

July 2018

# Coping with anxiety

This document is for parents and carers who have a child who is suffering with feelings of anxiety. We hope that this will enable you to respond effectively to your child's needs.

This document has been produced by MindMate with the help of Leeds School Nursing Service

**MindMate** 



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# Everyone feels anxious sometimes

For some people anxious feelings are related to a specific event or situation. For others it may relate to a combination of factors or underlying issues and it may be helpful to address these first.

Feelings of anxiety are normal. It is an appropriate response to a stressful or threatening situation. You may have heard this referred to as a flight, fright, fight response. It means we are prepared to cope with a threat. Anxiety only becomes a problem when we overestimate the threat or underestimate our ability to cope with the situation. When this happens on a regular basis it can have a negative effect on our health and well-being. Finding an effective coping strategy when feeling anxious is key because we often have limited control over the situations that provoke anxious feelings.

For younger children an approach which includes parent, carers and school staff, is most helpful. This is because the behaviour of those around the child can have a big impact on their behaviour and how they respond to situations that make them feel anxious. Younger children will look to their parent/ carer for clues on how to respond and sometimes parents/ carers and school staff can inadvertently reinforce anxious behaviour.

- Although a parent/ carer's natural instinct is to rescue their child, this can be unhelpful. Offering too much reassurance can sometimes reinforce the danger and increase anxious feelings. A more helpful approach is to promote the child's confidence in their ability to cope with a threatening situation. This can empower them and reduce anxiety.
- Learning strategies for containing a child's anxiety and modelling and encouraging bravery can help the child cope with anxious feelings.
- Older children may find it helps to understand what anxiety is and how it affects their bodies. It will help them understand why they are experiencing symptoms and reassure them that these feelings will not necessarily cause them harm.

## How can parents/ carers help?

Finding a way to help your child cope with anxious feelings is the key to beating anxiety.

Over the following pages there are some suggestions to help them overcome anxiety which you can encourage them to try.

### ✓ Helpful strategies

- Role model brave, non-anxious behaviour.
- Reward brave, non-anxious behaviour.
- Stop your child avoiding the anxiety-provoking situation.
- Communicate your empathy.
- Prompt your child to cope constructively.

### ✗ Unhelpful strategies

- Rewarding or indulging displays of anxious behaviour.
- Offering excessive reassurance.
- Being too directive.
- Allowing or encouraging avoidance of the anxiety-provoking situation.
- Being impatient with your child.

Adapted from Rapee, R. (2008). *Helping Your Anxious Child*. New Harbinger Publications. ISBN 13: 978-1-57224-575-4

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## 1. Understanding what anxiety is and how it effects our bodies

Not everyone will experience all of these feelings and they usually last no more than 15 minutes.

When these feelings are overwhelming it's called a panic attack. This can be very frightening but will not usually cause physical harm.

For more information search for 'feeling stressed' on [MindMate.org.uk](https://www.mindmate.org.uk)

**Sweaty hands**

**Hard to breathe**

**Dry mouth**

**Shaky voice**

**Red face / feel hot**

**Jelly legs**

**Feel dizzy or faint**

**Lump in throat**

**Butterflies  
in tummy**

**Headache**

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## 2. Knowing what triggers the anxious feelings

Helping your child take time to notice when they feel anxious may help them understand what's causing these feelings. For some people it can be one thing, for instance an upcoming exam. For others it could be more general and harder to pin down.

