

Section 2

Anxiety at the core of school
avoiding behaviour

Overview

It is recommended that this is a core section that all parents and young people of secondary school going age cover as part of the school avoiding work. This section will look at issues such as:

- What anxiety looks like and how it can present in the classroom.
- How to address anxiety in your work with a young person.
- How to address anxiety issues in your work with a parent.
- Further signposting to supports services.

What anxiety looks like

Everyone experiences anxiety. It is a natural and important emotion and can be experienced as worry, fearfulness, and alarm that danger or a sudden, threatening change is near. Anxiety is necessary to keep us safe from harm. Sometimes anxiety can be an exaggerated, unhealthy response and becomes problematic when it prevents a young person from engaging in normal everyday activities such as sports, social events or school.

Anxiety is normal and expected, considering the changes and uncertainties facing a normal young person. For some young people, anxiety becomes a chronic, high-pitched state, interfering with their ability to attend school and to perform up to their academic potential. Participating in extracurricular activities, making and keeping friends, and maintaining a supportive, flexible relationship within the family can become difficult. Anxiety can present as a constant state of unease or as incident-related panic attacks.

What are the signs of anxiety?

Anxiety disorders vary greatly from young person to young person. Anxiety can present in the following ways:

- Excessive fears and worries, and/or feelings of inner restlessness.
- A tendency to be excessively wary and vigilant. Even in the absence of an actual threat, some young people describe feelings of continual nervousness, restlessness or extreme stress.
- In a social setting, anxious young people may appear dependent, withdrawn, or uneasy.
- They seem either overly restrained or overly emotional.
- They may be preoccupied with worries about losing control or unrealistic concerns about social competence.
- Young people who suffer from excessive anxiety often experience a range of physical symptoms as well. They may complain about muscle tension and cramps, stomach aches, headaches, pain in the limbs and back or fatigue. They may blotch, flush, sweat, hyperventilate, tremble, and startle easily.
- Anxiety during adolescence is often as result of changes in the way the adolescent's body looks and feels, social acceptance, and conflicts about independence.
- When flooded with anxiety, adolescents may appear extremely shy. They may avoid their usual activities or refuse to engage in new experiences.
- Young people can often express anxiety through anger or defiant behaviour. In order to diminish or deny their fears and worries, they may engage in risky behaviours, drug experimentation, or impulsive sexual behaviour.

How clinical anxiety may present

Panic disorder

More common in girls than boys, panic disorder presents as feelings of intense panic that may arise without any noticeable cause. They may be triggered by specific situations, in which case they are called panic attacks. A panic attack is an abrupt episode of severe anxiety with accompanying emotional and physical symptoms.

During a panic attack, the young person may feel overwhelmed by an intense fear or discomfort, a sense of impending doom, or the fear that they are going crazy. Accompanying the emotional symptoms may be shortness of breath, sweating, choking, chest pains, nausea, dizziness, and numbness or tingling in the extremities. During an attack, some young people may feel they're dying or can't think. Following a panic attack, they may worry that they will have other attacks and try to avoid situations that they believe may trigger them. They may begin to avoid normal activities and routines, including school.

Phobias

Some young people develop exaggerated and usually inexplicable fears called phobias that centre on specific objects or situations that tend to involve school and social performance. These intense fears can limit a young person's activities. With school avoidance, excessive worries about performance or social pressures at school may be at the root of the reluctance to attend school regularly. This leads to a cycle of anxiety, physical complaints, and school avoidance. The longer a young person stays out of school, the harder it becomes for them to overcome their fear and anxiety and return to school. They feel increasingly isolated from school activities and different from other kids.

Causes and consequences

There are a number of reasons why a young person may become anxious:

- A young person may be naturally shy or nervous.
- If a parent is naturally anxious, there's a good chance that the young person will also have anxious tendencies.
- A significant change at school, such as the transition from primary to secondary.
- A significant life event such as a divorce, illness, or a death in the family.
- A young person may experience bullying or become fearful about bullying or the lack of safety in school.



Practitioner tips

In working with the young person and their family, you may notice that a parent or caregiver is also presenting as anxious. There is a useful section in this resource on working with parents who experience anxiety that you may find useful (see various worksheets in Appendix A). The Facing and Feeling model described below is also suitable for work with adults and may be of use to you in working with parents and caregivers. If appropriate, you can also photocopy the Facing and Feeling section with parents, caregivers or colleagues who are also supporting the young person.

Working with a young person

Facing and Feeling: How to support a person experiencing anxiety

The strategy described below is taken from Lawrence J. Cohen's book 'The Opposite of Worry' (Ballantine Books, 2013), and is a useful step by step guide on how to support a person experiencing anxiety. It has been used effectively by many to help young people face situations that act as barriers to school attendance.

