

ANXIETY - TIPS FOR PARENTS - FROM THE ECS ELSA

How to support your child when they're overwhelmed by anxiety:

It is key to calm yourself first, although it's undoubtedly very upsetting to see your child in so much distress. As parents, we need to **listen, empathise with** and **validate** our child's feelings (even if it seems small/silly/insignificant to you – it's not to them!)

Some useful validating phrases include "You really do have some big thoughts and feelings there" and "I can see you're feeling really overwhelmed, at the moment". It is also key to just be present whilst they are so worked up and to only have conversations about what event/issue triggered them once the situation is calmer. A lovely phrase at this point is "I am 100% sure that you can do this...in fact I know you can."

Having a certain level of worry and anxiety is normal:

A degree of anxiety is completely normal for all of us, throughout life. I think much of the anxiety that children struggle with, is because they don't yet have the life experience that we have as adults. It is important, as parents, to take that into consideration. We should try not to become excessively anxious ourselves, especially about what our children are experiencing. The human lived experience includes the struggles of daily life and that includes sometimes feeling worried and/or low. However, if those feelings start to have a clear impact on day-to-day living, for example, they don't want to go to school, or they've stopped doing the things they've previously enjoyed, that's when it's time to feel a little more concerned.

Distraction techniques you can do with your child:

Just a couple of the techniques I teach my ELSA pupils, for those moments when they can feel their anxiety levels starting to rise, are listed below for you to try yourself and then with your child:

Five Finger Breathing (ask your child to) - Hold open the hand you don't write with.

Using the index finger of your other hand, trace up a finger on the open hand as you breathe IN (...slowly).

Breathe OUT (...slowly) as you trace back down that finger.

Follow using this pattern across the whole hand, so up and down each finger, starting again at the beginning, if necessary.

It is always best if you model it and do it with them.

The Five Senses Game - This consists of encouraging your child to breathe steadily, then ask them to think about....

5 things they can see... (let the child to look around and list each item)

4 things they can hear...

3 things they can feel...

2 things they can smell...

1 thing they can taste...

These techniques can really help to manage that immediate feeling of being overwhelmed, as they refocus the mind away from any negative thoughts and bring the thinking part of their brain back into action.

What the School ELSA can do to help your child if things get worse:

Anxiety is one of the slightly easier things to treat, because talking to another adult (i.e., one other than your parents) and other evidence-based treatment, such as CBT, is so well tried and tested. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can be a hugely useful tool for anxiety. In CBT, there is discussion and a very gradual exposure to what makes the young person anxious. It focusses on reframing the child's negative thoughts and teaches them to do the same independently...an amazing life-skill.

It is quite easy to understand how it works, although I appreciate it's not always simple to fully implement, but once a person can do it, they can do it. Not every young person will need this approach. For some, just a brief period of supportive ELSA sessions, run as informal chats to offload their concerns, may be sufficient.

However, in more extreme cases, I would always suggest you seek external professional help as soon as possible - from a qualified psychologist or psychiatrist, usually found via your GP, CAMHS or privately sourced and funded. We also have an in-School counsellor, to whom I or your child's Head of Year can refer your child.

In summary then, the 3 ELSA Top anxiety Tips are:

- 1. Anxiety is very normal but do watch out if it stops your child from doing the things they've previously enjoyed (avoidance only exaggerates the problem).**
- 2. Try not to show how worried you are about them; it is very likely to increase their anxiety levels.**
- 3. Anxiety is very treatable, and the techniques used can give them skills for life.**

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