

Coping Strategies for Children with Anxiety



FIONA FORMAN

M.SC. APPLIED POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

10-5-22





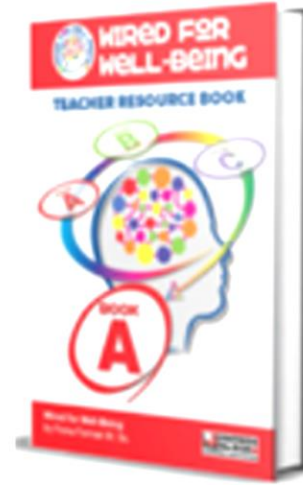
Thanks so much to Barry & Brigid for this opportunity

Delighted to connect with Hollypark again!

More important than ever to focus on our children's well-being & mental health – so many recent challenges – more anxiety

Chat function

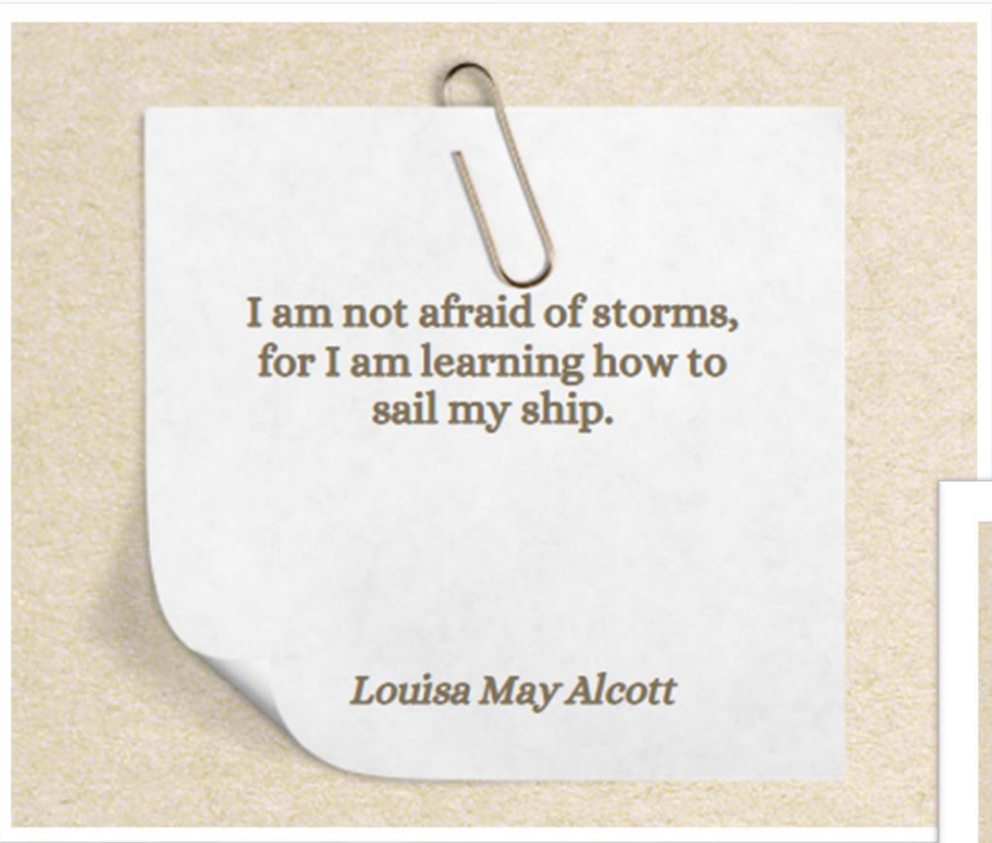
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relationships
flourish
psychology
support
meaning
bravery
love
resilience
wellbeing
perseverance


gratitude
creativity
mindfulness
positive
strong
active
health
joy
growth
hope
happiness
thrive

optimism
balance
humour



**I am not afraid of storms,
for I am learning how to
sail my ship.**

Louisa May Alcott



***Self-care is not selfish.
You cannot serve from an
empty vessel.***

Eleanor Brownn

Session Overview

Current and ongoing challenges to children's well-being

Causes & symptoms of anxiety in children

Support & self-efficacy

4 coping strategies

Final messages

Why?

Recent Challenges

Challenges - *social distancing, lockdown, less opportunities to socialise, coping with threat & uncertainty* posed by the pandemic resulted in increased levels of

- ▶ restlessness
- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ irritability
- ▶ separation anxiety
- ▶ inattention

[Idoiaga et al., 2020](#); [Jiao et al., 2020](#); [Orgiles et al., 2020](#); [Pisano & Galimi, 2020](#)

Normal stresses & challenges of life

We can't fix everything for our children!

Don't underestimate the power of listening and nurturing, your time and attention – comforting, encouraging, supporting...

“

The more often a child experiences nurturing in times of distress, the more easily they grow to nurture themselves and others in times of distress.

LELIA SCHOTT

Why?

Helping children to deal with the challenges associated with the pandemic can lead to

‘personal growth and development, which in turn reinforces a sense of competence and acts as a protective factor for coping with stressors in the future.’

Jones, K., Mallon, S., & Schnitzler, K. (2021). A Scoping Review of the Psychological and Emotional Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Young People. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 10541373211047191.

Ongoing Challenges

Unfortunately, statistics show that our children were already struggling in terms of their mental health

Worrying statistics:

By age 13 years, 1 in 3 young people in Ireland is likely to have experienced some type of mental health difficulty

By the age of 24 years, that rate will have increased to over 1 in 2.