When something makes a person feel anxious, there are 4 main responses:

Avoidance

This is when a person avoids the thing, person, activity or place that is making them anxious. While this is effective in reducing anxiety in the short term, it can greatly reduce their capacity to live a full life. This strategy does not allow for confidence or coping skills to manage anxiety to be built and consequently avoidance can actually end up greatly increasing anxiety. This can cause the person to live an increasingly limited life as they continue to avoid situations they feel they cannot cope with, and become more and more anxious. This type of reaction is the foundation of anxiety-based school refusal.

Flooding

Flooding happens when a person faces a challenging situation and becomes completely overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety. This can look like rage, cowering, freezing, clinging, crying, hiding, agitation, hyperactivity, running away or aggression. This can happen when a person finds themselves in – or has been forced into – a situation they are not ready for. No learning can occur in this state. A person who is flooded needs comfort, soothing and empathy until they feel confident and ready enough to try facing this situation again.

White knuckling

This happens when a person may have to endure the situation, but they do everything they can to avoid enduring the feelings. This will look like zoning out, dissociation, gritting teeth, 'getting on with it' and lack of engagement. No learning can happen in this state as the person does not feel safe and is not really experiencing the situation at all.

Facing and feeling

Facing and feeling happens at the place where we feel afraid but stay until we feel ready and move a step closer to our fear. We call this place 'The Healing Edge'. It's where a young person can face and feel their fear without becoming flooded. They gain the experience of feeling scared as well as secure, with a safe adult staying with them while gently encouraging them to move forward. Although they feel afraid, they can take small steps forward and pause frequently to cool down. An emotional connection with a safe and calm adult is key to success.

How to assist a young person in facing and feeling

To overcome a fear, we need to spend time at 'The Healing Edge'.

This is done as follows:

1) Approach the feared situation gradually.

You can say, "I can see you're nervous. I know this is scary. But we'll do it together. I know you can do this. We won't take any steps you're not ready for. I'm here with you."

2) Spend time at the Edge.

You can say, "Ok I see this is getting too much for you. Let's stop. Let's not go back to the car. Let's just stay here and wait until this feeling has passed. I'm here with you. You're safe. We won't do anything you're not ready to do."

3) Allow the person to experience and validate their feelings of fear.

You can say, "I can understand why you would be scared. It's been a long time since you've been in school and that must feel uncomfortable. It's normal to feel anxious. But I'm here with you, and you are safe."

4) Allow them to experience the fear reducing.

You can say, "Let's do a calming exercise together until you feel a bit better. How do you feel now? Let's take one more step together and see how you feel. We won't go any further until you're ready. I know that you're scared, but I also know that you can do this in your own time."

This is the only response that allows any learning to take place. The young person learns that it is possible to FEEL scared and yet BE safe.



Practitioner tips

This strategy is most effective with a young person and calm adult who has a good relationship with them. You may have to identify who is best suited to work with the young person using this strategy. In order for this strategy to be effective, it's important to identify the causes underlying school avoidance. Below is some guidance on using worksheets to help the young person to identify these issues.

Communication

Worksheet: Planning a gradual, stepped approach to support a person experiencing anxiety

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 1.
- This worksheet is designed for the practitioner to develop a structured plan to assist the young person in facing a fear or situation that causes them anxiety. The worksheet can be completed independently by the practitioner or in conjunction with the young person, parent or school personnel where appropriate.

Worksheet: Circles of support

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 2.
- This worksheet can be completed with or by the young person to help them to explore various sources of support and empower them to seek support if needed. Encourage the young person to keep the completed worksheet in a safe place.

Worksheet: Identifying my main stressors

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 3.
- This worksheet is designed to allow you to explore a range of incidents that may cause stress or anxiety for a young person and identify the key stressors.

Worksheet: When I feel anxious or stressed

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 4.
- This worksheet is designed to allow the young person to identify how and where they experience anxiety in their body. This will help them to recognise when they are becoming anxious and begin to manage the symptoms better.

Communication

Worksheet: Stressors self-reflection activity

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 5.
- This worksheet explores how the young person currently manages their feelings or anxiety and their coping mechanisms.

Worksheet: Healthy vs unhealthy coping mechanisms

- <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/healthy-unhealthy-coping-strategies>
- This worksheet allows the young person to explore their current coping mechanism and assess if they are helpful. It offers suggestions of effective coping strategies.

Worksheet: Self-Regulation and self-soothing

- See Appendix A, Worksheet 6.
- This worksheet allows the young person to compile a collection of their most effective coping mechanisms for future reference.

