

Welcome to our online workshop

**Supporting children with anxiety
for practitioners**



Photo of mother hugging child

led by Charlotte Amison, family support consultant at Contact

contact For families with disabled children



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What to expect from this workshop

- This is an online pre-recorded presentation
- Be prepared; be in a quiet room, have pen and paper ready to take notes
- You will receive a copy of the slides after the session
- If you have any questions following the session, please contact: bookings@contact.org.uk
- This pre-recorded workshop will be available for you to watch for 1 month (from the date you registered)
- The contents in this presentation are the intellectual property of Contact and shouldn't be shared. See T&Cs for more information.

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About Contact

We are Contact, the UK charity for families with disabled children.

- We support families with the best possible guidance and information
- We bring families together to support each other
- And we help families to campaign, volunteer and fundraise to improve life for themselves and others



Photo of mother with child

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Contact's online communities

- [Facebook](#)
- [Facebook group for families](#)
- [X \(Twitter\)](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Podcasts](#)
- [What's New newsletter](#)
- [Contact Scotland – Facebook](#)
- [Contact Wales – Facebook](#)
- [HemiHelp – Facebook](#)
- [HemiHelp – X \(Twitter\)](#)
- [Fledglings – Facebook](#)
- [Fledglings – X \(Twitter\)](#)
- [Fledglings – Instagram](#)



Photo of Contact families playing tug of war

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What our online workshop will cover

- Introductions
- What is anxiety
- What are the signs of anxiety
- How does anxiety make you feel
- What causes anxiety
- Types of anxiety
- Parents' perspectives
- How we can help
- Resources

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Objectives for this session

- Understand the support that Contact offers
- Understand **what anxiety is** and what are the **signs of anxiety** we may see in children and young people
- Know how to help children to recognise those signs of anxiety and think about **interoception**
- Understand **what causes anxiety** and how it makes children feel
- Gain an awareness of the **different types of anxiety** that may affect children and young people
- Ensure our **settings are parent-friendly** and have an understanding of the **language** we use when talking to families
- Ensure we recognise and understand **families' perspectives**
- Know how to help children and young people to manage their anxiety with a range of **support strategies**
- Know where to access **further resources** and support

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What is anxiety?



Photo of child with head in hands

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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a **feeling of worry or fear**. It is experienced through a combination of physical sensations, thoughts and feelings.

All children and young people feel worried sometimes, and it is a normal part of growing up. For example: changing schools, doing an exam or going into a new situation. Once this situation has passed, the child is able to soon calm down and feel better.

Anxiety can become a problem when a young person feels stuck in it, or when it feels like an **overwhelming, distressing or unmanageable** experience. If this kind of worrying goes on for a long time, it can leave a young person feeling exhausted and isolated, limit the things they feel able to do, and **start to affect their everyday lives**.

Anxiety can also cause **changes in our behaviour**, such as becoming overly careful or avoiding things that trigger anxiety.

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What are the signs of anxiety?



Photo of child hugging their father

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What are the signs of anxiety?

- Breathing too heavily
- Difficulty breathing
- Needing to use the toilet more often
- Sick
- Bedwetting
- Bad dreams
- Headaches
- Sweaty
- Shaky
- Needing assurance
- Problems eating
- Angry outbursts
- Hot
- Nervous
- Feeling tense
- Frightened
- Upset and tearful
- Unable to concentrate
- Feeling tired
- Can't make decisions
- Irritable
- Avoiding situations
- Repeatedly checking things
- Full of negative thoughts
- Unable to face simple day-to-day challenges
- Lack of confidence to try new things



Photo of child with head in hands

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Bodily sensations

It is really important to help children to notice and understand the feeling in their body as anxiety.

You can talk with them about the bodily sensations (heart racing / breathing / heat / tension) and wonder what they feel, where, and help them identify them as anxious feelings.

Alexithymia is a term to describe problems with feeling emotions. People who have alexithymia may have trouble identifying, understanding and describing emotions. They may also struggle to show or feel emotions that are seen as socially appropriate, such as happiness on a joyous occasion.



Picture of body outline

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How does anxiety make you feel?

Physical symptoms (as listed in previous slide):

Panic attacks, sweating, shaking, feeling sick, wobbly legs...