Cannon, Coughlan, Clarke, Harley, & Kelleher, 2013



Encouraging news!

- ▶ Promoting well-being is an important measure in the prevention of such difficulties
- ▶ Giving young people support and skills to develop a sense of belief in their own ability to cope with challenges is a key factor – self-efficacy

O' Connell, Boat & Warner, 2009

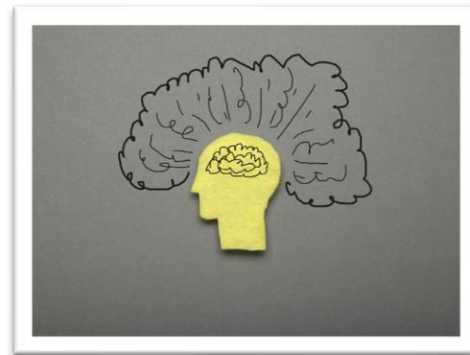
What is Anxiety?

- ▶ Normal, common response to perceived threats
 - ▶ We need a certain amount of anxiety to keep us safe
 - ▶ Our brain's way of helping to prepare us for these threats
 - ▶ Our body 'gears up' for threat – fight, flight or freeze mode
 - ▶ Body-mind loop – one feeds off the other
- ▶ Becomes a problem when it starts to have a negative impact on a child's every day life – prolonged physical symptoms or avoidance of new situations – limiting the child's potential – clinical diagnosis



Symptoms of Anxiety

- ▶ **Dizziness/headaches**
- ▶ **Increased heart-rate**
- ▶ **Increased sweating**
- ▶ **Stomach pains**
- ▶ **Dry mouth**
- ▶ **Difficulty concentrating**
- ▶ **Disturbed sleep**
- ▶ **Shallow breathing**



Build up of Anxiety....

- ▶ Poor sleep
- ▶ Low mood
- ▶ Need for constant reassurance
- ▶ Avoidance behaviours
- ▶ Overly pessimistic views
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ What other symptoms have you seen?



How can we help?



**Support,
connect &
soothe**



**Self-Efficacy-
strategies-
equip with
coping skills**

“

Worry doesn't mean that there is something wrong with you. It means that something you value is at risk. Anxiety is a sign that you care.

”

ADAM GRANT

Normalising and welcoming all emotions!!

Approach with gentle curiosity rather than judgement

Link back to the idea that a part of our brain is trying to protect us, but often over-reacts and errs on the side of over-protection

Fight Flight Freeze – A Guide to Anxiety for Kids – Anxiety Canada



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfSbWc3O_5M

Support & Soothe



**Normalise,
allow, accept
express &
validate**



**Don't rush in to
try to 'fix it'**



**Listen,
empathise
soothe &
nurture**



**Designated
'worry time'**

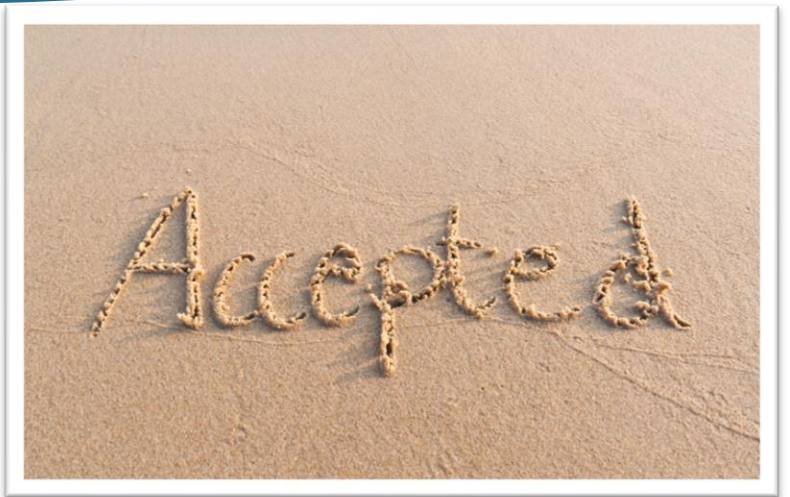
Worry Time..


- ▶ **At home, with a parent**
- ▶ **Designated time**
- ▶ **Remind the child – we will talk about that at ‘worry time’**
- ▶ **Stimulus control**
- ▶ **Associated with decreased levels of anxiety**

Mc Gowan & Behar, 2012

Emotional Validation

- **Making space for all emotions**
- **Not judging**
- **Allowing children to feel how they feel**
- **Not rushing in to fix or change emotions**
- **Self-awareness – managing our own emotions as a starting point**
- **Develop ‘distress tolerance’**





Non-validating	Validating
Stop crying/don't cry.	It's ok to cry, you must be feeling really sad right now.
Don't worry about that.	I can see you're worried – would it help to chat about it?
Calm down.	It's ok to be frustrated/angry/upset. What do you need right now?
It could be worse.	I see how tough this is for you.
Don't be so negative.	I see you're feeling bad, what might help?

<https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fper0000129>

Choices / Lists

Normalise
Accept
Express



107

CP7

WELCOME TO WELL-BEING - Book B: Good to be me with Mo and Kol - Teacher Resource Book
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Coping Skills & Self Efficacy

- ▶ **Coping skills build self-efficacy – equipping children with a sense of belief and bravery**
- ▶ **Self-efficacy is the belief a person has that they can reach their goals or a desired outcome**

Bandura, 1994.