Working with the parent/carer

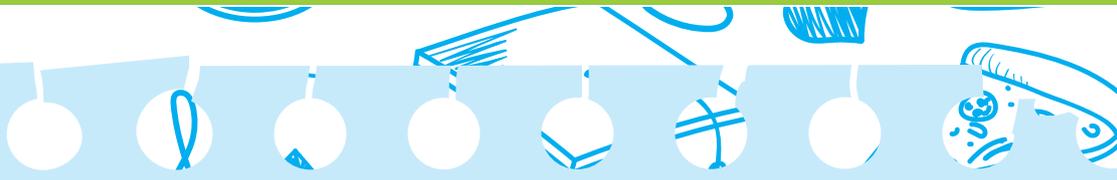


Practical tips for practitioners

Anxiety can present in many ways and may sometimes look like another feeling or behaviour. Some people may mask anxiety with anger, withdrawal, refusal or illness. This is true of adults and children and young people. When working with parents whose young person is struggling with school engagement, consider that they may feel anxious about this too.

We suggest using the parent/ worksheets 25 and 26 – ‘You and school (parent)’ and ‘It’s all about HOW we communicate’ – to open up the conversation with parents/carers. This can help you get an understanding of how the parent feels about school and to what extent they experience feelings of anxiety in their own lives too.

We also suggest giving the section ‘Facing and Feeling’ to parents/carer as this information may help them if they experience similar challenges in dealing with their own anxiety.



Note to Parent

Everyone experiences anxiety. It is a natural and important emotion. It can be experienced as worry, fearfulness or an alarm that danger or a sudden, threatening change is near. Anxiety is necessary to keep us safe from harm. Sometimes anxiety can be an exaggerated, unhealthy response and becomes problematic when it prevents us from engaging in normal everyday activities like sports, social events or work.

It is normal for young people to experience some feelings of anxiety considering the changes and uncertainties they face as they move through adolescence. For some young people, anxiety becomes a chronic, high-pitched state, interfering with their ability to attend school and to perform up to their academic potential. Participating in extracurricular activities, making and keeping friends, and maintaining a supportive, flexible relationship within the family can become difficult. Anxiety can present as a constant state of unease or as incident related panic attacks.

If this sounds familiar to you as a parent, you may be feeling overwhelmed and unsure about what you can do to manage your own feelings of anxiety, and also to support your young person.

Your Support Practitioner will give you information that explains anxiety – the signs and different ways that it can show in people. This information is relevant if you experience anxiety, as well as being relevant to your young person.

The information also outlines strategies you can use with your young person to help them face the situation that causes anxiety and experience feeling supported to get through it.

What can you do as a parent/carer when you feel anxious, and your young person also experiences anxiety?

Tune in

- You can help by showing that you practice effective ways of managing your own anxiety and emotions. This means 'Press pause' before you approach your young person to talk to them.
- This gives you time to think, rather than react immediately from a position of your own fear and anxiety about the situation.

- Press Pause
- Notice how you're feeling
- Practice the breathing activities provided by your support practitioner
- You can say, "I feel anxious about situations too at times. I try these breathing exercises and tuning into my 5 senses to help me calm down. I find they really help. Will we have a go together?"

Anytime your young person manages to go to school despite strong feelings of anxiety, it can be really helpful to notice this and to make an encouraging comment.

You can say, "Well done, I know that was a challenge for you to get up and go to school. I'm proud of you for achieving that today."

What could you say in your own words?

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“Communication”

You can support your young person with school-related anxiety by talking positively about school and the benefits of education whilst also acknowledging that it can be difficult to be in school for several reasons.

You can say, 'Tell me a bit about when you think this started...';
'Tell me about times you feel a bit less anxious...'

When are the best times or situations for you to connect and chat with your young person?

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You can say, 'I know it can be hard when you don't like a teacher or think they don't like you.'

How else can you let your young person know you understand their feelings of anxiety?

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It can be less intense and intimidating to have a one-to-one chat in the car or whilst doing an activity that doesn't require too much concentration on your part. Give your young person your full attention so that they know you are available to support them and find ways of helping them manage the anxiety so they can return to school. They need to hear and feel - 'I'm always here for you'. This means putting away the phone, turning off the TV.

'I'll just turn off that TV so we can chat in peace. I want to understand how you feel about all this school stuff.'

How do we know when someone is really listening to us?

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Practical tips for young people and parents

Some activities that may help release some anxious energy:

- Spending time with friends.
- Listening to music.
- Playing sport.
- Going for a walk.
- Reading.
- Drawing.
- Cooking.
- Watching your favourite movie.
- Playing with your pet.
- Learn a new dance.
- Singing.