Psychological symptoms (what you start telling yourself):

- Feeling an impending sense of doom – feeling like the worst is going to happen
- I might lose control/go mad/die
- Full of negative thoughts
- People are looking at me and can see I'm going mad

- On edge, scared, panicky and alert to everything around you
- I can't cope

Behavioural symptoms (what you do to cope in this situation):

- Isolate
- Repeat certain behaviours to create rituals/obsessive compulsive behaviours
- Eat more/less
- Self-harm
- Sleep problems

[See: Living with Anxiety video](#)

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What causes anxiety?


Anxiety affects everyone differently and can be brought on by different situations. It's our body's natural internal alarm system that's designed to protect you from danger.

It enhances your alertness and attention by giving you a boost of adrenaline. This increases your heart rate and the amount of oxygen going to your limbs.

This is called the **'fight or flight response'**. It can be triggered in everyday situations when stress or worry has built up, often unknowingly.


FIGHT

Stand your ground, defend your position, attack, dig in, persevere



FLIGHT

Give away, retreat, discard, remove yourself, give up, move on



Graphic illustration of a child fighting or running away

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Some children **can be born more anxious** and less able to cope with stress than others. Children can also **pick up anxious behaviour** from being around anxious people.

Life events can have an impact, for example:

- Regularly moving house or school
- Lots of change in a short space of time, change in routine, unexpected change
- Having responsibilities beyond their age, e.g. young carers
- Parents fighting or arguing and family stress, e.g. debt or housing
- The death of a close relative or friend, becoming seriously ill or injured
- School-related issues like exams, struggling with pressure or bullying
- Being abused or neglected
- Not being understood/fit in – masking/camouflaging
- Difficulty identifying, understanding and managing emotions

Children with [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#) and [autistic spectrum disorders](#) are more likely to have problems with anxiety.

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Types of anxiety

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| • Claustrophobia | • Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) |
| • Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) | • Panic disorder |
| • Agoraphobia | • Phobias |
| • Anticipatory anxiety | • Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) |
| • Compulsive skin picking (CSP) | • Seasonal affective disorder |
| • Dental phobia | • Separation anxiety |
| • Depersonalisation disorder | • Social phobia/social anxiety |
| • Emetophobia | • Stress |
| • Fear of flying (aerophobia) | • Toilet phobia |
| • Generalised anxiety disorder | • Trichotillomania |
| • Health anxiety | |
| • Hoarding | |
| • Injection phobia | |
| • Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) | |

[Types of Anxiety – Anxiety UK](#)

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Parents' perspectives

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional • Lonely / isolated • Stressed and permanently in state of 'fight or flight' • Frustrated • Hurt • Exhausted • Scared • Grieving • Dealing with their own additional needs • Spinning too many plates • Parent, nurse, therapist, psychiatrist, advocate – many roles, no training! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledgeable • Aspirational • Inspirational • Resourceful • A great co-production partner • Hard-working • Ambitious • Expert in their child and their individual needs, abilities and aspirations • Inventive and full of ideas • Doing a brilliant job of managing a difficult situation |
|---|--|

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First conversations with families

- Be aware that **you may be the first person** that has ever voiced any concerns to a family
- Think beyond your processes and policies – **make it personal**
- What do you know about the family? How can you use this to help your first conversations?
- When is the best time to talk to them? **What suits them?**
- Keep first conversations **brief and to the point** – don't bombard them with information
- Perhaps share information before discussing at a future meeting – so parents can also **prepare in advance**
- Be open, honest and approachable



Picture of two people talking

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How parent-friendly is your setting?

Think about what it's like to be a parent coming into your setting.

Do you regularly walk around your setting and look at it from a parent's point of view?

Consider:

- What makes your parents feel welcome and part of the setting?
- What tells parents they are important to you?
- What reflects parent input and ideas?
- What information can you see that informs parents about what is happening/their child/your ethos?

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How can you help?

