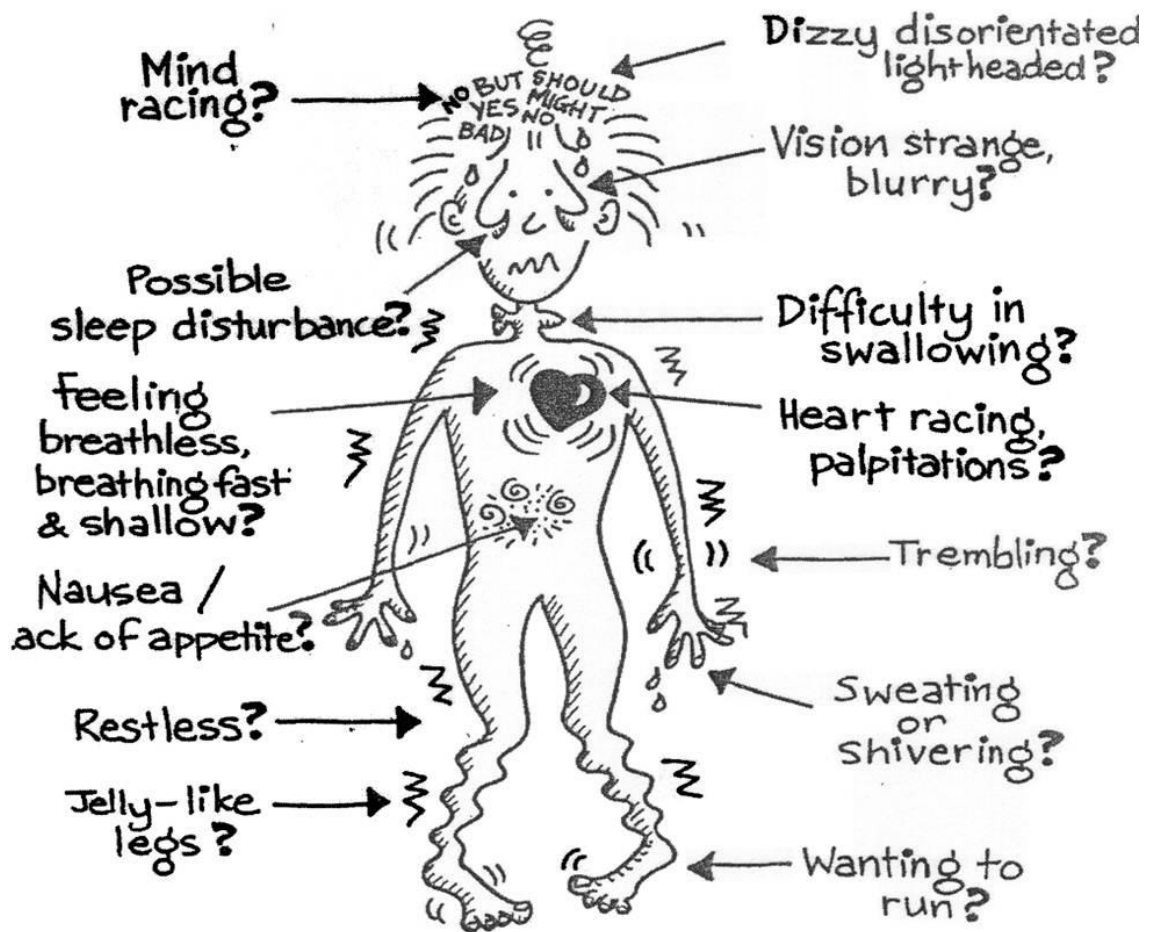


Body symptoms of anxiety and suggestions of how to manage them



Dorset Educational Psychology Service

Types of symptoms

Children (and adults) can experience a variety of physical symptoms associated with anxiety. The degree in which these are experienced can differ from person to person.