Book recommendations:

- Don't let your emotions run your life for teens: Dialectical behaviour therapy skills for helping you manage mood swings, control angry outbursts and get along with others by Sheri Van Dijk (New Harbinger Publications, 2021).
- The anxiety and phobia workbook Volume 2 by Edward Bourne (New Harbinger Publications, 2010).
- One year wiser: An illustrated guide to mindfulness by Mike Medaglia (Selfmadehero, 2017).
- Start where you are: A journal for self-exploration by Meera Lee Patel (Particular Books, 2016).
- Little ways to keep calm and carry on: twenty lessons for managing worry, anxiety or fear by Mark Reinecke (Mjf Books, 2012).
- My anxious mind: A teen's guide to managing anxiety and panic by Michael Tompkins, Katherine Martinez and Michael Sloan (Magination Press, 2010).

Podcast recommendations:

- The Youth Mentor Podcast.
- Teen Wealth.
- SuperGirls Podcast.
- Teen Talk.
- You Inside Out.
- Anxiety Free Teen Podcast.
- The Start of Something.



Practical tips for young people and parents

Spotify playlist recommendations:

- Stress relief.
- The stress buster.
- Calming music for anxiety.
- Nature meditation.
- Nature sounds.
- Calm vibes.
- Calming classical.

App recommendations:

- Calm.
- Headspace.
- Colorfy.
- Nature sounds relax and sleep.
- Shine.
- Breathwrk.
- Antistress anxiety relief game.

Some links to useful YouTube videos:

- The five ways to wellbeing (Mental Health Ireland)
<https://youtu.be/bsc2QkCC3uI>
- How can I manage anxiety (Jigsaw)
<https://youtu.be/Q8qPa3kcDFw>
- Are you anxious to go to school? Advice from a therapist.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3nCwYcwuHM>
- Dealing with school phobia and anxiety. Hear a young person's experience.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqs1BuNyVY4>
- Where does stress come from? (Jigsaw)
<https://youtu.be/qZp8BkaHmOE>

It's all about managing how you feel when you want to communicate well

It can be a real challenge to communicate well when we are feeling out of sorts. When we are overwhelmed by our feelings we can often **REACT**.

This can look like anger and aggression. It can also look like being dismissive and unwilling to cooperate.

When we take time to calm our emotions first then we have time to think about how we want to **RESPOND**.

Tips to calm you when you feel anxious or overwhelmed

Try the tips in the picture below to help to stay focused on the present moment. This moves your attention away from worries and helps you simply focus on simple things in the here and now.

5 Senses Grounding Tool



5 things you can see



4 things you can feel



3 things you can hear



2 things you can smell



1 things you can taste

It's all about managing how you feel when you want to communicate well

Below are 2 simple breathing exercises. You can simply trace a figure 8 on your own palm or your thigh if you are sitting. At first you might only breathe in and out for the count of 4. As your breathing slows down, maybe you can breathe in and out for the count of 8.

Lazy 8 Breathing

Start with an 8 on its side. Starting in the middle, go up to the left and trace the left part of the 8 with your finger while you breathe in. When you get to the middle of the 8 again, breathe out while you trace the right part of the 8 with your finger.



www.copingskillsforkids.com
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Square Breathing

Square Breathing

inhale 2...3...4

rest 2...3...4

hold 2...3...4

exhale 2...3...4

A white line drawing of human lungs is centered within a blue circle, which is itself centered within a white square frame.

It's all about managing how you feel when you want to communicate well

Simple steps to avoid feeling highly stressed and overwhelmed

Structure your day:

- Maintain a daily routine.
- **How this helps:** This gives you back a sense of predictability and control.

Notice 3 positive things every day:

- Really notice these positive things and then write them down or make a voice message on your phone to build up a memory bank of positive moments that you can remember again at any time.
- **How this helps:** This helps to shift the brain from continuously focusing on the negative.

Keep objects close by:

- Have objects that bring a smile to your face or give you comfort, in each room of your home.
- **How this helps:** This contributes to making your home your secure base/place.

If you are feeling low or down, movement up-regulates or helps lift your mood:

- Movement shifts the feeling of being stuck and helpless.
- Sitting on an exercise ball instead of the chair (don't do this if you have poor balance).
- Go out if you can, a brisk walk energises you. Walk or run on the spot if you can't go out.

If you are feeling frustrated or angry, physical effort down-regulates or calms your mood:

- Any activities that involve physical effort i.e. active pressure on the muscles and joints helps calm you down. For example, using weights, doing push ups, sit ups, pushing against the wall, going on all fours and 'being the horsey' for the young person.
- Fastest down regulators are hanging, climbing and crawling.
- Food that helps to calm you: eat hard and chewy foods.

