



Normalising Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours A Guide for School Staff

It is normal for children and young people to experience anxious thoughts and feelings from time to time, and these can occur in response to a significant change or life event, academic difficulties, friendship difficulties and a variety of other stressors. Stress and anxiety are a normal part of human life and it is important to provide children with opportunities to develop coping skills and nurture their resilience. Each individual child will have a personal coping style, however, there are a number of common factors that promote wellbeing. Staying active, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, limiting their use of technology will help. The following information may also be helpful.

If feeling stressed or anxious children and young people may have some of these thoughts...

I can't wait to see my friends I hate being in school

School is so boring I have nothing to look forward to

How am I going to get through this homework? ?

I have a lot of things to be happy about I am scared that something bad will happen

...or may experience some of the following emotions/feelings...

| | | | | |
|------------|-------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Frustrated | Discouraged | Angry | Nervous | Stressed |
| Worried | Excited | Nothing | Relieved | |



They may experience some of the following body sensations...



- Tension in their body
- Butterflies in their tummy
- Tiredness
- Headaches
- Change in appetite
- Tearful
- Poor sleep
- Difficulty settling, agitated
- Nothing different

It is natural to have a range of thoughts, feelings and body sensations such as those outlined above. Students may not experience any of these and that's ok, too. We all have our own way of reacting to these situations.

So what can children do if their thoughts, feelings/emotions or body sensations are distressing for them? They should...

- talk to family, friends, and school staff
- acknowledge their thoughts, feelings and body sensations rather than pushing them away. They are having normal reactions to an abnormal situation. They will not always feel this way
- decide which is most unhelpful for them; the unhelpful thoughts, distressful feelings/emotions, or unwelcome body sensations. Some students may feel a combination of the three. They should pick the one that bothers them the most and work on that first, using the strategies listed below.

Help students consider the following:

Unhelpful Thoughts

Helpful thoughts are based on facts and lead to appropriate feelings and behaviours. Unhelpful thoughts are based on our feelings about the facts, for example fear, worry. By learning to be the boss of their unhelpful thoughts, students can enhance their wellbeing. Some examples of unhelpful thoughts are:

- I have forgotten everything I learned
- I am never going to have fun again
- I have missed so much and there is nothing to look forward to

Encourage students to:

- Acknowledge their thoughts
- Talk to an adult or friend
- Remember that their thoughts are normal
- Remind themselves that thoughts are only thoughts not facts



- Try to challenge unhelpful thoughts – they can try saying:
 - ‘Is that really true?’
 - ‘What proof do I have for thinking that?’
 - ‘How else could I look at this?’
 - ‘What would I tell my best friend if they felt/thought this?’
- Try to replace unhelpful thoughts with realistic helpful self-talk statements such as:
 - ‘I can do this’
 - ‘I can ask for help’
 - ‘I have people who can help me’
 - ‘I know this is a hard time but I can try my best’
 - ‘I know I’d like things to be different, but I’ll get used to it things will work out’
 - ‘If I am unsure of anything, I will ask someone for help.’

Tip: Positive self-talk statements work even if when we don’t believe them at the time – Fake it to make it!

Unpleasant Feelings/Emotions

Unpleasant feelings/emotions can follow on from unhelpful thoughts. It is natural experience these feelings in challenging times These emotions might include:

- Anger
- Frustration
- Disappointment
- Simply fed up

Encourage students to:

- Acknowledge their feelings and remind themselves that these are normal given the circumstances.
- Talk to an adult or a friend.
- Name the feeling and find where it is in the body. Breathe into that area and imagine the area softening.
- What thought goes with the feeling? Challenge the thought? Ask is this really true? Or use a positive self-talk statement (see above).
- Pick a dedicated time to explore, discuss or think about this feeling. For example, ‘I will worry about this at 5pm.’ Tell the feeling if it returns that ‘I will pay attention to you at a later time.’
- Develop a coping strategy such as:
 - Thinking of and doing something that makes them feel better
 - Challenging the thought
 - Asking for help
 - Sticking to a routine
 - Using a positive self-statement,
 - Talking to family or friends



Unpleasant Body Sensations

These are normal and expected ways that we can experience negative thoughts and unpleasant emotions/feelings in our bodies. They might include:

- Tense neck and shoulders
- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Tummy ache
- Change in appetite
- Butterflies in tummy
- Difficulty settling

Encourage students to:

- Acknowledge their body sensations and remember that it is normal to have unpleasant body sensations at times of stress
- Name the body sensation and find where it is in their body. Breathe into the area and imagine the area softening
- Talk to an adult or friend about these sensations
- Practice calming strategies regularly such as breathing, visualisations, and mindfulness. See NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (text) and NEPS [Relaxation techniques](#) (podcast)
- Include exercise in their daily routine.
- Have a bath or shower; these can calm the body and aid relaxation.
- Have a massage (you or a sibling might give a neck rub) or use a gym ball or roller to massage tense parts of their body
- Practice positive self-talk statements
- Consider their bedtime routine:
 - Stop using I.T. an hour before bedtime.
 - Do not exercise too near bedtime.
 - Avoid eating too much before going to bed.
- Keep in touch with their friends however they can.
- If you continue to be concerned, suggest to parents that they consult their G.P.