

Calming down worries, for adults

Psychology & Learning

Putting Psychology at the Heart of Learning

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WHAT ADULTS NEED TO KNOW

Anxiety is the body's normal reaction to stressful, dangerous, or unfamiliar situations, either real or perceived.

No matter how skilled, brave and intelligent we are, news of the coronavirus will have raised some concerns for you.

We need to realise:

- Anxieties are normal.
- They pass (think of a time when you were really anxious, you thought that feeling would never go away but it does).
- Worries are unpleasant and distort our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. We can think irrationally - shown by people hoarding toilet rolls - but we rationalise it (I might need them if I cannot get out of the house).
- We can make worries bigger and all consuming by thinking about them.
- But we can also reduce them.
- We can also pass them onto the people around us without realising. Did you know that we have mirror neurones in our brain which pick up signals from others and give us the capacity to copy them, sometimes unconsciously? (Think about when you suddenly realise you have positioned your body in the same way as the person you are talking to).
- Children pick up on non-verbal signals: the tone of your voice; your body language. You may be trying to protect them from hearing how worried you are but chances are they can see and feel the tension around them.
- We all like to make sense of situations and not knowing can make us more anxious.
- When we are worried, our body reacts. We are just a bag of chemicals, primed for fight, flight or freeze.
- When we are worried we stop socially engaging (our talk is shorter, more abrupt, it takes more effort to think of others). This is all normal as your body is flooded with stress hormones.
- You need to be mindful of the Attention Principle - *what we pay attention to we get more of!* Just think of someone telling you Don't think of a kangaroo! You automatically do. So telling children not to worry won't help.
- Anxieties are normal.

Read on if you want to be able to reduce your anxieties and those of your children. The key is knowing what to do with our worries.

Remember:

Anybody can become worried — that is easy, but to share your worries with the right people, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.

(Adapted from Aristotle, 384 BC - 322 BC)



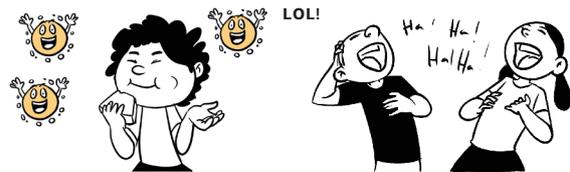
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TOP TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

1. Regulate yourself - learn to read your own body and calm it down.
2. Engage in controlled breathing exercises with your children (see the children's tip sheet). Lying on the floor to do this makes it easier initially, listen just to your breath. How many times can you do it for? What do you notice? Feel the tension drifting away with each breath.
3. Whilst doing your controlled breathing, think of your favourite place, imagine you are there. Make the colours really bright, listen to your favourite sounds, breathe in your favourite smells and enjoy.
4. The brain is great - you can take yourself to any place you want to be from the comfort of your own home.
5. Learn to appreciate the things you have - notice all the things you treasure in life. If you could put 10 favourite things in a treasure chest what would they be? (you can include things like sunshine, sand and your family, be imaginative).
6. When your child is worried, learn to recognise the signs (it can come in any form: rejection, withdrawal, anger, over-excitement or tears).
7. Rather than tell them to calm down, show them how to: model relaxation activities (yoga, singing, stretching); give them a hug; spend time with them.
8. Check yourself - would you talk to a friend the way you talked to your child or partner? (we tend to be less guarded with people we love and live with).
9. Acknowledge their feelings - "I can see you are upset. I can see this is really frustrating for you." Do some calming down activities together or just sit and be together.
10. Identify irrational / negative thoughts and have a *so what* plan. If this happens we will 1...2...3.... Having plans reduces fear of the unknown.
11. Teach your child that we can tell our brains to worry and they will; or we can tell our brains to be happy.
Try it out, facing each other say:
 - (i) "I am worried" - what happens? You should notice your faces changing.
 - (ii) now say, "I am happy" - what happens?
12. Have some fun! Our bodies like to feel balanced and produce hormones to help with this. When the stress hormones go up our oxytocin (feel good hormone) goes down. However, if oxytocin goes up our stress hormones come down. Here are a few oxy boosts you might like to give yourself: **having a cuddle, eating your favourite food, having a laugh.**
Playing silly games (try not showing your teeth and talking).
Choose things that make you smile.



More ideas can be found in the Calming Cat resources - see TTS website.

These notes and the Calming Cat resources have been written by Paula Williams, Educational Psychologist.

