

# Preventing Anxiety-Based School Refusal

## A guide to early intervention



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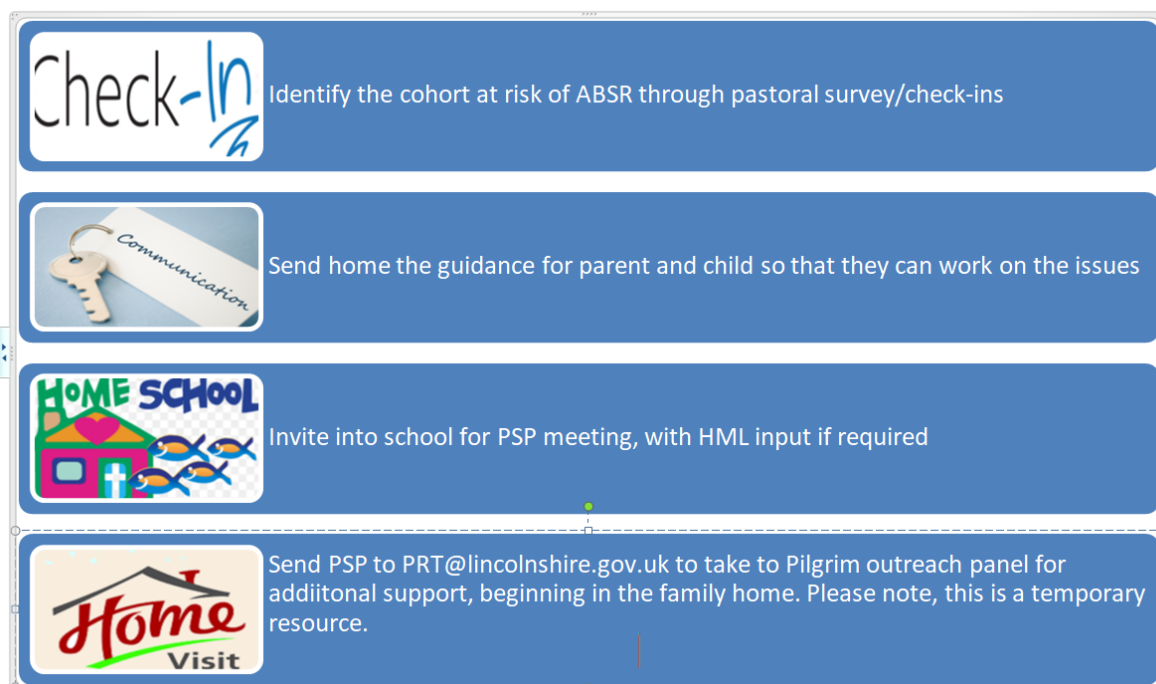
## The purpose of this guidance & additional resources

The guidance is designed to support early intervention through the stepped approach to anxiety-based school refusal (ABSR) summarised in the flow chart below. It builds on the excellent use that Lincolnshire schools already make of the Pastoral Support Programme (PSP), simply extending its use to include children and young people who *act in* their distress through avoidance or withdrawal, as well as those who act out.

If you would appreciate **Healthy Minds Lincolnshire support** at a PSP meeting, please contact the named Healthy Minds Practitioner for your school. If you are unsure who this is, please contact Healthy Minds Lincolnshire hubs on:

- Lincoln & West Lindsey: 01522 421699
- North & South Kesteven: 01476 858277
- Boston & South Holland: 01205 446949
- East Lindsey: 01522 307367

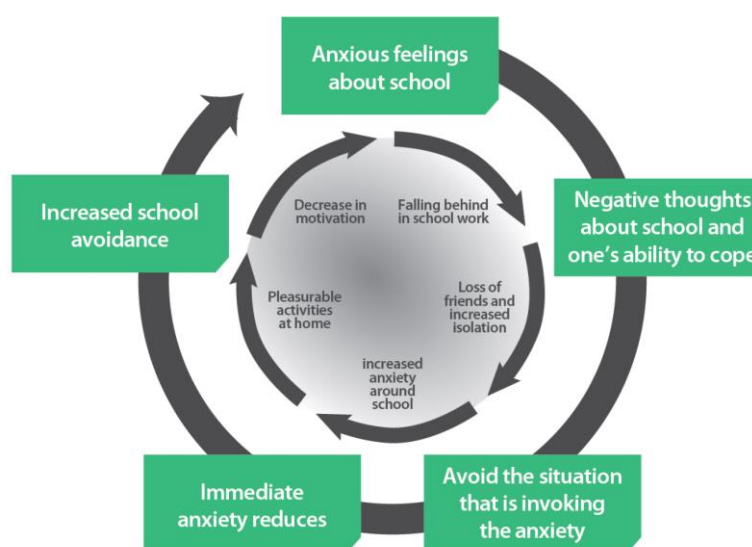
### The stepped approach



The advice is based on the evidence about what helps children and young people overcome ABSR. It is designed to support effective PSP planning and ultimately to secure positive outcomes for children and young people at risk. Where environmental factors are a significant factor, schools should complete an Early Help Assessment and consider holistic support for child and family.

