Managing Anxiety

Managing Anxiety

- by Rachel Isgar & Keely Knapp Assistant Psychologists and Dr Emma Crawford, Consultant Clinical Psychologist & Clinical Lead from Hillcrest Shifnal School.

Hillcrest
innovators in care and education

Managing Anxiety

Authors: Rachel Isgar & Keely Knapp Assistant Psychologists and Dr Emma Crawford, Consultant Clinical Psychologist & Clinical Lead from Hillcrest Shifnal School.

Introduction

Anxiety is a natural human response which can be experienced through feelings, thoughts and physical sensations. Anxiety occurs when we feel under threat. It is what a person feels when they feel tense, worried or afraid. This can be about things that may happen very soon or some time in the future.

Early experiences of childhood trauma have been hypothesized to play a significant role in the development of anxiety (Bishop et al, 2014). Anxiety is therefore often developed following a series of stressful or traumatic life events. It is these traumatic experiences which leave us with feelings such as being apprehensive to trust others and uncertainty. This is likely to make an individual feel as though they are unable to cope with any demands. Developmental Trauma can therefore influence the way in which an individual's body processes and reacts to fear, thus individuals are more likely to be hyper-reactive to stress.

Fight or Flight Response

People will primarily experience anxiety to help them to run away from danger or to fight danger. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response.

When our body responds to fear, it results in an increase in adrenaline. The increase in adrenaline, increases an individual's blood pressure and heart rate. Subsequently an individual will become hyper-alert to the perceived threat. If a child or young person experiences several events, for example in the case of Developmental Trauma, this can result in them feeling as though the world is a dangerous place and may result in them experiencing anxiety. Anxiety can feel different for everyone. The worries and expectations of negative outcomes of anxiety are often accompanied by physical symptoms. Some of the symptoms that may be felt by the children and young people we support may include:

Effects on the body:

- Feeling like you can not breathe properly
- Feeling light headed
- A churning feeling in your stomach
- A butterfly feeling in your stomach
- Breathing faster
- Feeling sick

- Sweaty palms
- Feeling restless
- Difficulty sleeping
- Needing the toilet frequently

Effects on behaviour:

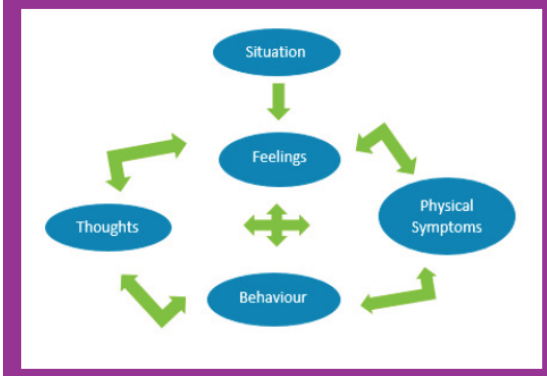
- Talking very quickly
- Avoidance - even avoiding situations that you enjoy
- Snapping at people
- Pacing/ unable to relax

Effects on your mind:

- Focusing on negative thoughts
- Feeling tense and unable to switch off/ relax
- Fearing the worst/having a sense of dread
- Feeling like you can not stop worrying

Understanding Anxiety

Being aware of what anxiety is, how anxiety presents and what affects it, has enabled us to reflect on what strategies might be beneficial to manage anxiety. A starting point for this is to complete the diagram below based on a situation or problem that provokes anxiety:



How can anxiety be reduced?

A number of strategies have been developed to help manage anxiety. After understanding what provokes an anxious feeling it can be helpful to:

- Practice challenging negative/ unhelpful thoughts
- Develop problem solving skills
- Learn how to reduce time spent worrying and engage in enjoyable and meaningful activities
- Learn how to feel more physically and mentally relaxed

What strategies can be used to manage anxiety?

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise outlines how to relax muscles through a two-step process. Firstly, specific muscle groups need to be tensed, such as the neck and shoulders. Next, release the tension and notice how muscles feel when they are relaxed. Try the steps below, finding somewhere comfortable to sit:

1. Start with your toes – tense them for five seconds by curling and releasing them
2. Then your feet – tense them for five seconds by spreading your toes and pulling your toes up to your body then release
3. Next your calf and thigh muscles – tense them for five seconds and then release
4. Tense your tummy muscles - pull your tummy in for five seconds and then release
5. Push your chest out for five seconds and then release
6. Push your shoulders and bring them up to your ears and then release
7. Stretch your arms out straight and make a fist with your hands - hold for five seconds then release
8. Tense your face by wrinkling your forehead, squeezing your eyes shut, hold for five seconds and then release

Try repeating each exercise three times and notice how it makes your body feel.

Mindful Breathing

This exercise requires you to focus your attention on breathing and doing so deeply and slowly.

Research has shown that when adrenaline is released breathing occurs at a quicker rate. Engaging in relaxation techniques is a method that helps to switch off the 'flight or fight' response. The aim of mindful breathing is to slow breathing down and refocus your attention if your mind wanders.

1. Can you slow your breathing down to a count of 3 or 4?
2. Breathe in for 1-2-3-4 then breathe out for 4-3-2-1 consistently and evenly
3. Take a deep breath so your stomach rises and falls, rather than your rib cage
4. Imagine having a balloon in your stomach that inflates when you breathe in and deflates as you breathe out
5. If your mind has wandered bring it back to focus on your breathing
6. Breathe in for 1-2-3-4 then breathe out for 4-3-2-1
7. Take a deep breath so your stomach rises and falls
8. Refocus your thoughts on your breathing. It is normal for your mind to wander, your job is to notice it has wandered and refocus it on your breathing
9. Breathe in for 1-2-3-4 and then breathe out for 4-3-2-1, consistently and evenly

Try practicing this technique to see whether it is helpful in allowing you to relax.

Conclusion

The children and young people we support who have experienced Developmental Trauma often have significant levels of anxiety, which in turn can impact on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Therefore it is important to understand what strategies can be used to help manage their anxieties.

Practicing breathing techniques and relaxation strategies has been seen to be hugely beneficial. Hillcrest Children's Services Clinical team has created a variety of key-working booklets for parents and carers to undertake with children and young people in their homes. One example of a booklet is 'Anxiety Management'. Which supports them to understand how they can regulate their experiences of anxiety and develop support strategies.

The children and young people we support are offered access to regular therapy from our multi-disciplinary clinical teams. When working with children and young people who have experienced Developmental Trauma, therapy should attend to cognitive, emotional and sensorimotor processing. Individuals who have suffered from Developmental Trauma are vulnerable to their lower brain stem being overwhelmed. Engaging in relaxation techniques is important to develop self-regulatory skills that can be used in everyday life (Blanaru et al, 2012).

References

- Bishop, M., Rosenstein, D., Bakelaar, S., & Seedat, S. (2014). An analysis of early developmental trauma in social anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder. Annals of general psychiatry, 13, 16. doi:10.1186/1744-859X-13-16
- Blanaru M, Bloch B, Vadas L, Arnon Z, Ziv N, Kremer I, et al. (2012). The effects of music relaxation and muscle relaxation techniques on sleep quality and emotional measures among individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder. doi: 10.4081/mi.2012.e13
- Mind.org.uk. (2018). Anxiety and panic attacks, Mind, the mental health charity - help for mental health problems. [online] Available at: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/#.W9LgAntKjlU [Accessed 26 Oct. 2018].

Spread the word...

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our clinical team. If you would like us to cover any particular subjects around social, emotional and mental health in future editions then please let us know by emailing info@hillcrestcs.co.uk

The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website:
www.hillcrestchildrensservices.co.uk/clinical/resources

If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.