- ▶ **People with high self-efficacy show greater resilience and reduced vulnerability to anxiety and depression**

Maddux, 2002

- ▶ **Anxious children may doubt their own ability to cope with anxiety, which leads to greater levels of anxiety.**

Carthy, Horesh, Apter, & Gross ,2010

And I learned there are troubles
Of more than one kind.
Some come from ahead
And some come from behind.

But I've bought a big bat.
I'm all ready, you see.
Now my troubles are going
To have troubles with *me!*



Feel anxious.
Do brave.

-Anon



Strategies: Coping Skills



**Emotion -
Focused
Coping Skills**



**Solution-
Focused Coping
skills**

Lyubomirsky, 2007

Coping Skills for Anxiety: Emotion-Focused & Solution-Focused

Emotion-Focused Coping Skills

- ▶ 1. Nervous system Regulation
- ▶ 2. Boosting Positive Emotions

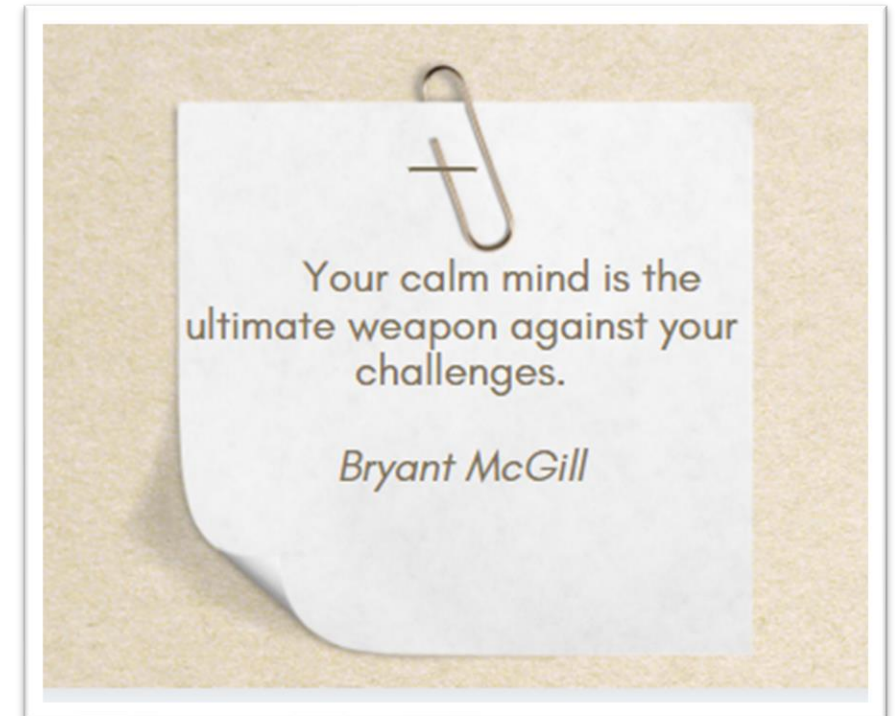
Solution-Focused Coping Skills

- ▶ 3. Helpful Self-talk
- ▶ 4. Healthy Distraction



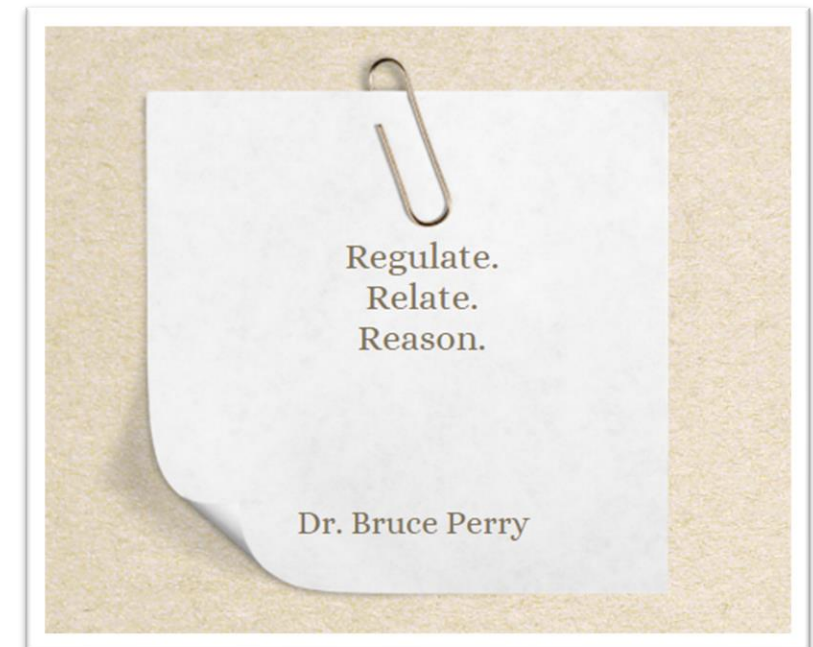
1. Nervous System Regulation

- ▶ Vital to keep our children's - and our own - nervous system at a calm, balanced, soothing base-line as a starting point to help children deal with anxiety
- ▶ Dysregulation - Tense, reactive, difficulty sleeping or relaxing, hyper-sensitive – can't think straight or problem-solve
- ▶ Gives them a chance to *respond* rather than *react*



