## How to help your child in an anxious moment

When your child is in the middle of a very anxious moment, they may feel frightened, agitated or worried about having a panic attack. The important thing to do in the moment is to help them calm down and feel safe.

These strategies can help:

* **Breathe slowly and deeply together.** You can count slowly to five as you breathe in, and then five as you breathe out. If this is too much, try starting with shorter counts. If it works for them, gradually encourage your child to breathe out for one or two counts longer than they breathe in, as this can help their body relax.
* **Sit with them and offer calm physical reassurance.** Feeling you nearby, or holding your hand or having a cuddle if it’s possible, can be soothing.
* **Reassure them that the anxiety will pass and that they will be okay.** It can be helpful to describe it as a wave that they can ride or surf until it peaks, breaks and gets smaller.
* **Ask them to think of a safe and relaxing place or person in their mind.** If you haven’t tried this before, agree with them when they’re feeling calm what this place or person is. It could be their bedroom, a grandparent’s house, a favourite place in nature or somewhere they’ve been on holiday. Sometimes holding a memento of a relaxing place, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
* **Try using all five senses together.** Connecting with what they can see, touch, hear, smell and taste can bring them closer to the present moment and reduce the intensity of their anxiety. You might think together about five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell and one thing they can taste.
* **Encourage them to do something that helps them to feel calmer.** This could be running, walking, listening to music, painting, drawing or colouring-in, writing in a journal, watching a favourite film or reading a favourite book.

Remember that everyone is different, and that over time you and your child can work together to find the things that work best for them in these moments.

How to help your child manage their anxiety

Outside of moments when your child is feeling particularly anxious or panicky, there are things you can do over time to help them manage their anxiety and feel better.

A lot of these strategies are about helping your child to understand themselves and find out what works for them. The more confident they feel about helping themselves when things are hard, the more they will believe in their ability to cope – helping to reduce feelings of panic.

* **In a calmer moment, talk with your child about their anxiety.** Ask them what it feels like in their mind and body, and what things make them feel that way. It can be tempting to dismiss their worries because you want to reassure them, but it’s important to empathise with their experience and validate their feelings. You can find our tips on starting a conversation with your child [here](https://youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/).
* **Think together about whether there’s anything in particular that’s making them feel anxious.** This could include a friendship, a relationship with a family member, their schoolwork or a combination of things. Are there changes that could be made at home or school that would make things easier? If your child is worrying about things that are outside of their control, it might help to name together who is responsible for managing the problem – for example, you might say, “worrying about money is the parents’ job”.

I felt that we lost the idea that it’s important to validate their feelings rather than dismiss them. But I think this is a really important point that we shouldn’t lose

Parent

* **Help your child to recognise the signs that tell them they’re getting anxious, so they know when to ask for help or help themselves.** Anxiety might make them feel sick or make their heart race. Getting to know these signs can make them less frightening and overwhelming when they happen.
* **Think together about the activities that help them to express themselves and reduce their anxiety.** Your child could try doing exercise, drawing or painting, writing in a journal, watching a favourite film, talking to friends or cooking and baking. These kinds of activities can help them to feel calmer.
* **Make a worry box or self-soothe box.** It might help your child to write down their worries and put them in a worry box, giving them a physical place where their worries can be ‘held’. Or they might prefer a self-soothe box, which they can fill with things that help them when they feel anxious – like photos, fidget toys, scented oils and positive quotes.
* **Help them do the things we know are important for our mental health: physical exercise, sleeping well, eating healthily, drinking water and spending quality time with loved ones.** Regular exercise is particularly important for anxiety because it can help to reduce the symptoms in the body. It doesn’t have to be strenuous – walking or gentle yoga can help.
* **Spend quality time together and talk about other things.** Even if it’s just for a little while, you can help your child take their mind off their worries by having fun, relaxing and laughing. Activities like playing a sport, sewing or playing musical instruments, playing a game or reading a book are great for focusing the mind on the moment.

I’ve found it helpful when talking about anxiety to think about achievable goals for overcoming worries that stop them from doing things, and then to create stages like a ladder to get to the