



Managing Stress and Anxiety A Guide for School Staff

Introduction

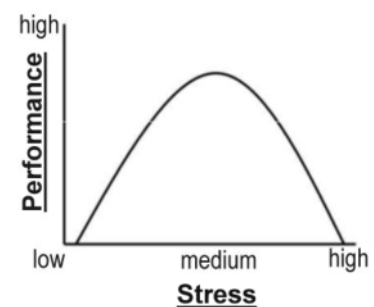
We've seen huge progress in the fight against Covid-19. So much of society has re-opened and many of the things we all enjoy doing, or rely on, are possible once again. While many children are coping well with the adjustment needed, some may continue to find the changes to their usual life and routines stressful. Children will not all respond to these changes in the same way, each individual will have their own unique coping mechanisms. It is important that we encourage and support our children to pay attention to and take proactive steps to promote their wellbeing. Staying active, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, limiting their use of technology will help. However, if stress persists the following information may be helpful in coping with stress.

What is Stress and Anxiety?

Stress is a temporary response to feeling under pressure. A small amount of stress can be positive as it can help us to cope with tense or challenging situations. It can also make us more alert and help us to perform better.

Stress occurs when we have to adjust to change, it is part of life. The change can be big or small, bad or good such as being late for a bus or starting a new school year.

Stress can become a problem when we are feeling worried or anxious a lot of the time. Anxiety can be a normal emotional response to many stressful situations. Anxiety is a response to a vague or unclear sense of danger such as 'something bad about to happen' or 'I don't know what to expect and am sure I won't be able to cope'. It can be hard to pin point what is making us feel anxious. Learning to manage stress and anxiety is good for our wellbeing.



What can stress and anxiety feel like?

Stress and anxiety can make you feel emotionally overwhelmed, irritable and wound up, fearful and lacking in self-esteem. They can make your heartbeat or breathing get faster, your palms sweaty, or knees get shaky. These physical signs can be worrying and this can lead to further anxiety.

They can cause children to have difficulty concentrating and in making decisions. They may also experience racing thoughts and constant worrying.



How to Manage Anxiety

Remember, feeling anxious sometimes is normal but there are things to do that can help manage anxiety including:

- sleeping well
- eating well
- getting exercise
- avoiding stimulants

These are some strategies that children may find helpful if they are feeling stressed:

- **Talking** to friends and family about how they are feeling.
- **Get good quality sleep.** 8 to 12 hours sleep is recommended for pupils. Leaving their phone/laptop outside the bedroom may help; avoid energy drinks and sugar before sleeping and limit lie-ins to weekends. See a useful link on sleep [here](#).
- **Have a healthy diet.** What we eat or drink can impact on how we feel. Energy drinks are to be avoided as they can make us feel more anxious. Similarly, it is better to avoid high sugar content foods which can lead to a sugar crash. Better to eat at least 5 pieces of fruit and vegetables a day and maintain a balanced diet.
- **Keep active.** Exercising helps to release tension. It can be particularly helpful for children aiming to clear their thoughts and to be calm when dealing with their problems. It will also help them sleep better.
- **Plan their days and their time.** Routines and schedules are the key to getting through difficult times in our lives. Structuring their days helps children to feel secure and reassured. The plan should include basic daily activities such as eating and sleeping, physical activities, household activities, social activities and enjoyable activities, as well as school work/study.

Things they can do:

Remember there is no single technique to manage anxiety or stress but there are a number of things that pupils may find helpful to reduce the accompanying feelings, such as:

1. Identify the Triggers

Children suffering frequent or excessive anxiety should try to identify firstly the triggers for it and then what helps with the feelings. They might keep a log of the following:



- *When and where do I feel anxious?*
- *What makes the feelings worse?*
- *What helps reduce the feelings?*

2. Positive Self-Talk

As we go about our day, we say things to ourselves in our heads about the things that we or others do. This is called self-talk. If we are experiencing anxiety it is likely that we are engaging in negative self-talk. When anxious we may engage in faulty and irrational thinking affecting the way we feel and behave.

Encourage your pupils to try and use positive self-talk, such as:

- I can try my best effort instead of giving up
- I don't have to be perfect. My best will be good enough.
- I have managed before, I know I can do it again

(See NEPS Post Primary Toolkit for more information)

3. Relaxation Techniques

There are lots of relaxation techniques and different things work for different people. Practicing relaxation creates the opposite effects to stress and anxiety. It lowers the heart rate, reduces blood pressure and sweat gland activity. By trying some different techniques pupils can find what works for them. See below for a list of suggestions and further ideas and resources on relaxation can be found [here & here](#).

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|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| - Yoga | - Meditation |
| - Mindfulness | - Muscular Relaxation |
| - Deep Breathing | - Visualisation |
| - Body Focus | |

4. Distraction

It may help pupils to take their mind off things if they can distract themselves by:

- Focussing on what is going on around them – for example if they are out walking and feeling anxious, count how many blue cars or people wearing red they see etc.
- Keeping active - Going for walks, doing exercises at home, cycling.
- Finding ways to engage their mind e.g. spell words, counting backwards, saying the words of a song, reading a book or trying a puzzle



5. Take Control of Worries

Pupils should remind themselves that, although worrying is normal, it doesn't help. Instead of spending their time worrying, they should take 10 minutes to write down everything they are worried about. These worries will seem less scary when written down and they won't have to think about them for a while. If they start worrying again, they should check if the worry is already written down. If it is not, they can jot it down. Alternatively, if a worry comes into their mind, they can choose not to fight it but rather:

- Notice it,
- Name it *"I am worrying about _____"*
- Let it go.

By doing this they are refusing to give power to their worries but this takes practice.



6. Problem-Solving

This can help to reduce worries and alleviate anxiety

1. Write down what the problem is.
2. Think of all the possible solutions to the problem.
3. Look at the pros and cons of each solution.
4. Pick the solution that is best and try it.
5. After implementing it, ask yourself 'Did it work'?
6. If it did not, move on to the next solution.

7. Where To Get Support

If anxiety is impacting on a pupil's day-to-day life, they may need short term extra support. See [here](#) and [here](#) for more information on mental health supports.

And/or

Encourage Parent/Guardians and pupils to talk to their GP who can support them or refer them on for further help and support.