1. Nervous System Regulation

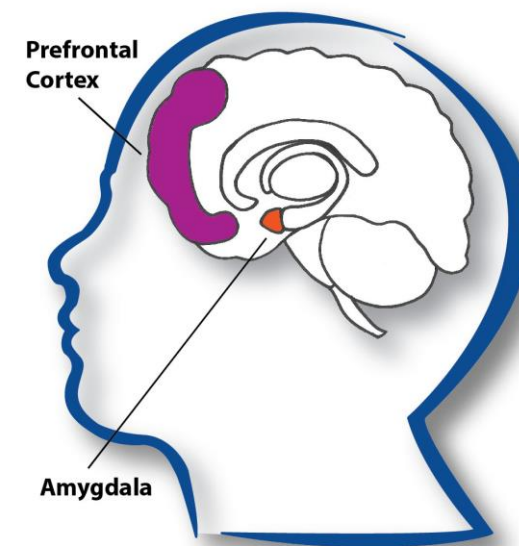
- ▶ We feel stress/challenge/anxiety first in our bodies – our nervous systems release stress hormones - stomach aches, headaches
- ▶ Prolonged stress and worry – fight, flight, freeze mode – amygdala hijack



Nervous System Regulation:

Faced with a challenge –

- anxiety, fear, anger, panic
- amygdala hijack
- stress response
- stress hormones
- cortisol & adrenalin
- fight, flight, freeze



Fight	Flight	Freeze
Aggression	Unfocused	Shut down
Angry, hitting, kicking etc	Restless, overwhelmed, fidgets	Zoned out
Shouting	Avoidant & anxious	Apathetic
Defiant	Procrastinates	Unresponsive



1. Nervous System Regulation

- ▶ **Breathing exercises – 4, 4, 4**
- ▶ **Physical activity – walking, running, dancing, stretching - release the stress hormones, regulate the brain & heart**
- ▶ **Time in nature**
- ▶ **Sleep**
- ▶ **Soothing, rhythmic activities**

Sensory Box/ Calm Box/ Chill-Out Box



- Tactile objects – fabric, stones, shells
- Scented playdough
- Bubbles
- Calming images
- Picture books
- Uplifting quotes
- Sensory items
- Lego, bricks
- Art & craft
- Theraputty



<https://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/discipline/how-to-create-a-calm-down-corner-at-home/>

Mindfulness: Research on benefits to children – prevention!!



**Higher levels of
well-being &
mental health
& resilience**



**Decreased
anxiety due to
decreased
activity in the
amygdala**



**Greater ability
to learn**



**Better physical
health**

Weare, K. (2012). Evidence for the impact of mindfulness on children and young people. The mindfulness in schools project in association with mood disorders centre.

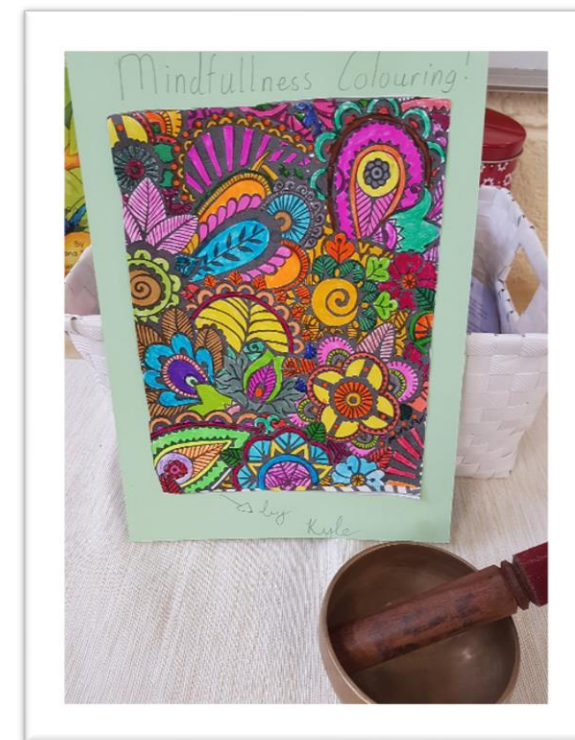
Nervous System Regulation

Body scan

<https://soundcloud.com/user-10491760/lesson-2-body-scan-on-the-floor>

Mindfulness Apps – Headspace & Calm

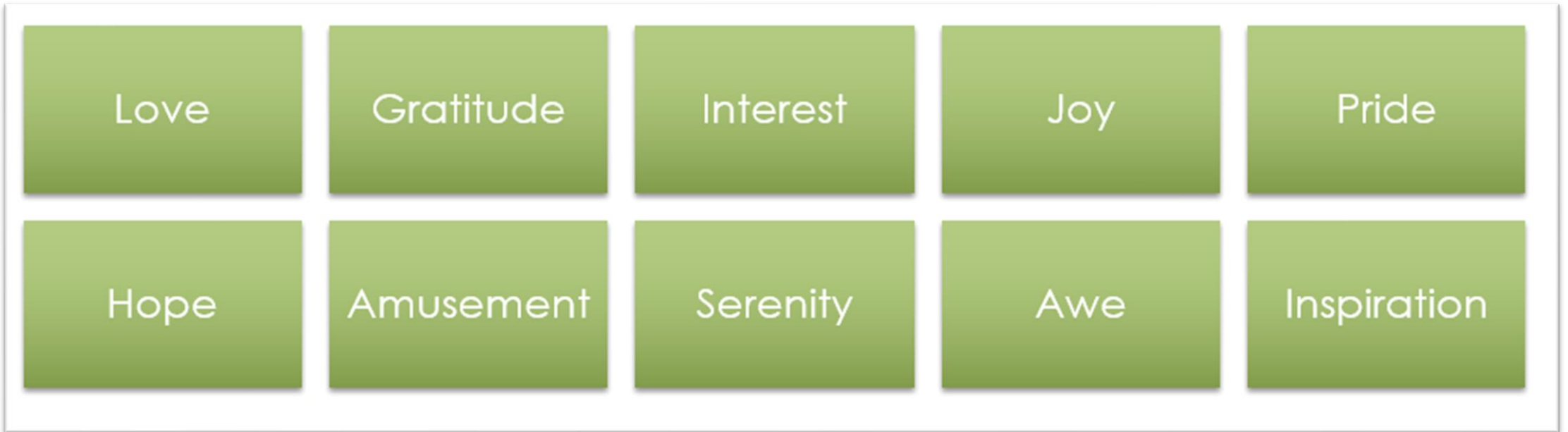
Mindfulness colouring



2. Boost Positive Emotions



In Positive Psychology, there are 10 Positive Emotions identified as vital to well-being.