Ref: With thanks to Éadaoin Bhreathnach, The Just Right State Programme for Adolescents and Adults ©2020.

Signposting for support services

If you are concerned for the mental wellbeing of a young person, you should advise the parent/carer to bring the young person to their GP, who will assess if that young person requires a referral to CAMHS or Primary Care Psychology Services.

If you have any reasonable concerns that the young person may harm others, you should contact the Gardaí. If you have concerns that the young person may be harmed at home, you should contact Tusla Child and Family Agency.

Information on how to make a report into your local Tusla office can be found here:

<https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/report-a-concern/>.

If you are concerned about the mental wellbeing of a parent/carer, it is advisable to encourage them to speak to their GP.

If you are looking for more information to share in relation to managing anxiety, the websites below are good sources of information:

- **Anxiety text line: 50808**
- <https://text50808.ie>
- <https://jigsaw.ie/asking-for-help/>
- <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie>
- <https://www.aware.ie/information/anxiety/>



Worksheet 2:

Circles of support

It is not always easy to ask for help. Sometimes, you might feel like talking to a close friend or family member. Other times, it might be easier to talk to a teacher or other caring professional. In certain circumstances, you might want to share something very personal and maybe a stranger is the best option. Try to think about all the people who you could ask for help. Add phone or text numbers and websites and keep in a safe place. You are not alone.



Who are the key people you would normally ask for help from?

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What other places would you consider looking for help from?

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Worksheet 3:

Identifying my main stressors

Read each suggested item and answer honestly. Write in any other things that cause you stress or make you feel anxious. Rate how anxious each one makes you feel. Rate each item from 1 – 5.

1 =	Feeling Calm	
2 =	Makes me feel a little uncomfortable	
3 =	Makes me feel stressed and worried	
4 =	I am really stressed and struggling to cope	
5 =	I am panicking	

How do I feel when...

1 2 3 4 5

	1	2	3	4	5
Exams and tests are coming up					
I think people are talking about me					
Being late					
Schoolwork or homework					
Waiting for something					
When I disagree or have an argument with a friend					
When I need to ask for help					
Large crowds or busy spaces					
Going to social events					
Group work with classmates					
Meeting new people					
Public speaking					
Extracurricular activities					
When I am excluded from an activity or conversation					

Worksheet 3:

Identifying my main stressors

How do I feel when...

1 2 3 4 5

Sports or PE					
When things change suddenly					
People looking at me					
Getting into trouble					
When others get too close or touch me					
When I have to do something new or different					
Peer pressure					
When I don't understand something					
Deadlines, time pressures					
Sitting at a desk for long periods of time					
When I have to organize my things					
Find things boring					

Stress and anxiety are different for everybody.

What other things can make you feel stressed.

1 2 3 4 5

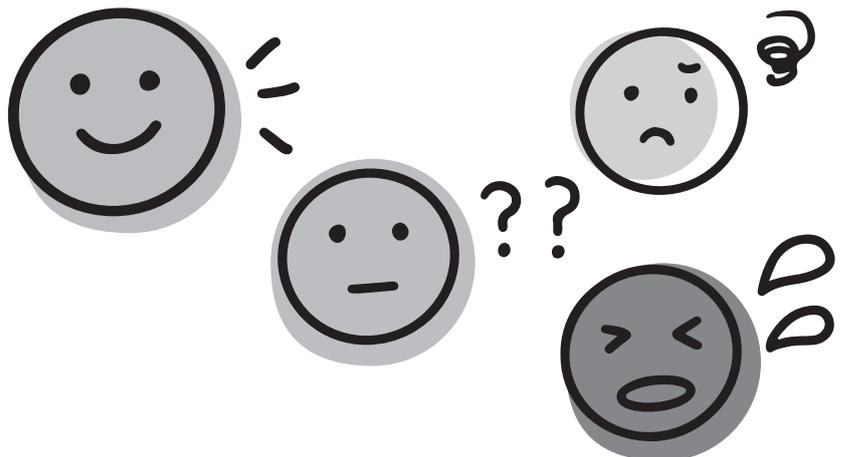
Worksheet 3:

Identifying my main stressors

Now that you have finished rating these items, identify your biggest stressors? These are items that you scored as a "5" (or perhaps even a "4"). Write those down below and be as specific as you can.

My TOP FIVE "5's" are:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5



Worksheet 4:

When I feel anxious or stressed

When you feel anxious, how do you feel? Anxiety can feel very different to everyone. Circle the words that make the most sense to you. There are no right or wrong answers. It may help to take deep breaths and try to 'revisit' a time you felt really anxious.

