

Helping children to cope with anxiety

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Down memory lane...

- What made you happy when you were a child?
- This might be your favourite toy, place, pair of shoes or song
- What emotions is this memory giving you?
- This exercise is helpful when thinking about how to help children



Your “frame of reference”

- It’s important to be able to think ourselves into the mind of a child
- We need to enter their reality so they **believe we understand them**
- We are shaped by our own experiences and we need to acknowledge them
- Feel free to ask questions as we go along, but it’s okay if you’d rather just listen

What we'll be talking about:

- The brain, how it develops, and how it affects behaviour
- What anxiety is and what it's for
- Guiding principles for working on resilience
- Practical ideas for use at home



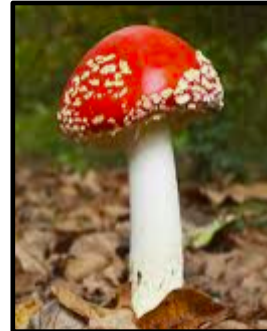
The key points

- All behaviours are forms of communication
- People of all ages will do anything to avoid anxiety
- We often don't realise this is what we are doing
- Biologically, we are still a prey animal



Evolution and mental health

- Human beings needed to adapt to challenging environments
- Changes were too fast for the adaptations to be fixed biologically
- Instead, we had to learn as a group from other people we trust – this means we learned to understand other people's feelings
- This trusting relationship for children is called **containment** and leads to **attachment**
- We have to trust before we can learn



Containment

- The infant experiences overwhelming distress (hunger, fear, discomfort)
- The caregiver understands this distress and can bear it herself*
- She communicates this understanding with her response, through both words and non-verbal signals
- The infant is reassured and anxiety is reduced by this understanding
- Hormones cause both stress and soothing reactions

* It can be a man too!

- The care and containment comes from a reliable, trustworthy source
- The caregiver's response teaches the child about themselves – feeling hungry results in being fed
- The child begins to learn about understanding their own and other people's feelings
- The caregivers become the “secure base” to which the infant is attached

- **Attachment** provides contact with the secure base, allowing the child to feel safe and secure
- Families are the root of attachment for most children
- Schools, settings and their staff can all become secure bases for children – especially those who lack attachment in their family life
- With a secure base, the child can explore life safely



The importance of language

- Words help the child to translate fear into thoughts
- This helps the child to explore their fear and to find solutions, with the help of supportive adults to offer containment
- It means we can describe what we are feeling
- Without this, the fear and uncertainty become overwhelming



Splitting and projecting

- Strong feelings are too much for us so we split them off
- They can then be projected onto other people who can “feel” them for us



A child who is bullied may scare others in order to make them feel the fear and anger the child cannot bear

Children who feel ashamed of their own lack of skill may mock other children to make themselves feel superior

The child who laughs at others for getting something wrong may have been very scared about not knowing the answer themselves