## The importance of early intervention

The graphic below clearly illustrates how the cycle of ABSR establishes and becomes self-perpetuating, without early intervention. It is a good idea to look for patterns of sporadic attendance and to ask families whether anxiety might be the root cause of the issue, which may present in a physical way, as sickness or headaches:



The advice for pupils and for parents/carers (hereafter referred to as parents) has been separated into discrete sections within the document so that it can be shared in advance of the initial PSP meeting with the relevant parties. (The Word version of this advice means that schools can personalise it as they see fit.) There is, for example, an invitation for the young person to be practicing relaxation activities and to complete a wellbeing plan at home as well as prompts for parents about what they

can do and say that will be helpful. Healthy Minds, BOSS and other online resources are signposted.

## **Additional Resources**

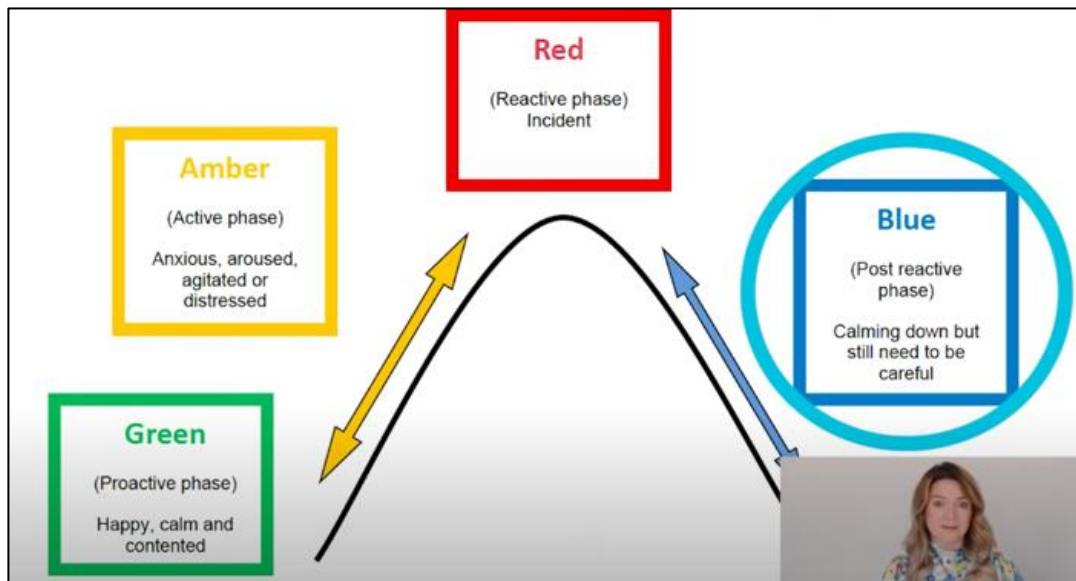
Healthy Minds Lincolnshire's five part “Survival Guide to Change” workshop is available [here](#). This resource is designed to support young people through the many different changes they will experience during their life. The workshop is accompanied by a workbook. If this is something you would like to support your pupils to access, please contact your Healthy Minds Practitioner.



In addition, the Healthy Minds Lincolnshire Toolkit for Educational Staff can be found [here](#).