Jittery Heart Racing Hot Scared Quick Breathing Sick Angry

Want to run and hide Angry

Silly Terrified Sweaty Frozen Invisible Outside of my Body

Like I'm going to Die

Add your own words to describe what it feels like for you.

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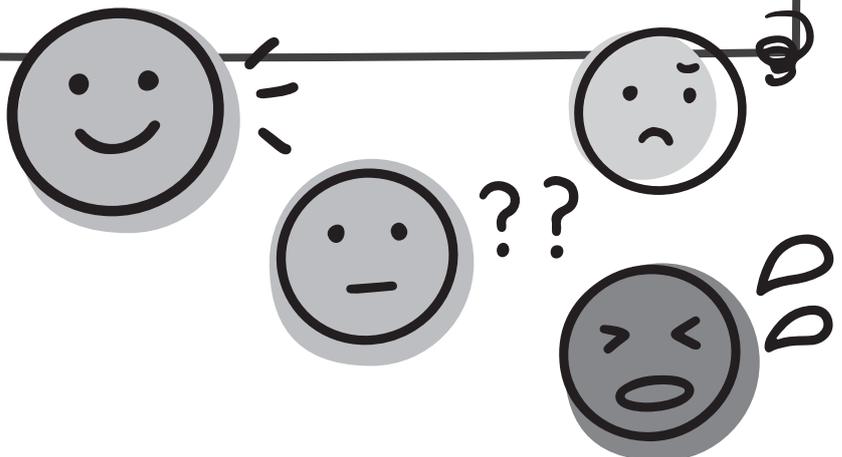
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Worksheet 4:

When I feel anxious or stressed

Use the body map opposite to mark where you feel these sensations in your body.