The gut and the brain (Children's health, 2022)



- The gut and the brain are closely connected.
- This might be why your child talks of stomach ache, experiences constipation or diarrhoea, says they feel sick, or have difficulty swallowing*
- Stress and anxiety are among the top triggers for gastrointestinal issues, especially in children. This is because the neurotransmitters that control our mood are the same ones that control pain and digestion.
- Children have a lower threshold for the physical sensations associated with gastrointestinal issues (Puckett-Perez, 2022).

*It is important to rule out any medical reasons.

Rapid heartbeat

- When the body feels it is in danger it tries to take in more oxygen.
- This causes breathing to quicken.
- The body releases hormones (such as adrenaline), making the heartbeat faster and muscle tense up.
- This can leave people feeling very unwell included being lightheaded and short of breath.
- It can create more anxiety as they think they are experiencing a medical emergency such as a heart attack.



The below video highlights other physical symptoms of anxiety

[Physical Symptoms Of Anxiety - YouTube](#)

It's important to remember the pain is not in your child's head, they are real and legitimate symptoms, the focus should be on how to reduce these symptoms.

What can you do?

- Listen and respond with empathy (E.G.):
 - *“That sounds really scary”.*
 - *“I know your heart it is beating really fast, that isn’t very nice for you. Your body is trying to keep you safe because your brain thinks you’re in danger. Sometimes we need to let our bodies know we are ok. Some [breathing] might help”.*
 - *“I know that this is really hard, and you feel like you’re sick. But we also know that this is anxiety, and you can get through it”.*



This clip is helpful in understand how and why empathy is an important approach when discussing ‘big feelings’: [Inside Out Sadness comforts Bing Bong - YouTube](#)

- Ask questions that focusing on describing anxiety:
 - *If you could see the anxiety, what would it look it?*
 - *What animal would you say the anxiety is?*
 - *What colour is the anxiety?*
 - *What would it feel like if you touched it?*
- Model/ label where you feel tension and sensations in your own body:
 - *“I feel happy, my tummy feels tingly”.*
 - *“When I feel sad, I’ve noticed I also experience a tightness in my chest. Have you noticed where sadness lives in your body?”*
- Discuss strategies to try managing the anxiety (see ideas below)



Yoga



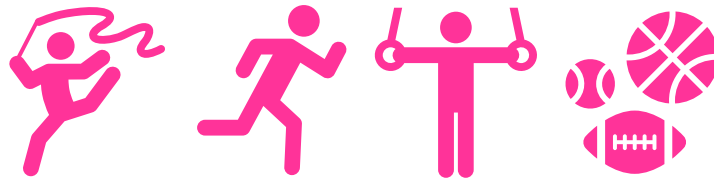
- Yoga encourages focus on breathing, which is known to reduce anxiety symptoms.
- It has been shown to lower stress hormones in our bodies while at the same time increasing helpful brain chemicals such as endorphins (help relieve pain, reduce stress, and improve mood).
- One study found that practising yoga for as little as 10 minutes a day over eight weeks can have a significant impact on decreasing anxiety in children aged 8- 10 years old.
- Another found that after three months, yoga was significantly more effective for anxiety than stress management strategies.

Try these videos with your child, there are many others available for free online.

[10 minute EASY & SIMPLE Yoga Flow for All Levels - YouTube](#)

[15 minute CALMING YOGA for Stress Relief and Anxiety - YouTube](#)

Exercise



Exercise can take many forms; for some it may be a walk, for others it may be a game of rugby. There is no wrong form of exercise, it is whatever works for your child.

Regular exercise may help ease anxiety; this works by:

- Releasing feel-good endorphins, which enhance a sense of well-being.
- Taking the mind off worries, allowing escape from the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety.
- Doing 30 minute or more of exercise a day, for 3 – 5 days a week may significantly improve anxiety symptoms.
- Doing 10 – 15 minutes of physical activity (any activity that works the muscles and requires energy), may make a difference.

Colouring



Repeating fine motor movements (the coordination of eye, small hand, and finger movements) can allow the brain to focus on returning to that movement rather than to anxious thoughts.