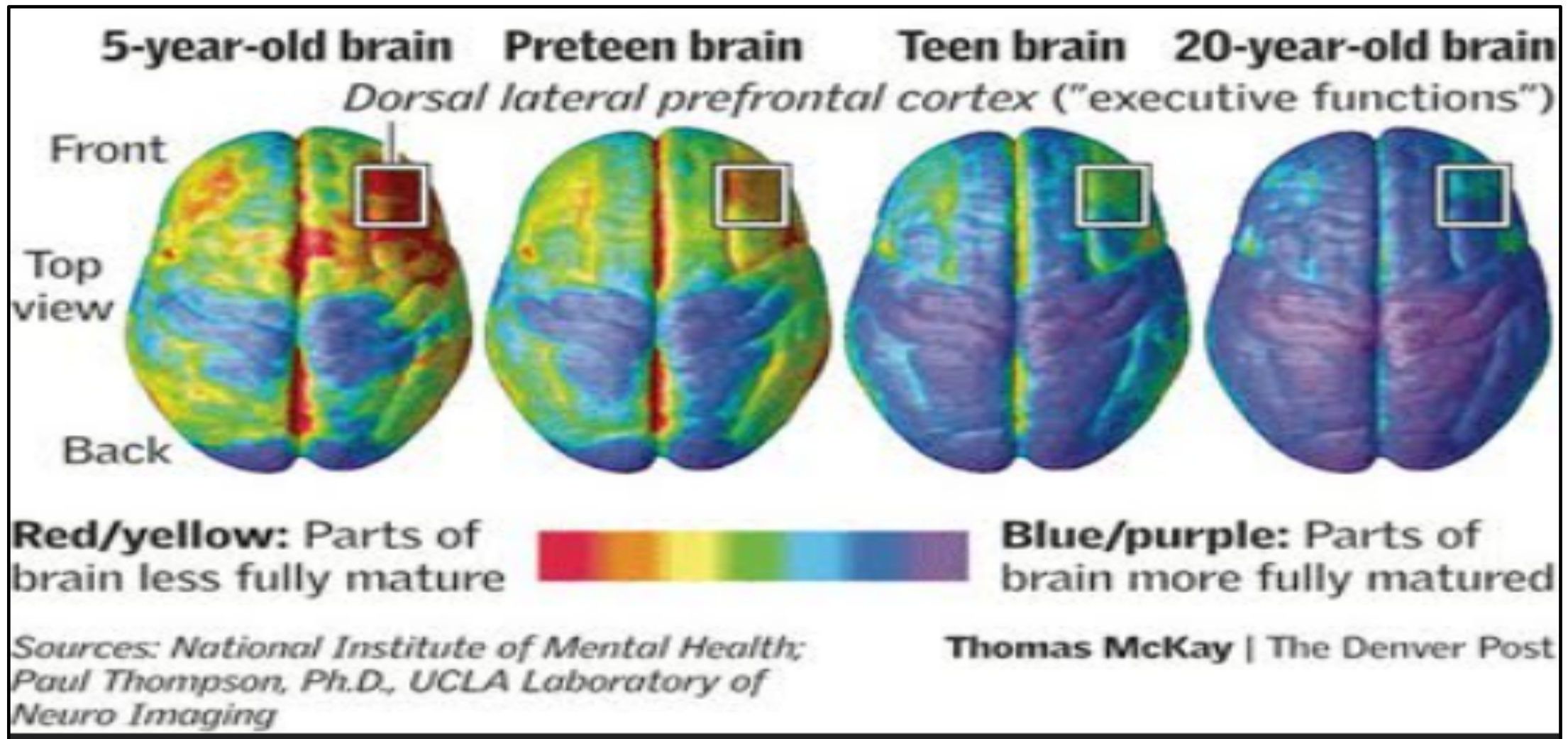
A child who picks on another child for sharing one of their traits may be punishing the problem in the shape of the other person

We all do this, even as adults....

What can be done?