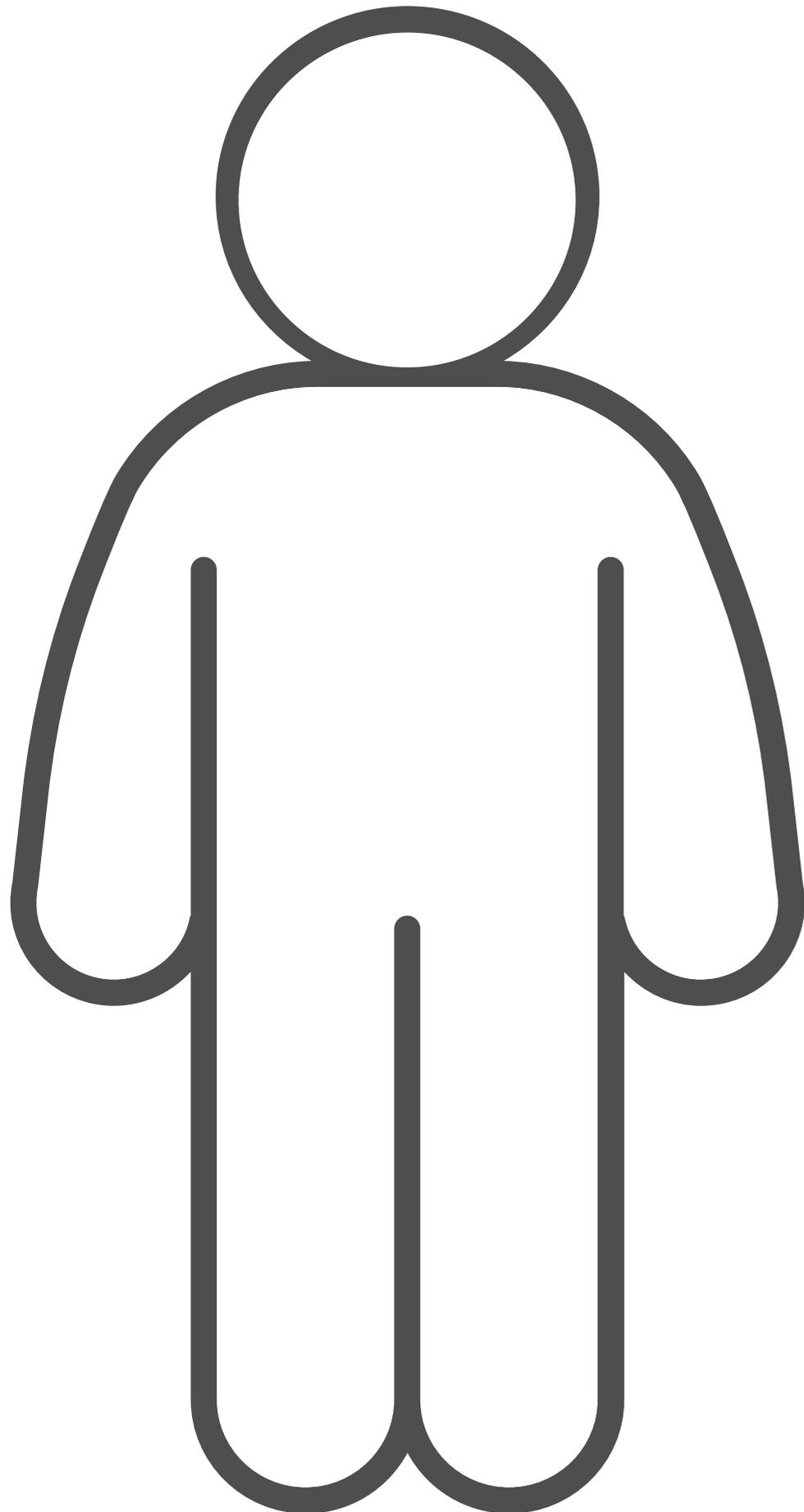


Tip: Learning to recognise feelings of anxiety in your body is the first step to learning to control anxiety, rather than Anxiety controlling you.

Next time you feel anxious, take some deep breaths and try to identify where you are feeling it in your body. What are you feeling? How intense is the feeling from 1-10? If you have rated it a 7, breathe deeply, focus on the feeling and try to slowly reduce the intensity

Worksheet 4:

When I feel anxious or stressed



Worksheet 5:

Self-reflection activity

Think of a time you became very anxious or stressed write about it below.

Where were you?

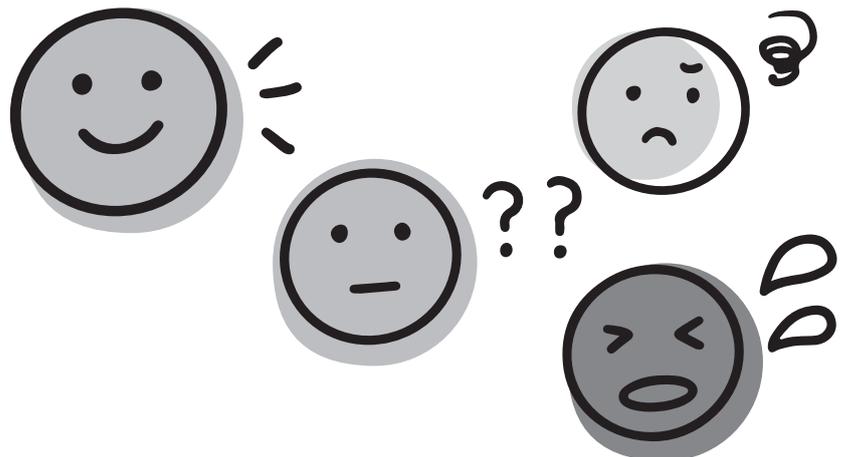
What happened?

What was said?

Write about how you felt. How did the anxiety feel in your body? How intense was it from 1-10?

Were there any other emotions underneath the anxiety and worry?

Did this incident remind you of something that has happened to you before?



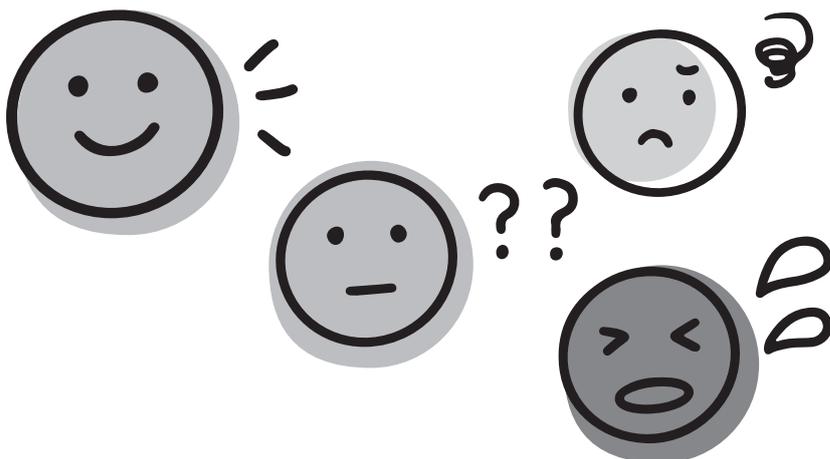
Worksheet 5:

Self-reflection activity

How did you behave? How did you relate to others when this happened?