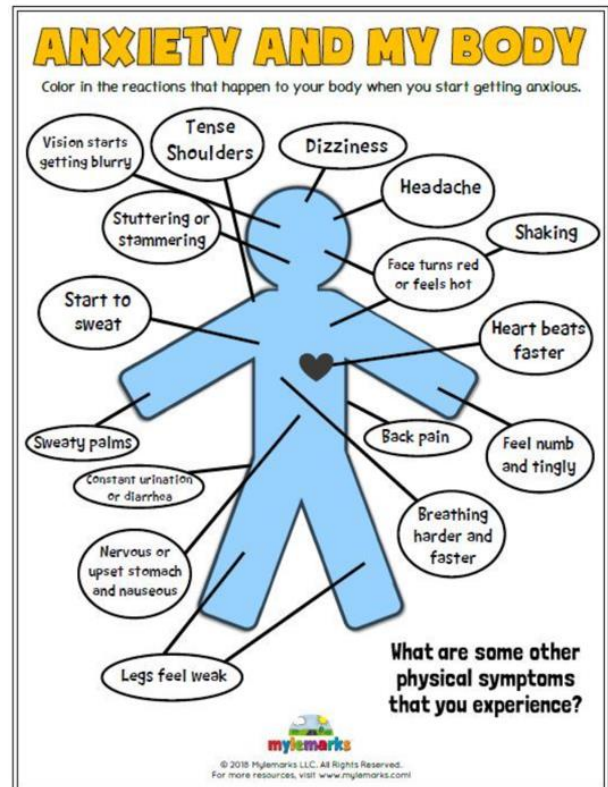
Finally, the Lincolnshire BOSS team's [Toolkit for Regulation](#) is a highly practical resource for teachers seeking to reduce the anxiety of children once they are in the classroom. It is based on the anxiety curve, with strategies to deploy at each stage. The screenshot below is taken from the introductory video and explains the approach. The videos are aimed at primary-aged children but principles apply to all ages.



## What is school-based anxiety?

To friends, family and school staff, the reasons for anxiety and avoidance can be baffling and it is not always easy to know how to help or respond. For those who struggle, the experience can be overwhelming.

Anxiety affects different people in different ways. Some may find it harder to sleep, eat or concentrate whilst others may find that they just can't stop themselves thinking and worrying about the situation they fear, which can then get in the way of everyday life.



When we get anxious, we also experience the physical symptoms of anxiety within the body. We might sweat, have an increased heart rate or feel butterflies in the stomach. These are automatic bodily changes linked with the fight or flight response and associated with the release of adrenalin: when we are anxious, we are usually overestimating the level of threat and our bodies are responding physically to this perceived and exaggerated fear.

Despite these difficulties, most children and young people are able to attend successfully with modified timetables and high levels of support of the kind that a PSP should capture.

## Guidance for Pastoral Leads

### Identifying the cohort at risk

Pastoral leaders will want to identify which pupils are at risk of ABSR in advance of this becoming a problem they are grappling with reactively; what we can predict, we can prevent. Simple surveys can be shared with pupils or parents for this purpose. For example (avoiding leading questions that might introduce the idea of anxiety): *'How do you feel about your return to school?' with a follow up, such as 'What do you need to know before coming back to school?'* This will often indicate what fears are present and whether a child or young person might be in need of extra support and reassurance.

Pastoral staff can then use this information as the basis for initial conversations over the telephone or online with young people and parents. Where concerns are confirmed, then arrangements should be made for an initial PSP planning meeting, in advance of the start date where possible. If there can be check-ins with a trusted adult/key worker in the lead up to this, that will contribute greatly to a positive outcome – we know that being held in mind makes a difference.

When considering the risk factors, below, it is clear that a high proportion of those within child and family columns will have been escalated as a direct result of the pandemic. This is another reason why schools are advised to engage proactively with this issue:



## Risk Factors

School factors	Family Factors	Child factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bullying (the most common school factor)</li><li>• Difficulties in a specific subject</li><li>• Transition to secondary school</li><li>• Key stage or change of school</li><li>• Academic demands/high levels of pressure</li><li>• Transport or journey to school</li><li>• Exams</li><li>• Peer or staff relationship difficulties</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Separation or divorce or change in family dynamic</li><li>• Parent physical and mental health problems</li><li>• Overprotective parenting style</li><li>• Being the youngest child</li><li>• Loss and bereavement</li><li>• High levels of family stress</li><li>• Young carer</li><li>• Family history of school avoidance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personality type – reluctance to interact and withdrawal from unfamiliar settings and people</li><li>• Fear of failure and low self confidence</li><li>• Age (5-6, 11-12 &amp; 13-14)</li><li>• Learning difficulties, developmental problems or ASC if unidentified or unsupported</li><li>• Separation anxiety</li><li>• Traumatic events</li></ul>

Generally speaking, school avoidance occurs when the risks are greater than resilience and when stress and anxiety exceed the support available.