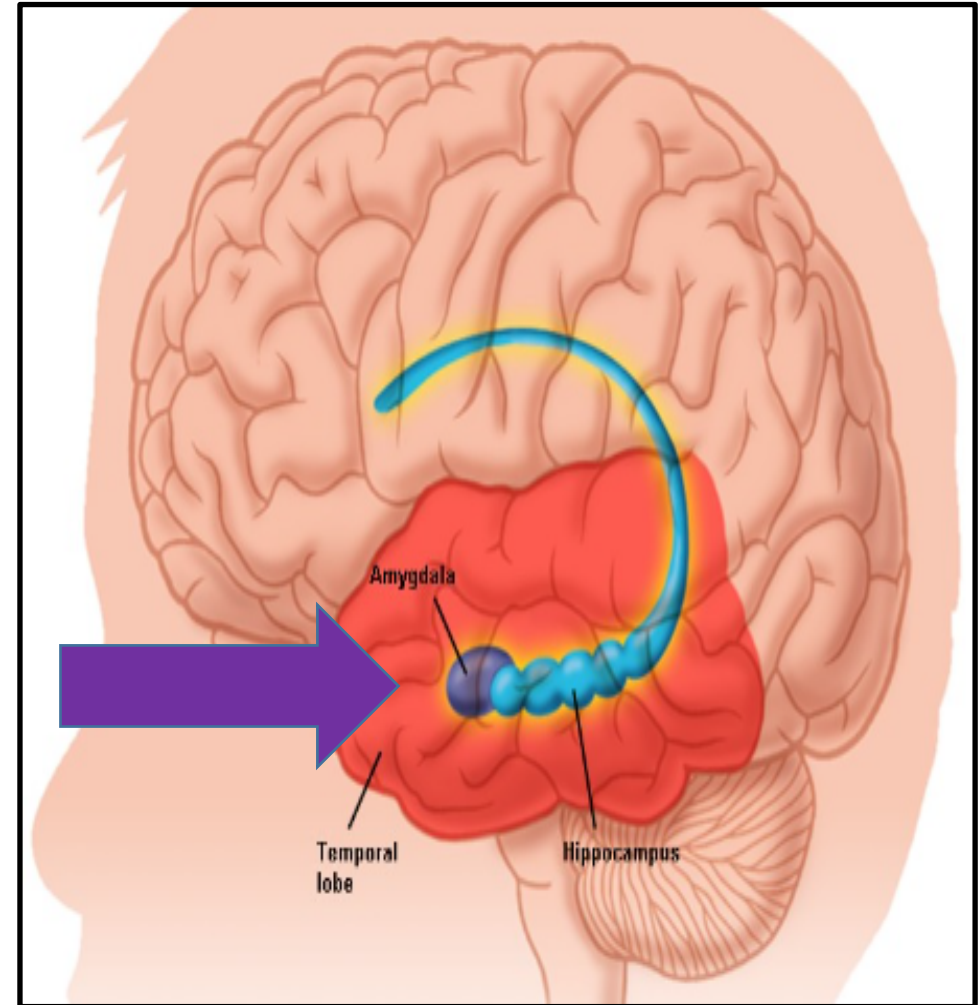
- Ask yourself “what is the behaviour trying to tell me?”
- Remember that the anxiety and fear may make it hard for the child to express what is going on (more on this later!)
- Respond with patience, consistency and kindness
- Do not add to the child’s fear – we all remember scary teachers but for the wrong reasons!

What on earth are they thinking?



The amygdala – part of your “lizard brain”

- Linked to survival responses – “fright, flight, freeze, food and fornication”
- Triggers an uncontrollable and unthinking physiological response
- Can’t tell the difference between real or perceived threats
- Strong links to stored memories



The brain and hormones

- Some stress is useful – it stimulates us and helps us to learn
- The fright/flight response is controlled by stress hormones released by the brain
- Being soothed produces calming, feel-good hormones
- However, high levels of stress hormones that are not reduced by care can affect the development of the brain – stress becomes “hard wired”

Other brain issues for children

- The amygdala is not fully mature or connected
- The hippocampus, which controls memory, is not fully developed
- The neurons related to empathy and compassion are changing
- A brain chemical called dopamine increases at puberty, which means the brain becomes hyperactive
- Technology can stimulate the brain and reduce the quality of sleep



How we can help

- Help children explore the causes of their anxiety, and identify ways to defuse things
- Remember that the “flight-fright” response is often irrational
- Replace stressful mental images with positive ones
- Challenge unhelpful versions of the “truth”

Beneath every behaviour is a feeling. And beneath every feeling is a need. And when we meet that need rather than focus on the behaviour, we begin to deal with the cause not the symptom.

Ashleigh Warner, psychologist

'Children's emotions are as real as yours. Just because they might get sad over the colour of their cup, does not make their feelings any less real.'