Prof Barbara Fredrickson, 1998

Elevated emotions – impact our mood, uplift & buffer us

Boost Positive Emotions

Why?

Research:

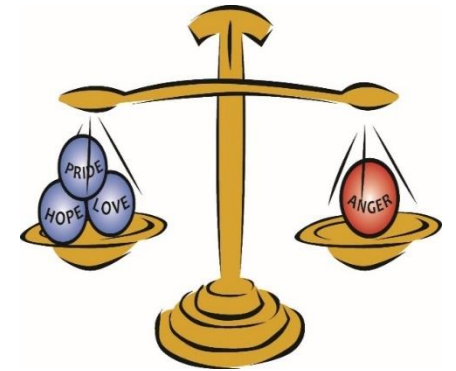
Ratio of a least 3: 1 of positive to negative emotions is needed for flourishing – negativity bias of the brain!

Diehl et al., 2011

Release serotonin, oxytocin & dopamine – bathing our brains in feel-good neurotransmitters

Also open our minds for learning & creativity

Anxious children need a lot of positivity to buffer them!



The presence of frequent positive emotions is likely to be a stronger predictor of overall well-being and resilience in young people than the experience of stressors.

McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin



Reflection



What do you *already* do to boost
Positive Emotions in your home?

Love

Gratitude

Interest

Joy

Pride

Hope

Amusement

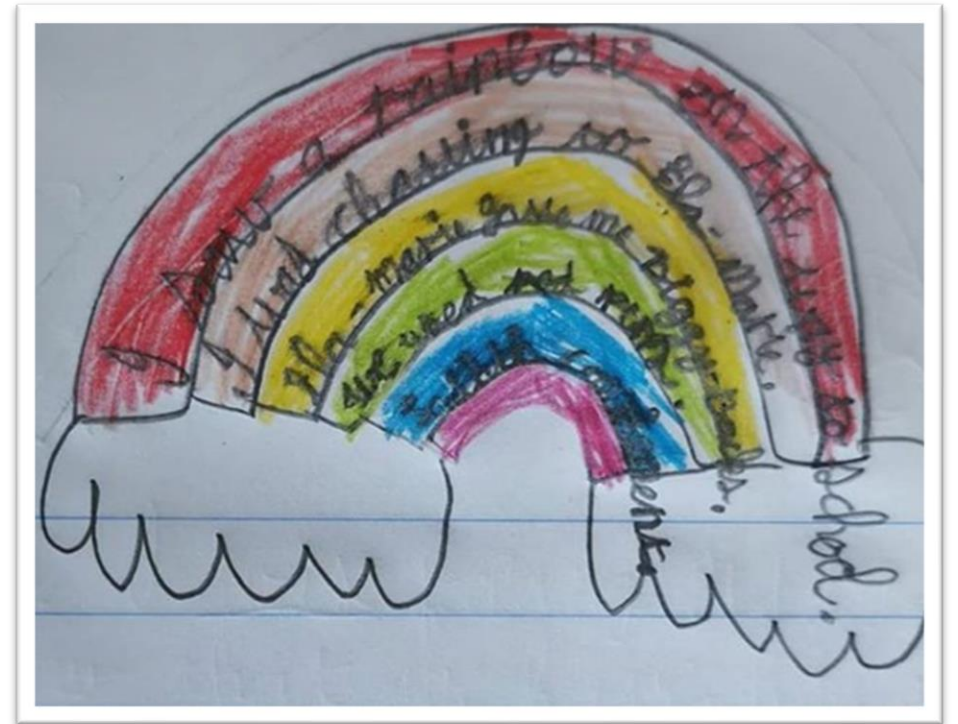
Serenity

Awe

Inspiration

Boost Positive Emotions

- ▶ Gratitude practices- Rainbow Moments
- ▶ Random Acts of Kindness
- ▶ Gratitude displays
- ▶ Time in nature
- ▶ Spending time on enjoyable hobbies and interests
- ▶ Creative activities
- ▶ Screen free family time
- ▶ Fun!!
- ▶ Play

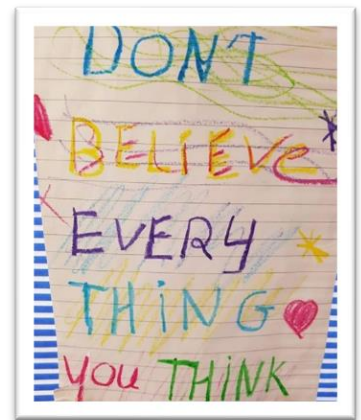




<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ref/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872668?>

