

## Guidance for School Staff to support Parental Anxiety

During this challenging time, staff are having to adjust the way that they work and this includes having more direct communication with parents. It can be challenging to know what to say to a parent who is feeling anxious and distressed.

This short guide has been written with the aim to support staff with some of these conversations, below are some points/prompts to help you manage these conversations:

- 1. Normalise any anxiety** – people are understandably anxious about the current coronavirus pandemic, anxiety is a completely normal human response to an abnormal situation. The unpredictable and ongoing spread of coronavirus is as abnormal as it gets so it's totally natural to be feeling anxious or worried.
- 2. Why are we scared?** The coronavirus pandemic gets to the heart of three human fears:
  - Losing control
  - Social Isolation
  - Death

When we experience changes to our environment that are beyond our control, this can lead to feelings of panic, fear and worry. However, by remembering that we are in this together and that we can draw on others for support, can help us to gain a different perspective.

- 3. The Fight, Flight or Freeze Response** is the body's reaction to a perceived threat or an actual threat, such as coronavirus. The response is triggered by the release of hormones that prepare the body to either stay and deal with the threat, to run to safety, or freeze, which is where the body becomes rigid or limp so that we can't move, this is the body's response to protect us.

Indications of the fight, flight or freeze response can include:

- Shortness of Breath
- Sweating
- Rapid heart beat

These symptoms are similar to coronavirus, which can cause further worry. However, if we practice deep breathing exercises, we can manage our sense of threat and these symptoms will reduce and eventually disappear, if they are related to a 'fight or flight' response. The breathing works to slow down our heart rate, which in turn reduces the feelings of anxiety and regulates our emotional state. These deep breathing exercises are known as "belly breathing" and instructions on the different types can be found here:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/diaphragmatic-breathing#steps-to-do>

Other ways to regulate our emotional state include:

- Exercising or practicing yoga
- Mindfulness of meditation
- Listening to music

**It's useful to be aware of our thoughts and how they impact on our body:**



Our thoughts impact our feelings and this in turn affects our behaviour, when our thoughts become mainly negative, or are consumed with fear and worry, this can leave us feeling very low and as though we are unable to cope. If we can re-frame our thoughts into ones that allow for hope and remind us that this situation will not last forever, then this can have a positive effect on our feelings and our abilities to cope. Changing unhelpful thoughts to helpful thoughts can help reduce anxiety.

Here are some alternatives to unhelpful thoughts:

**Unhelpful Thought:** “I absolutely must not catch coronavirus”

At first glance, this may seem sensible, however, it's unhelpful because despite sensible precautions, it's still possible to catch it.

**More Helpful Thought:** “I would prefer not to catch coronavirus and I can take precautions but it might happen”

This thought allows you to follow government guidance and take the necessary precautions rather than reacting due to a state of panic. ‘No Concern’ and ‘Panic’ are on the same continuum. A thought like this can help to keep **us** balanced between the two extremes.

**Unhelpful Thought:** “Coming out of lockdown will be a nightmare”

In England, the government has made some changes to the rules regarding lockdown, it will be a slow, gradual process that will take some time. It can be distressing to know what exactly this will look like and how long it will take but we are able to spend more time outside now, whilst still maintaining the safe 2 metre distance. The change from lockdown to a “new normal” may feel different and challenging. But what we can take away from this period, is that we have shown we are resilient enough to cope and adapt to significant life changes, when we need to.

**Helpful Thought:** “At least, we live in an age with lots of ways to find alternative sources of connection”

### Unhelpful Thought: “We will all suffer a financial disaster”

The global economy will be impacted but to what degree, we don't know. We know that at this time many people are suffering hardship through losing their jobs, being furloughed and are feeling worried and uncertain about the future. Many people were suffering hardship before lockdown and this has made things worse. However, this situation will end and there are support services that can help.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

<https://workingfamilies.org.uk/articles/coronavirus-support/>

Helpful Thought: “We are all in this together. We need each other to get out of it”

### Unhelpful Thought: “People who have coughs and colds are plague carriers”

Coronavirus is not a plague and not everyone who coughs or sneezes has coronavirus, we also know the steps we can take to keep ourselves safe and reduce the spread, such as washing our hands and coughing and sneezing into tissues or into our elbows. We also need to be mindful of how we talk about coronavirus and react to people who have it or have come from other countries. Some people are already feeling that they are being discriminated against and made to feel like an outcast.

Helpful Thought: “People who cough and sneeze may not necessarily have the virus and are ordinary people just like us.”

### Rumination:

Rumination is when we repeatedly go over thoughts and problems in our heads, without completion. This repetition, along with unhelpful thoughts can lead to anxiety and stress. If this something that someone is doing, here are some ways to help you manage feelings of worry or distress:

**Worry time** – People who are bothered by worry often experience it as *uncontrollable*, time consuming, and sometimes believe that it is beneficial to engage in worry when it occurs. It helps to set aside some “worry time” each day, perhaps up to 15 minutes, and use it to write down the worries, e.g. on strips of paper, then screw them up and throw them in the bin. If worrying happens outside of this time, it's helpful to bank the worry for “worry time” only, using the same time each day for “worry time”.

**Real problems vs. Hypothetical Problems** – Real problems are ones that affect us right now, which we can act on now, e.g. “I'm late to pay this bill.” Hypothetical problems are ones that don't currently exist but which *might* happen in the future, e.g. “What if my loved ones contract the virus?” It's helpful to decide what type of worry it is; real or hypothetical. If we experience lots of hypothetical worry, then it's important to remind ourselves that our mind is not focusing on a problem that we can solve right now, and then find ways to let the worry go and focus on something else.

**Practice Gratitude:** - At times of uncertainty, developing gratitude practice can help us to connect with moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure. At the end of each day, it is helpful to take time to reflect on what we are thankful for. Being specific and noticing new things each day, for example ‘I am grateful that it was sunny at lunchtime so I could go outside.’ Starting a gratitude journal, or keeping notes in a gratitude jar can also be helpful, as well as Encouraging other people in the home to get involved too.

Positive emotions do help us to manage our emotional wellbeing. Finding ways to laugh, as a means of coping with the current reality, is a good thing right now.

Resources:

<https://www.acamh.org/blog/helping-parents-manage-challenging-behaviour-during-the-covid19-lockdown-some-pointers-for-practitioners>

<https://www.orygen.org.au/About/Responding-to-the-COVID-19-outbreak/For-young-people-and-families/Self-care-during-the-COVID-19-outbreak/orygen-covid19-self-care-tips.aspx>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/>

References:

“Managing Fears and Anxiety Around the Coronavirus,” Dr. Catherine Sykes.

“Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty” Dr. Matthew Walley and Dr Hardeep Kaur, Psychology Tools 2020.