

Managing Worry



What is worry?

Feeling worried, tense, and stressed at times is a normal human response. In fact, 2 out of every 5 people report that they worry at least once every day. Worry is usually relatively short-lived and can lead to positive problem-solving behaviour.



Sometimes worry, feelings of anxiety and tension can persist, and might start to affect daily life (e.g. it might be hard to get to sleep or focus on other activities).

If this is the case for your child, you may find the information in this sheet helpful in supporting them to learn positive ways to manage their worry.

How should I respond to my child's worries?

Ensuring your child feels understood, taken seriously and heard is an important first step. Give them time to talk about their worry: perhaps ask them questions so you and they can work out what their worry is about.

Dismissing their worry or giving reassurance without first really understanding it may result in your child feeling they need to go over the worry again, to make sure you really understand it.

Telling you child not to worry probably won't help much. We don't have that much control over what pops into our minds and trying not to think something usually results in the opposite happening – thinking that thought even more.

Experiment: Try really hard not to think about a pink elephant for two minutes and see what happens. Most people find they think about a pink elephant.

The role of reassurance and avoidance

Reassuring your child is important and can help reduce worry. Over time and as your child grows, the aim is to help your child learn to reassure themselves so they can build independence, confidence and skills to cope. Asking questions to help them think things through and supporting them with problems solving are good ways to help your child build these skills.

Although avoidance might feel helpful in the short-term, in the long run it isn't usually helpful and overtime confidence will reduce. Discourage avoidance, explain why it isn't helpful and work out small steps to help your child face feared situations.

Different techniques for different types of worry

There isn't 'a-one-size-fits-all' approach for managing worry: different techniques will help different types of worries. We can group most worries in to two general categories:

1. Real event or current worries: these are worries about something that has actually happened (e.g. an argument with friends; a newly lost favourite toy).
2. Hypothetical worries: these are often 'what if....?' type thoughts about the future (e.g. what if my gran gets ill? What if I lose my favourite teddy?) This type of worry may or may not come true and there probably isn't anything that can be done about it to fix it or solve it. We can't fix a problem that hasn't happened yet.

A good question to ask is:

Is this a worry I can do something about?

If the answer is yes, it's probably a real event (or current) worry. Try problem solving (see overleaf).

If the answer is no, it's probably a hypothetical worry and it might be helpful to try 'Worry time' or 'Letting go of worries with mindfulness' (see overleaf).

Steps for problem solving for real event worries

1. What is the worry? *Write it down*
2. List all the possible solutions. *Be creative!*
3. Evaluate the options. *What are the pros and cons of each possible solution?*
4. Choose the best option.
5. Plan what you are going to do. *Break it down into steps. What? Where? When? With whom?*
6. Put the plan into action.
7. Review your plan. *Repeat if needed.*

See the 'Problem Solving Worksheet' for more information and an example

Learning to let go of worries with mindfulness

Trying to control or avoid worries or other negative thinking by blocking them out or answering back, often makes worries stronger and to feeling tangled up with them. The following skills which we learn through mindfulness can help with worry:

- Becoming more aware of when we are worrying.
Worry is usually automatic and can happen without noticing or choosing it.
- Learning to let go of unhelpful thoughts - learning to let our thoughts be like a radio in the background, or watching thoughts like leaves float down a stream can help untangle from worries.
- Learning to focus our attention on things which are helpful to us – bringing our attention to the feet on the floor or bum on the chair to help connect with the present moment and help with feeling steadier and less caught up with worries.
- Learning to be kind and understanding of ourselves – we don't need to tell ourselves off for worrying and we don't need to worry that we are worrying! With mindfulness we practice being kind to ourselves and not judging our experience.

See the mindfulness information sheet for more information and some ideas on how to begin to explore mindfulness with your child. The following mindfulness practice might be particularly helpful: The conveyor belt of worries from Sitting Still like a Frog (audio guidance freely available on the following website:

www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog/)

Worry time

Worry can happen at any time or place and it can get in the way of daily life. Telling your child not to worry probably won't work but asking them to postpone their worry to a particular time can be much more manageable. Postponing worry will mean it's less intrusive on life and can give a sense of control. The steps to postpone your worry are outlined below. Like learning any new skill, it takes time so encourage your child to stick with it.

1. Create a worry jar or box: Your child could label and decorate it. This is for storing worries until the agreed worry time.
2. Agree a worry time: The time, place and duration should be the same each day (e.g. 5pm, 20 min, kitchen table). Make this place unique and comfortable, free from distractions: a special chair, TV off, phones away etc. The time should be convenient so you can ensure you do it every day, when you won't feel hurried and not close to bed.
3. Store worries that come up outside of worry time in the worry jar: make a note of the worry on a bit of paper (a couple of words or picture) and put it in the worry jar. Remind your child that you will come back to it later, but that it's on pause for now. Encourage them to focus on the here and now (see 'Learning to let go of worries with mindfulness').
4. Come back to worries at the planned worry time: When the worry time comes around, settle down with your child as planned. Go through the worries in the worry jar. How likely we think something is, how bad we think it will be and how able we are to cope, are likely to affect how worried we are. Below are some ideas for how to spend this time (depending on your child's age):
 - Let them talk through their concerns.
 - Ask if they are as worried about it now as they were when they put it in the jar. (Worry may change, even if the situation is the same).
 - Ask how they might cope – who might help them, how have they coped in the past.
 - Explore what other outcomes are possible.
 - Offer reassurance, share your own experiences of coping with worry or what you have learnt about worrying.

It's completely understandable to want to take your child's worry away and protect them from difficult emotions. To begin with, helping your child learn to cope with worry might mean they are a bit more worried. However, with time, they will build confidence to cope with worry themselves which will help them develop the skills they need for life.