Solution-Focused Strategies: Helpful Self-Talk

- ▶ Self-talk – *what we are saying to ourselves* – 24/7 narrative, ‘sound track’ to our daily lives – often both inaccurate and negative
- ▶ This affects our mental health, emotions, moods and also our behaviour – our ability to cope
- ▶ Children with anxiety often experience constant unhelpful self-talk, which leads to them doubting their ability to cope
- ▶ Helpful self-talk actually has a positive effect on the brain – releasing neurotransmitters which help us to feel better



<https://meteoreducation.com/how-does-thinking-positive-thoughts-affect-neuroplasticity/#:~:text=Every%20thought%20releases%20some%20type,a%20feeling%20of%20well%20being.&text=Dopamine>

Helpful Self-Talk

- ▶ What can we say to ourselves when we are feeling anxious?
- ▶ *I can cope with feeling uncomfortable*



Helpful Self-Talk Phrase	Tick if you used it
<i>I don't need to panic if I feel stressed. I can remember that my body is helping me for the challenge ahead.</i>	
I can cope with feeling uncomfortable.	
<i>These feelings will pass eventually.</i>	
I can cope with this. What do I need to do first?	
<i>My negative thoughts are often not true.</i>	
I can learn from this, even if it's a difficult situation.	
<i>I'm doing my best, that's all I can do.</i>	

Helpful Self-Talk Phrases:

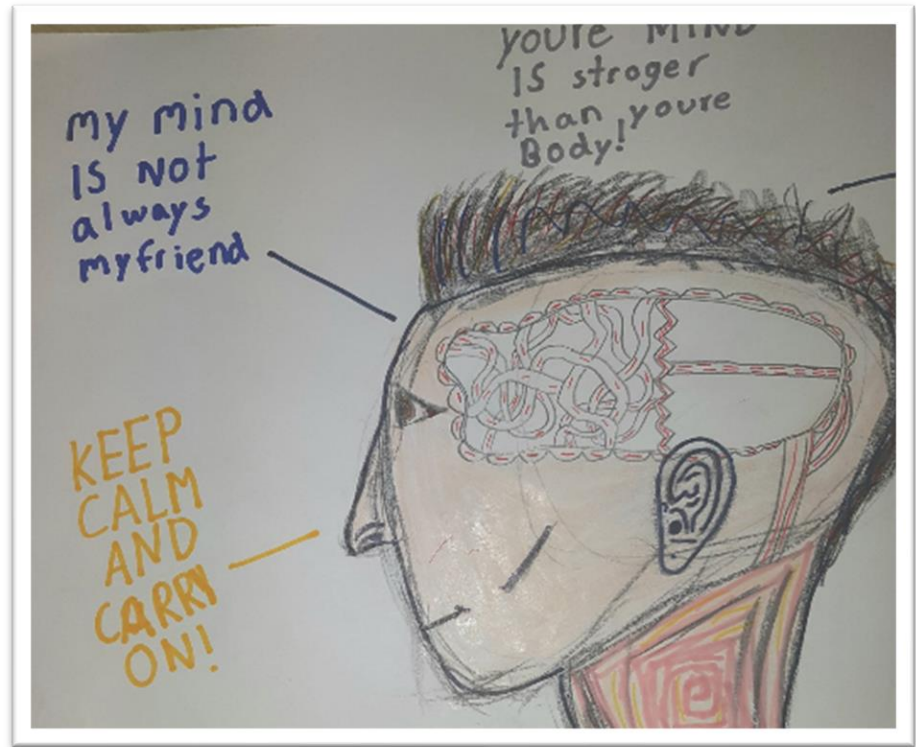
Choose 3 or 4!!