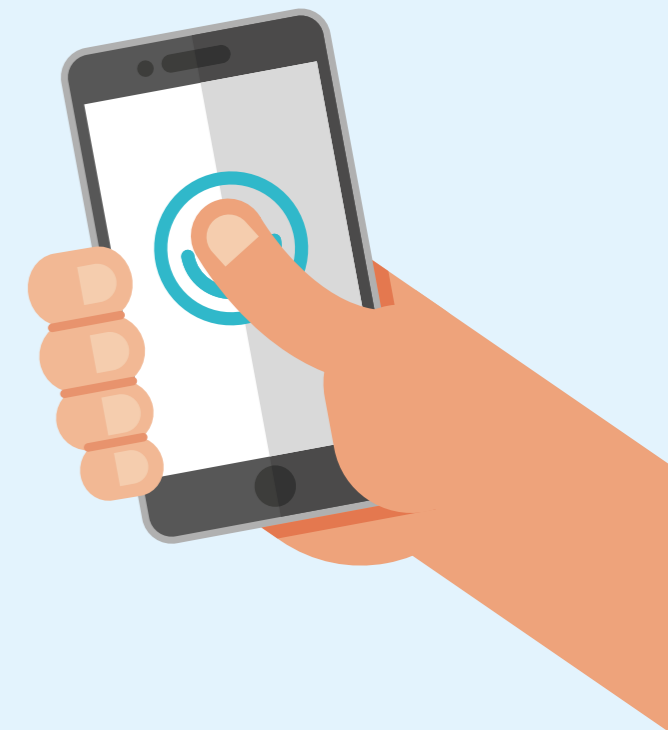
School can be a source of anxiety for many young people due to difficulties with the following :

- Relationships with classmates and teachers
- Feeling insecure/self conscious about appearance/body image
- Feeling pressure to do well with studies/exams
- Pressure to do well with activities such as sports
- Pressure to have latest gadgets, clothes etc

Social media can add to this pressure. Family relationships and finding