- **Listen** – find a time when the child is relaxed and willing to talk, e.g. during bath time or mealtime. Be judgement-free and help them to recognise how they are feeling
- **Watch out for changes in behaviour** – be understanding that this change in behaviour is part of the anxiety and understand their feelings
- **Make time for 1:1 quality time** – be involved in their interests and show support and it will help give time for talking things through

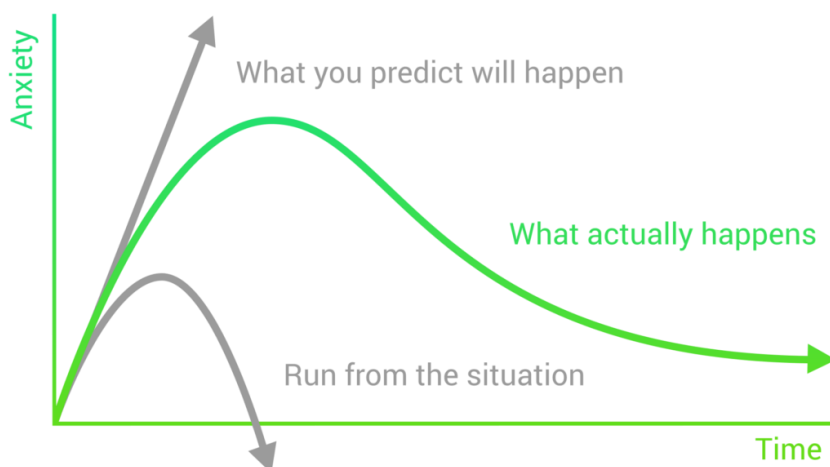
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How can you help?

- **Be active** – exercise can really help mental health and provide a beneficial opportunity to learn new skills and make new friends
- **Calm and routine bedtimes** – this will help with sleeping and ease anxiety before bed, as well as allow time to talk about any worries they have so their mind is clear before they sleep
- **Eat well and drink water** – a healthy diet is good for mental health
- **Calm** – slow down speech, lower volume, lower pitch 'I'm here'

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Habituation curve



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How can you help?

Acknowledging and naming the feeling: This is always important, even if we can't take the feeling away. For example: *"Oh, I wonder if you are feeling scared"* or *"Maybe this is making you heart race, perhaps you are worried."* This is much more helpful to children than *"Don't worry."*

Externalisation: Name their feeling and make a character, e.g. Mr. Worry

- This helps remove the worries from the child
- Notice it and name it

Facing fears: Anxiety makes you want to run away, but this makes anxiety BIGGER. The only way to beat anxiety is to face it, but in small chunks

- "Let's unpick this"

MR. WORRY

Roger Hargreaves



Picture of Mr. Worry

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The Worry Ladder

To overcome our fears, it can help to build our confidence gradually. Think of it as being like climbing the steps of a ladder.

To help a child make a Worry Ladder, start by writing down the fear that they are facing.

Then, for each step of the ladder, write down one thing they can do to face that fear head-on. Begin at the bottom with the least difficult step.

Make sure to reward them for each step they take.



The fear I'm facing is: _____

Most difficult

_____ ☆

_____ ☆

_____ ☆

_____ ☆





_____ ☆

Least difficult

Picture of Worry Ladder

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The Zones of Regulation

			
BLUE ZONE Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	GREEN ZONE Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Relaxed	YELLOW ZONE Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	RED ZONE Mad/Angry Terrified Elated/Ecstatic Devastated Out of Control

The Zones of Regulation | A Curriculum For Emotional Regulation

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How can you help?

- **Calming exercises:** mindfulness techniques, yoga, Pilates, breathing exercises. There are apps available for this too. See: [Calm zone | Childline](#)
- **Worry Box:** the child can write their worries on a piece of paper and put them in a cardboard box – parent or practitioner can then read them, discuss with the child and think of strategies to overcome them together
- **Breathe, cuddle, reassure:** slow, deep breaths will help calm their feeling of panic, a cuddle will give a grounding squeeze, and reassurance will ease worry
- **Happy place:** think of a happy place together – when the child feels anxiety building, talk to them about the happy place
- **Distraction:** an action to make them feel calmer – walking, a fidget toy, music, drawing...
- **Visual schedules:** to help structure their day and reduce uncertainty

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How can you help?