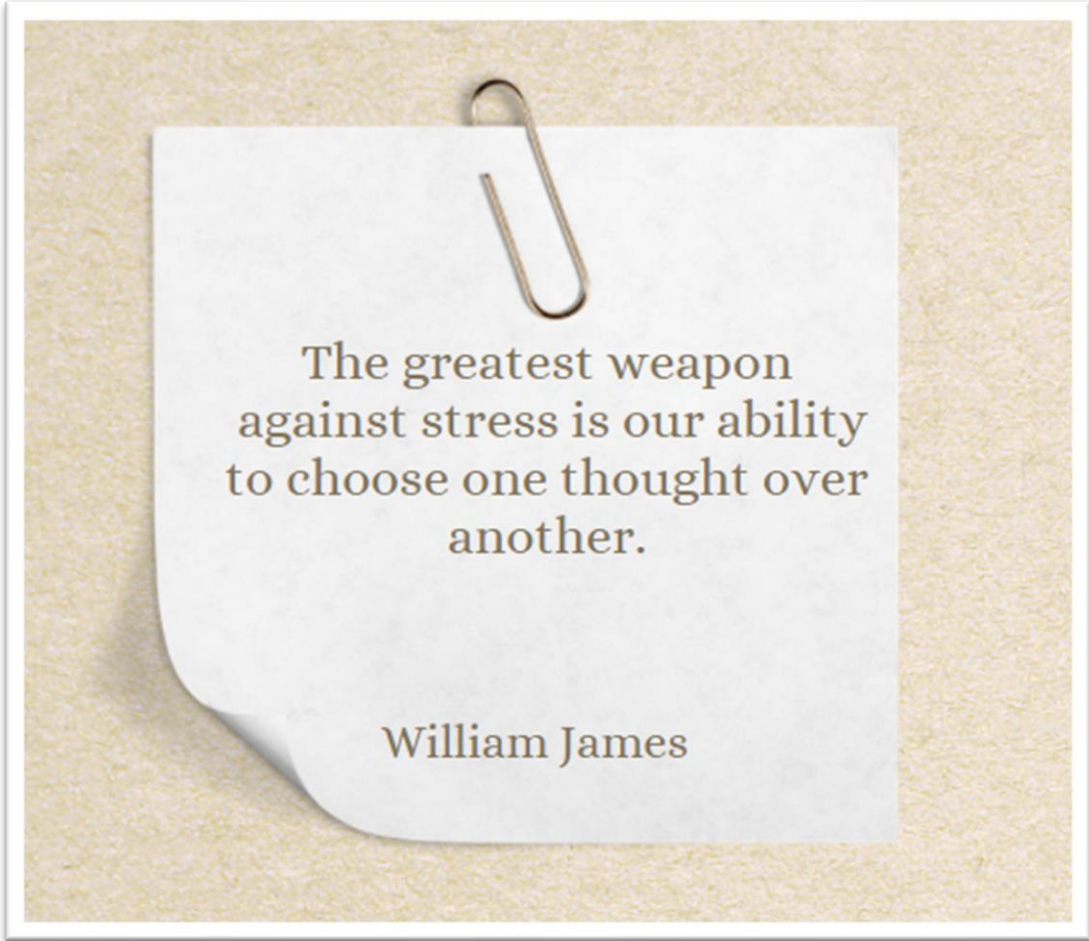
Model them for your
child

Coping Statements to Develop Resilience

- Stop, breathe, I can do this.
- This will pass.
- I can be anxious/angry/sad and still deal with this.
- I have done this before, and I can do it again.
- This feels bad, it is a normal body reaction. It will pass.
- These are just feelings, they will go away.
- This won't last forever.
- I can feel bad and still choose to take a new and healthy direction.
- I don't need to rush, I can take things slowly.
- I have survived before, I will survive now.
- I feel this way because of my past experiences, but I am safe right now.
- I'm stronger than I think.
- It's okay to feel this way, it's a normal reaction.
- Right now, I am not in danger. Right now, I'm safe.
- My mind is not always my friend.
- Thoughts are just thoughts. They are not necessarily true or factual.
- I will learn from this experience, even if it seems hard to understand right now.
- This is difficult and uncomfortable, but it is only temporary.
- I choose to see this challenge as an opportunity.
- I can use my coping skills and get through this.
- I can learn from this and it will be easier next time.
- Keep calm and carry on!

Carol Vihyan 2011. Permission to use for therapy purposes.



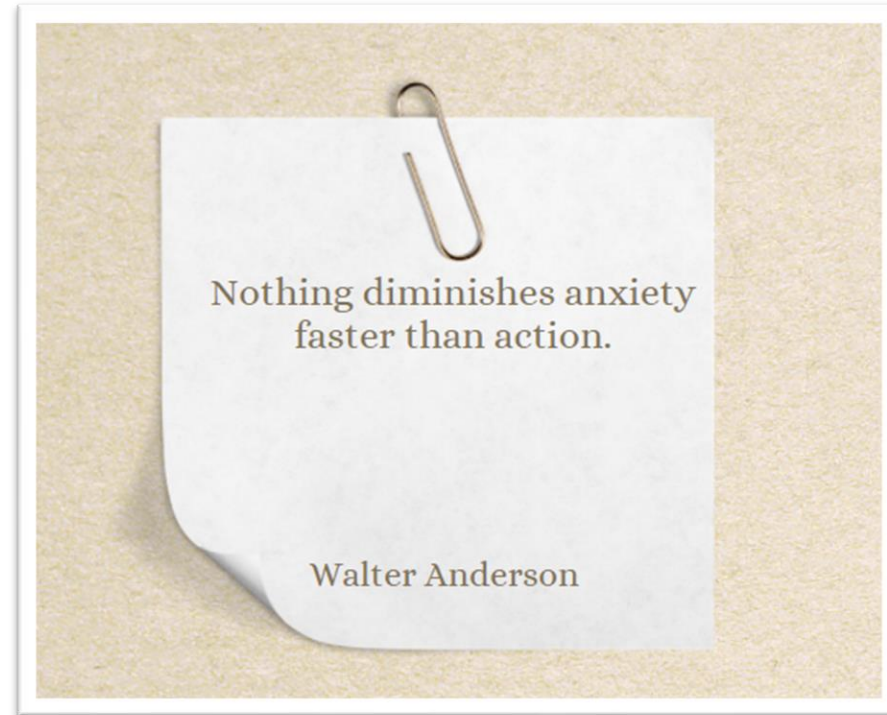
A photograph of a corkboard with a piece of white paper pinned to it by a silver paperclip. The paper has a quote and the name of the author. The corkboard is a light brown color with a textured surface. The paper is slightly wrinkled and has a small shadow cast to its left.

The greatest weapon
against stress is our ability
to choose one thought over
another.

William James

4. Healthy Distraction

- ▶ For when children are worrying about something they have no control over
- ▶ Talk it out first – not about ‘glossing over’
- ▶ Allows children to take a break from their worries
- ▶ Prevents negative spirals of thought that can lead to rumination & depression
- ▶ Builds a sense of self-efficacy even in difficult situations
- ▶ People who use healthy distraction to break ruminative, anxious thoughts are better equipped to deal with their worries and challenges