your own identity can also be a source of pressure. It is common for all of us to feel anxious at times.

For some young people this can be affected by other factors such as:

- Difficulties at home
- Health worries
- Disability
- Being a perfectionist
- Lack of confidence
- Low self-esteem
- Identity/Gender issues
- Financial problems



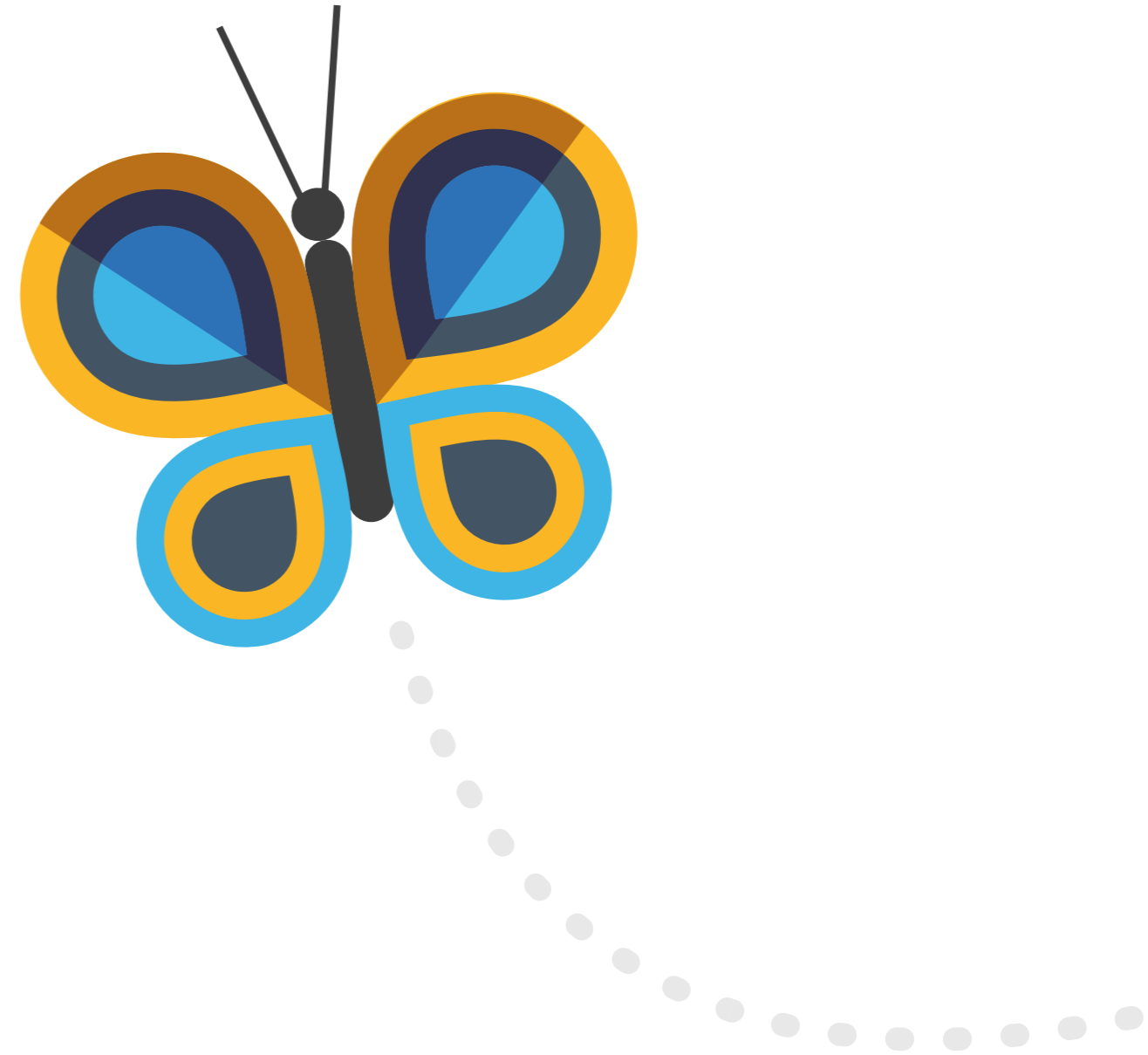
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### 3. Developing coping strategies