How did other people behave to you when they could see you were in a stressed state?

How would you have liked this incident to go differently?



Worksheet 6:

Self-regulation and self-soothing

This pack contains a collection of strategies to help you with self-soothing and regulating yourself when you feel worried, anxious or over-whelmed. Some strategies work better for some than others, so it is important to figure out what works for you. You can try out a few of the strategies included in the pack or from the suggestions below, or you may already be using them!

Be active!
30 Minutes a day

Use a
meditation app

Focus on
your breathing

Be creative

Reflect and
be mindful

Bake or cook

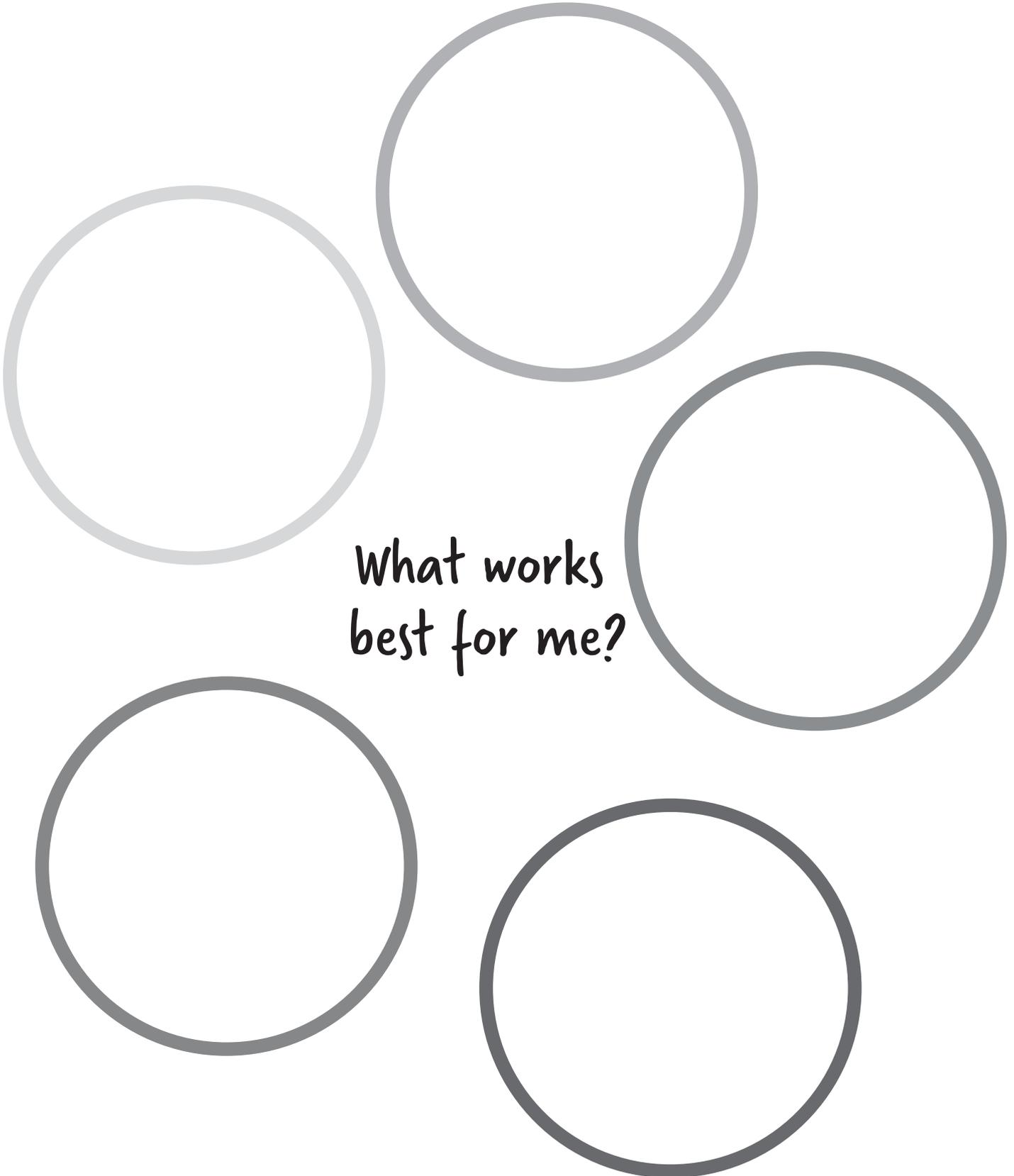
Connect
with others

Journal about
your feelings

Worksheet 6:

Self-regulation and self-soothing

Write the strategies that work best for you in the spaces below.



What works best for me?