~ Rebekah Lipp

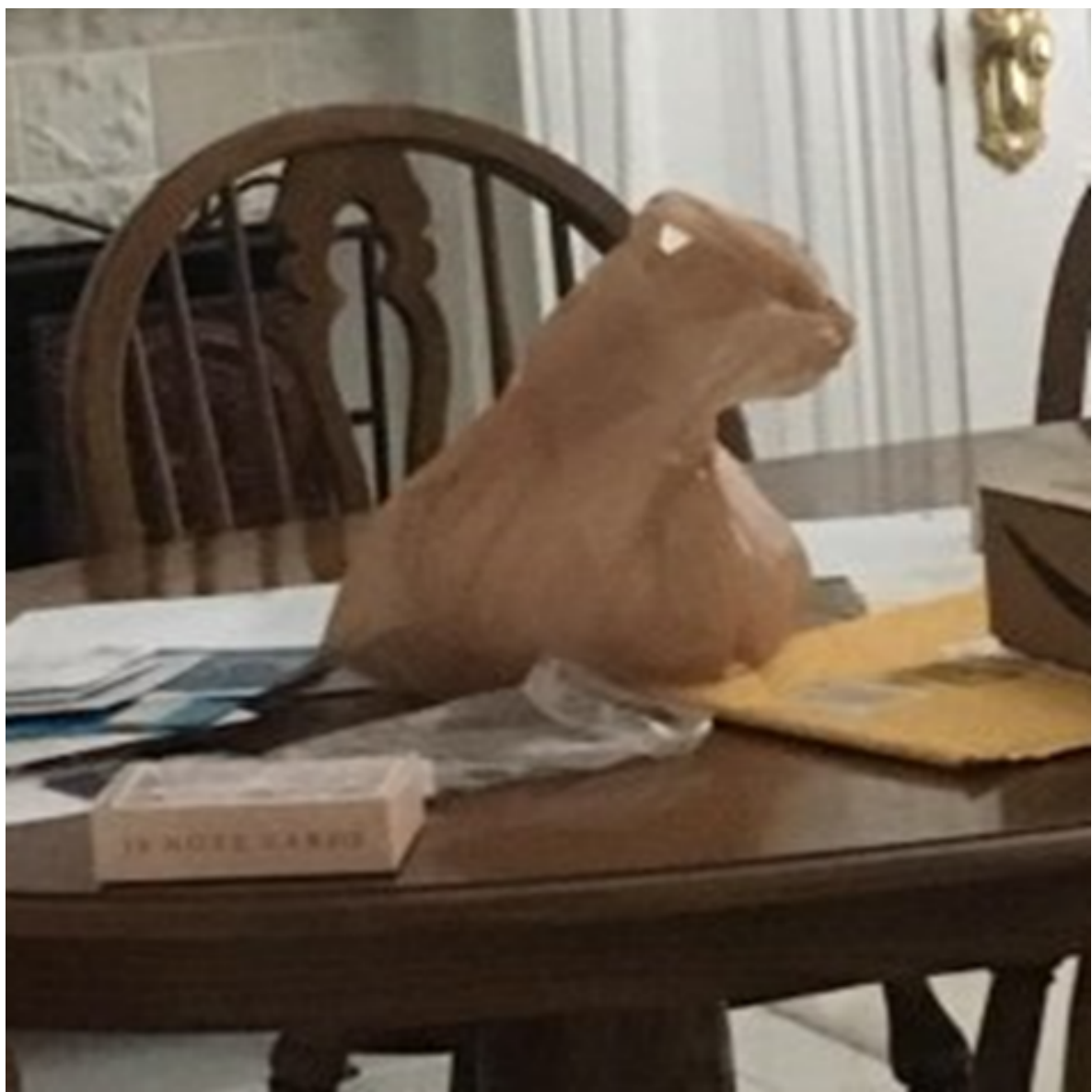


Pareidolia and the power of pictures

- Human brains work on images rather than words
- New born babies are attracted to things that look like faces
- Our lizard brain links images to memories and emotions, and this reinforces our “truth”
- Is it a shadow, or a bear?