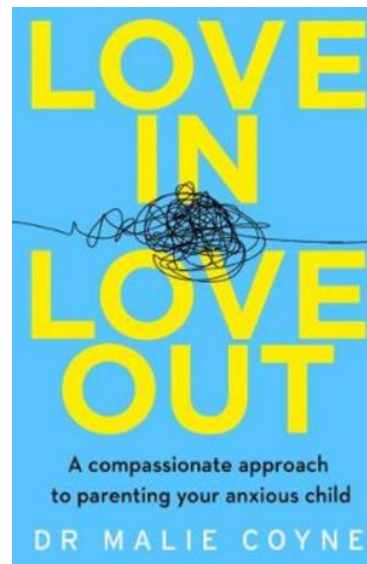
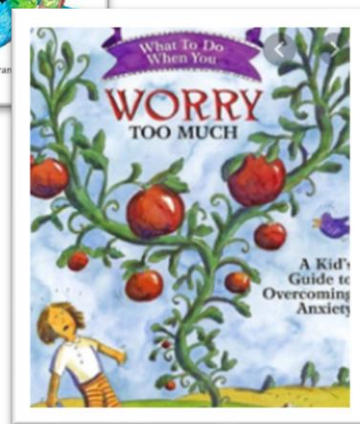
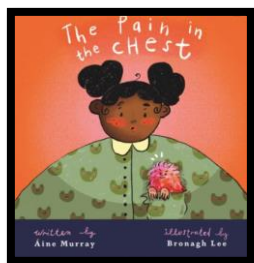
<https://www.alustforlife.com/tools/mental-health/how-distraction-can-build-childrens-resilience>

Final Messages and Review

- ▶ **Combination of support and skills needed**
- ▶ **Normalise**
- ▶ **Boost Positive Emotions & nervous system regulation**
- ▶ **Personalised 'Anxiety Tool Kit'**
- ▶ ***'What can you do to help yourself to feel stronger/better right now?'***



Recommended Books



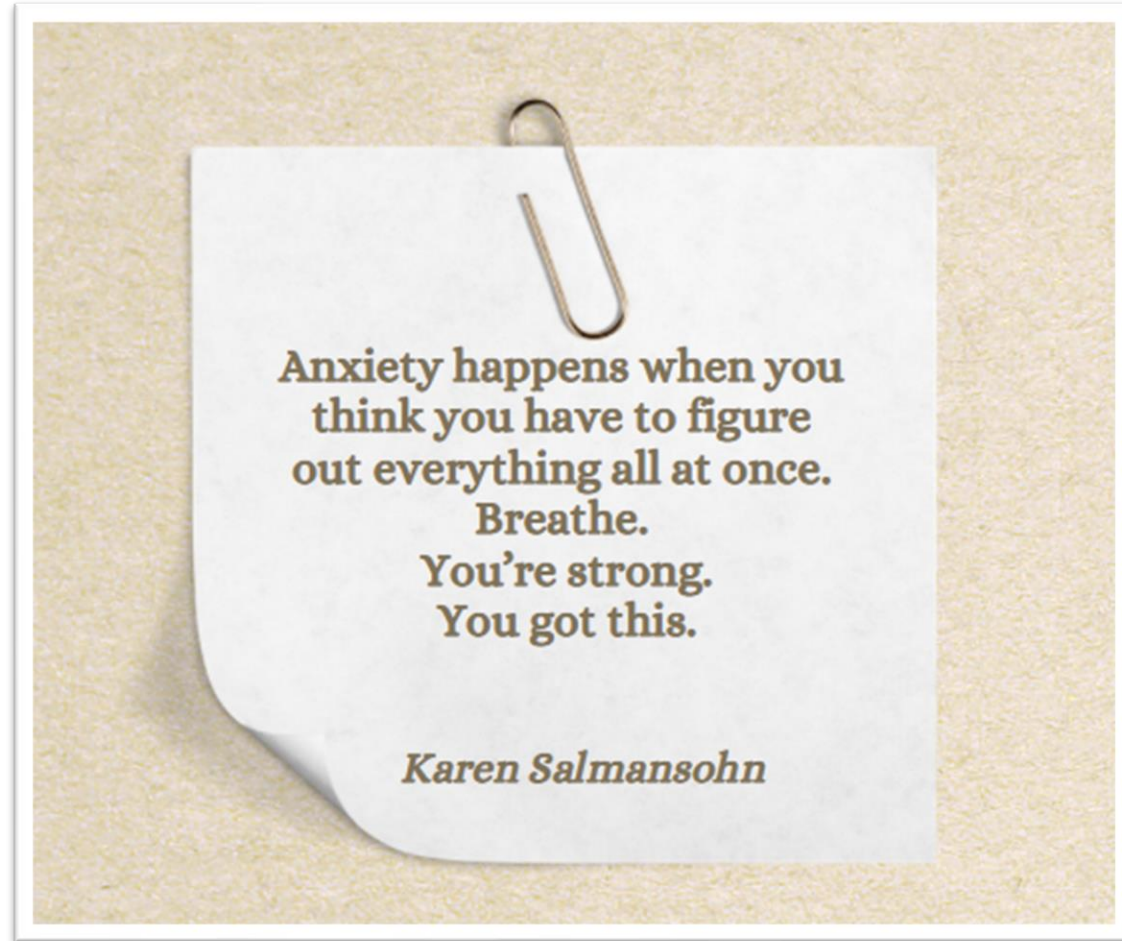
9 Anxiety Books for Teens

By *NowPsych MD Dr. Sean Paul* In *Adolescent Psychiatry, Anxiety*



<https://nowpsych.com/anxiety-books-for-teens/>

<https://laughingkidslearn.com/20-books-to-help-children-who-worry-or-suffer-from-anxiety/>



Thank you!

- ▶ Thanks so much again to Barry & Brigid!
- ▶ Thanks so much for joining me
- ▶ Contact – fiona.forman@gmail.com
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