others to help and support you as your child will learn different things from them too. Anxiety and stress are a normal part of our lives that can sometimes get out of control. Helping your child to learn to manage fears and worries will be invaluable for all of their lives.



## Feeling Worried?

Try these.....

### Detective thinking:

What am I thinking and feeling?

Look for evidence.

What is more likely to happen?

### Positive self-talk:

I know that I can do this

It will soon be over

I am not worried

(Repeat a positive phrase in your head)

*Brain wave tests prove that when we use positive words, our 'feel good' hormones flow. Positive self-talk releases endorphins and serotonin in our brain, which then flow throughout our body, making us feel good. These neurotransmitters stop flowing when we use negative words.*

### Relaxation:

**Square breathing** - breath in for 4, hold for 4, breath out for 4, hold for 4 - repeat.

**Visualisation** - close your eyes (relaxing place)

Or

**Imagine a cake** with strawberries on top and a candle in front of you.

Breathe in the smell of strawberries, slowly blow the candle so that it flickers.

Repeat.

Tense all muscles in your body; hold for a count of 10, relax.



## Be confident:

Try standing in a confident pose; like a superhero. Act this out for two minutes.

Scientifically proven to release happy hormones and make you feel less stressed and more confident.

## Distract your thoughts:

*Left hand side of brain - is our logical problem solving side*

*Right hand side of brain - is our emotional and creative side*

*When we are worried we need to balance out our brain by activating the left hand side of our brain as the right hand side has taken over.*

A quick and easy way of distracting the right hand side of your brain is to count back from 100 in 7's. 100, 93, 86.....

It is slightly tricky for a reason because you have to concentrate harder than say counting to 10.

## Reward yourself:

Award yourself a small treat

Say 'well done me, I did it'

Receive a reward or praise from someone else