Eat enough Sugar Puffs and you'll end up looking like me.



You too can be covered in super badges and grow big and handsome like me. Because in every special pack of Sugar Puffs, there's a free stick-on Honey Monster badge.

As well as lots of my favourite breakfast. And as there are four badges to collect, get your mummy to buy lots of Sugar Puffs in the special packs.

Oh, I bet you thought that I'd forgotten to tell you about the honey? Well, I just have! Hee Hee!



The impact of this in real life

You see....



The amygdala sees...



**Working with the brain to make things
better**

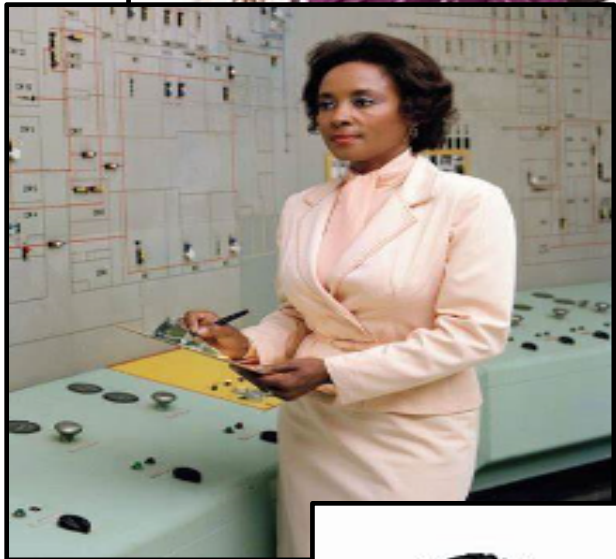
The self-talk cycle (with thanks to the Pacific Institute)

Someone we believe gives us information about ourselves

This becomes our “truth”, stored subconsciously

We cannot bear the unconscious anxiety when we move
away from our “truth”

We go out of our way to make things “true” again -
behaviour becomes a solution



Who gave you your "truth"?

Why did you believe them?

Practical ideas for use at home and at school (they also work for grownups!)

- “Your room is always messy.”
- Mum says I’m a messy person. Mum must be right.
- Messy people don’t put their pants in the laundry basket.
- My room is a mess. Pants all over the place.
- See? Mum was right!

- “You’re usually much tidier than this.”
- Mum says I’m a tidy person. Mum must be right.
- Tidy people put their pants in the laundry basket.
- My room’s tidy again. Everything’s been put away.
- See? Mum was right!

Creating a new truth – tricking the lizard



- You always get nervous about tests, don't you?



- You are a calm person. **It's not like you** to worry too much

- You never stop talking when we are trying to learn



- You know that talking is not okay. **I see you** as an attentive person

- You always make so much fuss about the lockdown



- Being scared is okay but **I see you** as a thoughtful person

That's Not Like You/I See You As... key phrases to use and repeat

Is your child learning your self-talk?

- Take a moment to think about your own reactions to stress
- Are you too optimistic?
- Or are you a negative fortune teller?
- Could changing your reactions help your child?



Statement Cards

- Get ideas and information from advice/support charity websites
- Print these off on small cards and leave for your child to take and carry around
- Or help your children write and create their own
- Children can also make cases/boxes for storing the cards

Suggestions for anxiety cards

- Everyone feels scared sometimes
- It will all be okay in the end
- You will feel better again
- You are not alone
- Mistakes are the best way to learn
- We can find a way around this
- There is always someone who can help
- You have strengths and skills
- You don't have to be like everyone else
- You can always control the way that you react
- This is only temporary and things will get better

Hope for the best, prepare for the worst

- Say the unsayable – “What’s the worst thing that can happen?”
- Help your child to have a realistic perspective and gain a sense of control
- Explore how it will feel if something less good happens
- Then make a plan for dealing with the situation
- If you don’t explore the possibilities, you can’t plan for them

I CANNOT CONTROL

(So, I can LET GO of these things.)