- **Recognising the signs:** ask them what it feels like and what they might be thinking when they feel anxious. You can use the ‘mapping exercise’ to help. This will help them recognise when they are beginning to feel anxious
- **Identify the issue:** when they feel willing to talk about it, you can use the handout ‘Controlling the Controllables’
- **Make a self-soothe box:** [watch the instruction video](#)
- **Identify any stimulants that may cause issues:** caffeine or sugar can trigger physical symptoms of anxiety, so try reducing them
- **Make the environment work:** make adaptations to the environment where possible, for example by lowering unnatural light if it’s too harsh or trying noise-cancelling headphones to reduce sensory overload

If things are not getting better, it is time to seek professional help.

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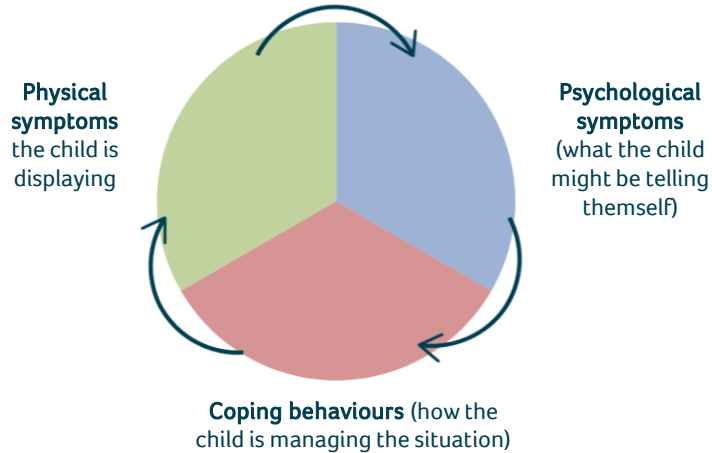
Controlling the Controllables

Things I can control	Things I cannot control

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Mapping Exercise

Working together with the child, use this chart to write out what you think the physical, psychological and coping behaviours may be for their anxiety.



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How can you help?

- **Keep a diary:** identify the physical, psychological and coping behaviours that are happening. Do this for a few weeks and note down the impact that anxiety is having on the child
- **Tell parent to take this information to their GP** to request support for their child if they are willing to attend. Help that may be offered includes:
 - Referral to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service)
 - CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)
 - Counselling and therapy (also available privately)
- **Consider what support you can offer in your setting:** pastoral care, counselling, mentoring, extra activities, exit cards, flexible timetable, home visits...
- **Medication** may be offered if the child's anxiety is very difficult to manage or talking therapy has not helped. Medication should be suggested alongside talking therapies or another psychological treatment, and by a doctor who specialises in children's mental health

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Books, blogs and apps

- What To Do When You Worry Too Much – D Huebner
- The Huge Bag of Worries – V Ironside
- The Anxiety Workbook for Teens – L Schab
- Overcoming your Child's Fears and Worries – C Cresswell
- The Problem with Problems – Rachel Rooney, Zehra Hicks
- How to cope when your child can't – Roz Shafran, Ursula Saunders, Alice Welham
- Jamie Knight (2015): [Medication is Scary](#)
- Helen Needham (2019): [Facing anxiety - understanding and working around triggers](#)
- Musings of an Aspie (2013): [My Anxiety is not Disordered](#)
- Neurodivergent Rebel (2020): [Autism & Mental Health - My Autistic Anxiety](#)
- Aspergers from the Inside (2016): [Dealing with Anxiety](#)
- Purple Ella: content from [Purple Ella](#) about her life with autism
- [Brain In Hand app](#)
- [Molehill Mountain app](#)
- [Real Stories On Mental Health From Young People | YoungMinds](#)

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Listening Ear support service

Our Listening Ear service offers 1-2-1 telephone appointments with a family support adviser.

This is a free service for parent carers looking for emotional support, practical help or reassurance.

As well as having a huge wealth of professional experience, our Listening Ear advisers are all parents of children or young people with disabilities themselves.

Families can visit our [Listening Ear page](#) to find out more or to [book an appointment online](#).



Speech bubbles containing comments from parent carers

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What now?

Please email bookings@contact.org.uk with the password 'Anxiety 2425' to confirm you have attended this workshop.

You will be sent the slides, handouts, and our contact details along with your certificate.

We will also send you a survey link so you can share your feedback for the session.

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Thank you!



Photo of a family on a sofa



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