Colouring and the amygdala (Sage House Therapy, 2023)

- There is a part of the brain called the amygdala, it is activated by negative emotions and fear. The amygdala regulates the stress response.
- Reducing activity in the amygdala can reduce negative emotions and feelings of stress and depression.
- When children (and adults) are upset or worried, it's difficult to stay in the present.
- Thoughts wonder and focus on the stressor.
- Colouring works similarly to meditation, enabling the focus to be on colouring, rather than worried thoughts.
- While choosing the colours, deciding the shapes to draw or which part of the picture to colour first, the brain focuses on the task at hand.
- New imagery of colouring can replace anxious imagery.
- If paired with slow breathing, it can be even more effective as more oxygen is taken in, resulting in stress reduction and increased feelings of calm.

You can buy colouring books:

[Amazing Patterns: Adult Coloring Book, Stress Relieving Mandala Style Patterns: Amazon.co.uk: Kim, Coloring Book: 9798682830084: Books](#)

Or print for free from the internet:

[t-c-1551-adult-colouring-mindfulness-colouring-sheets-bumper-pack- ver 3.pdf \(welbournprimary.co.uk\)](#)

Guided imagery/ relaxation visuals



Guided imagery is a meditative process that uses visualisation and imagination to bring awareness to the mind-body connection. It can help us to slow down, focusing on breathing and clearing the mind of worries and stressors.

Think about the time of day that is most difficult, it may be helpful to add this activity into the schedule at this time, E.G., in the morning, or before bed.

There are several free videos online:

[7 - Minute Guided Beach Meditation For Kids, Preteens, Teenagers, and Classrooms - YouTube](#)

[Guided Meditation for Children | Your Secret Treehouse | Relaxation for Kids - YouTube](#)

It might be that music and visuals, without words, is more suited:

[Hey Bear Sensory - Lanterns - Relaxing Video - Calming Music - Stress Relief - YouTube](#)

[Relaxing Music with Nature Sounds - Waterfall HD - YouTube](#)

Distraction



Distraction works by taking the mind off current emotions. Instead of putting energy into worries and increasing the anxiety, the focus is put on other things and gives the mind and body time to calm.


There is lots of evidence to support distraction being a good strategy for reducing anxiety in children; talk with your child about what they are interested in and would enjoy the most:

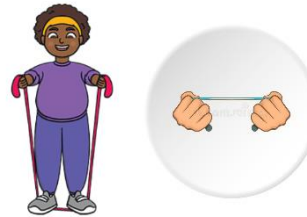
- Board games
- Wordsearches
- Noughts and crosses
- Mazes
- Puzzles
- Reading
- Knitting
- Threading
- Lego
- Sudoku

Make a self soothe box

- A self soothe box or calming box may be a helpful tool, that once made, your child or young person can access independently.
- It can be filled with personal items that help them to regulate and feel less anxious.
- It focuses on tools that activate the senses, for example items that can be heard, seen, tasted, touched, and smelt.
- It may also be helpful to focus on the other senses:

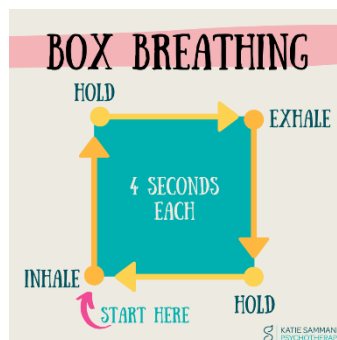
- Proprioception (where the body is in space)

- Yoga
- Massage
- A tight self-hug 
- Items that involve pulling (E.G., [Amazon Brand - Umi - Resistance Band Set](#) [Stretch Bands Exercise Bands for Yoga Ballet Pilates Workout Exercise :](#) [Amazon.co.uk: Sports & Outdoors](#))



- Interception (sensations within the body)

- Focus on breathing
- Make a fist then stretch hands out.
- Wiggle finger and toes



Watch this clip for some ideas:

[Hampshire CAMHS - Make Your Own Self Soothe Box - YouTube](#)

Or read this link:

[How to make a self-soothe box - Best For You](#)