IF OTHERS FOLLOW THE RULES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

THE AMOUNT OF TOILET PAPER AT THE STORE

I CAN CONTROL

(So, I will focus on these things.)

THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS

MY POSITIVE ATTITUDE

TURNING OFF THE NEWS

FINDING FUN THINGS TO DO AT HOME

HOW LONG THIS WILL LAST

HOW I FOLLOW CDC RECOMMENDATIONS

LIMITING MY SOCIAL MEDIA

MY OWN SOCIAL DISTANCING

MY KINDNESS & GRACE

PREDICTING WHAT WILL HAPPEN

HOW OTHERS REACT

OTHER PEOPLE'S MOTIVES



“I’m so sad I’m not seeing my friends any more”

It’s really hard not to see people we love. It would make me sad too. Let’s try to think of ways you can keep in touch. Maybe you can all keep a diary so you can show each other everything you’ve done when you see them again?

“I’m scared I’ll get the virus and give it to my mum”

Let’s look up advice about the things we can do to help mum stay safe. It’s great you want to be responsible, that’s really grown up. I’m proud of you.

“I won’t learn anything for ages and everyone else will know more than me”

Everyone will be learning different things while they are out of school. Let’s make a list of all the things you have already done. Then we can look at where you might need a bit more help.

Remember, the fears are the child’s “truth.” Dismissing them won’t help.

These responses:

- Show respect for the child's feelings
- Reassure the child that these feelings are normal and okay
- Are realistic and honest
- Offer practical, optimistic solutions
-
- Make the child feel they are in control
- *It's really hard not to see people we love*
- *Let's try to think of ways you can keep in touch*
- *It would make me sad too*
- *It's great you want to be responsible, that's really grown up*
- *We can look at where you might need a bit more help*

Solution-focussed thinking



- “If you had a magic wand...?” can be a helpful question
- Identify small, practical steps that can be taken
- The steps won’t address the underlying problem but will help alleviate the “symptomatic” behaviours or worries
- Use a thermometer scale to assess change

GOAL!

9 – I have a plan for dealing with any problems that might come up



3 – dad's agreed not to nag me about revising



0 – how things are with the problem
(I'm really scared about SATS)



10 - The day after the magic wand has worked
(I did my SATS without getting upset)



5 – I've done 30 minutes' revision every day



2 – I've talked to my teacher about how I'm feeling

(With thanks to Brief Solutions)

The Three Islands



The Island of things I love



The Island of things that are okay sometimes



The Island of things I can't bear

Add a bridge to move between the islands

Learning's okay sometimes
except when it's maths



What is it about maths that
worries you? What would
happen if you had a magic
wand?

I can't bear feeling so
anxious



What would make things
more manageable? What
strengths do you have that
can help?



Who was your lighthouse when you were a child?
How can you be one now you are the grown-up?

How to be a lighthouse (without getting wet)

- **Tune in** to your children – show you've noticed how they are feeling
- Meet them where they are – acknowledge their emotions and allow them to be named
- Use your voice, language and body to show you understand

Maintain eye contact

Using the names of feelings

Checking in during the day

Treat each child as an individual

Sit at the child's level, or walk with them if they want to

- Be **empathetic**
- Acknowledge feelings as they are - don't try to change them
- Help the child to make sense of the emotions they are experiencing
- Use containing techniques (physical and emotional)

- I can see that this is making you really sad
- It's okay to be angry
- That would make me scared, too
- Let's have a cuddle while we let the feelings get smaller
- How can I help you?



“Peter, that’s a wonderful car”



Other sources of help and support

- The Anna Freud Centre – www.annafreud.org
- Young Minds - <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
- Papyrus (young people's suicide prevention) <https://papyrus-uk.org/>
- Croydon Drop In - <https://croydondropin.org.uk/>
- Off the Record (young carers) - <https://www.talkofftherecord.org/>