There is no one way of managing anxious feelings. Different approaches work for different people at different times.

Your child may find that certain things help to distract them or to help them feel calmer. MindMate have some 'tips for destressing' on line – search for **de-stress** on MindMate.

...this includes guided recordings for relaxation, which you could try together.



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## 4. Coping with anxious feelings

People often learn to cope with worries and anxious feelings by avoiding the thing that made them worried. This may help at the time but won't help your child to beat the worry in the long run.

When they feel ready to confront their feelings here are some suggestions that may help:

- Help them to work out what is making them anxious.
- Help them to see things differently.
  - What is the worst that could happen?
  - How likely is it?
  - What can they do to cope?
  - What support can they get if they need it?
- Encourage them to take small steps to overcome their anxious feelings. Thinking in this way may help them realise that it's not as bad as they first thought and they can be brave.
- Encourage them to think about how well they have done. This will increase their confidence and self-belief. Being successful once means they can do it again. Encourage them to take the next step and keep going until they have overcome your fears.

**“You’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think”**

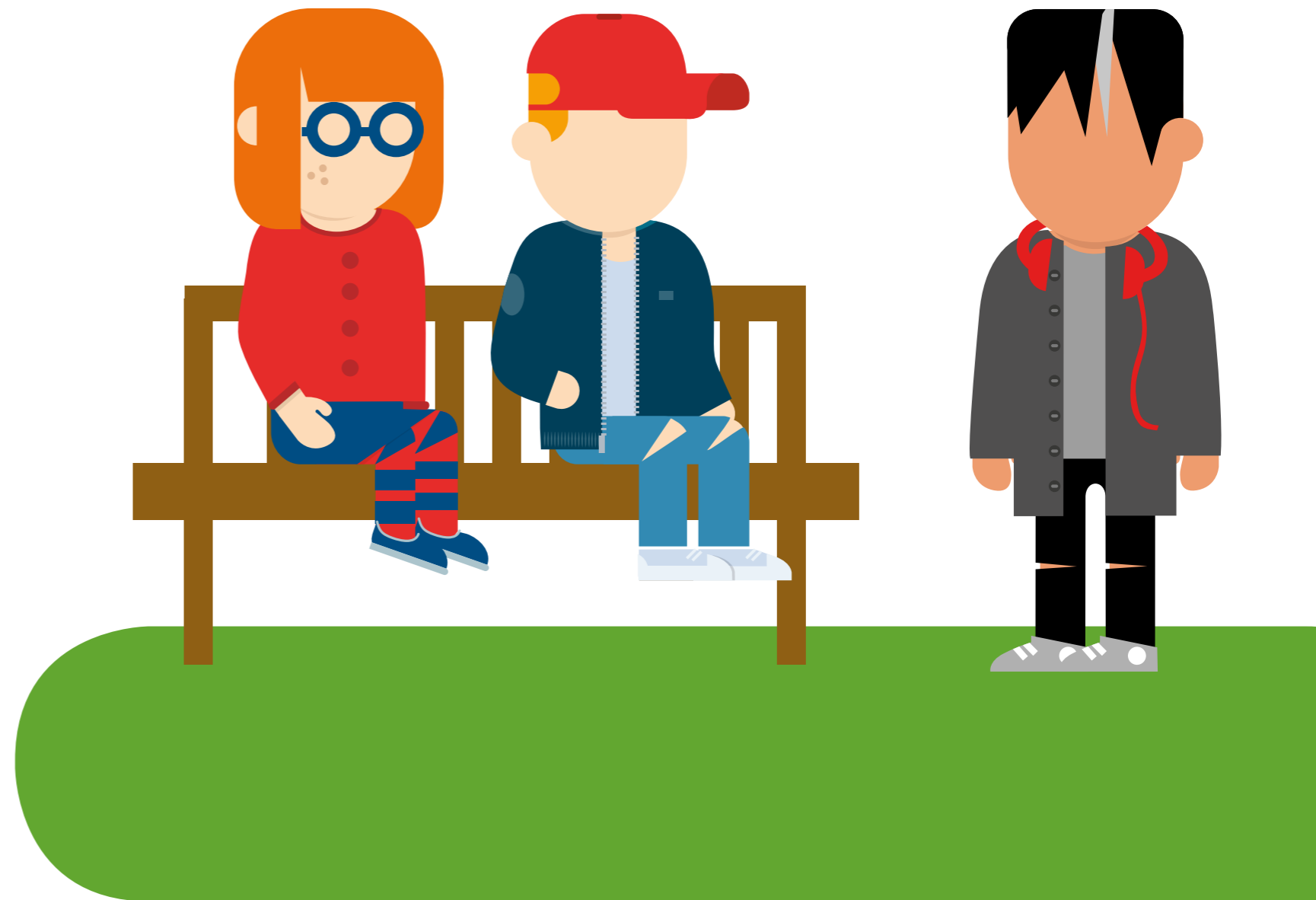
AA Milne (Winnie the Pooh)

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## 5. Getting the right support

Find someone you can trust – parent/carer, teacher, friend, relative, school nurse. If you find it hard to speak about your worries, try writing them down. Try playing the game on MindMate called **Find Your MindMates** to help you think about who would be good to talk to about your worries.

You may feel you need more specialist help if your anxious feelings are sticking around for a long time, or preventing you from doing things you normally enjoy. Search on MindMate for **'What's in Leeds for me'** to find different services in the city that might help if you need more support.





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## Recommended reading and useful resources

Rapee, R., Helping Your Anxious Child: A step by step guide for parents. ISBN 13: 978-1-57224-575-4 \*

Hubener, D., What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety. ISBN 13: 978-1591473145 \*

MindMate.org.uk includes pages for young people on **Coping with Common Issues** and pages for parents and carers.

The School Nursing Service offers a range of services and welcome enquires from children, young people, parents/carers and professionals. Please contact the School Nursing Single Point of Access by calling 0113 8435219.

\* Books are available to borrow at Leeds Libraries

**Young Minds Parent Helpline Freephone**  
0808 802 5544

Provides support, advice and information for any adult worried about the emotional problems, behaviour or mental health of a child or young person up to the age of 25.