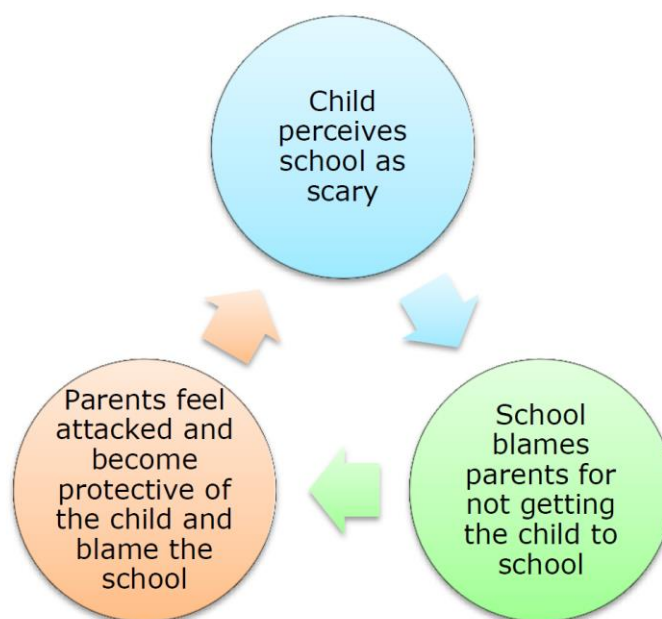
## Gathering Information

Once a potential difficulty has been identified, there needs to be a prompt analysis of the possible causes and the formulation of a practical working hypothesis to inform any subsequent plan. Due to the complex nature of ABSA, no fixed assessment process can be followed. However, it is essential that the views of the young person, the family and key school staff are gathered.

It can be tempting to identify a simple reason and a simple solution for the behaviour:



However, trying to find simple causation often encourages blaming and individuals can then become more anxious and defensive, reinforcing another problematic cycle:



The broad areas to cover and some key questions to ask families when gathering information are:

<b>Developmental and educational history</b>	What was s/he like as a younger child? Can you tell me about their experiences at primary school?
<b>Strengths, interests and resources</b>	<p>What is s/he good at? What do they like doing? Do they have any hopes for the future? What do they want their life as an adult to be like?</p> <p>Do you know what is going well in school?</p> <p>Have there been times when s/he managed to get into school when it was difficult? What was different about those times?</p> <p>What has been the most helpful thing that someone has done in helping with this problem so far?</p> <p>What problems have you overcome in the past and what helped?</p>
<b>Any changes or losses</b>	Can you tell me about your family? Who is in it, who is like whom? Who is s/he closest to? Have there been any recent changes? You could draw a family tree or genogram.
<b>Relationships</b>	Does s/he talk about any other children? What does s/he say?
<b>Academic progress</b>	School should be aware of any identified SEND needs and should ask about these needs and the support in place. If there is no identified SEND, school should ask if there are any concerns, or if the child has spoken about any difficulties.
<b>Family views</b>	What have you been able to find out about what your child finds difficult about school? What does each parent think the issues are? Are there any differences of views about the reasons and what should be done as a family?

Where the pupil is already known to the school, it is also essential to seek information from staff. They may have valuable information to help identify triggers for anxiety and strategies the young person responds positively to. In particular, it is important to seek the views of any staff that the pupil speaks positively about and from any with whom the relationship may be more difficult.

Key questions for staff:

- The pupil's strengths
- What is going well?
- Any difficulties you have noticed?
- Peer relationships
- Relationships with adults
- Response to academic tasks
- What did any distress witnessed look like and what caused it?
- What differentiated support is in place and how effective is this?
- Any ideas for further support?

### **Action planning – the PSP**

Research, based on case-studies, undertaken by [Babcock LDP](#) explored “factors associated with the successful inclusion of young people who display ABSR”. These were:

#### **1. Key worker/adult support**

Feelings of safety, security and belonging were strong in pupils and all reported that they had developed a good relationship with at least one member of staff who they could rely on for support. Some of the student's had a 'key worker' who would meet them in the morning to discuss any concerns or talk about the day. Adult support promoted feelings of security.

### **Key PSP Agreements**

- A key adult – someone the pupil trusts
- Arrangements for check-ins and check-outs
- Is this also the link with home or is that someone different?

## **2. A culture of kindness and flexibility**

The pupils felt that all staff were ‘understanding’ and ‘kind’ and this was not isolated to the support staff or those most involved with them. They felt that on the whole, communication was good between all staff and teachers were very understanding of anxiety and responded appropriately. Pupils were helped to think about what made them feel safe within the classroom. A barrier to attendance arose when they were made to feel uncomfortable about using reasonable adjustments, or asked to explain absence. Conversely, “Good to see you!” was helpful.

### **Key PSP Agreements**

- What information will be shared with all staff?
- What adjustments should they make, e.g. seating plans/not reading aloud/time-out scheme?

## **3. Personalised timetables**

Another strong factor was the level of personalisation and planning that had gone into developing the pupil’s timetable. There was clear evidence of listening and valuing the pupil’s perspective and prioritising individual needs over system processes at times. One important factor raised by pupils, staff and the parents was understanding the need to be realistic and build success slowly over time, rather than setting up a high expectation of reintegration, for example. Each pupil’s timetable was highly personalised and it evolved at a pace that supported recovery.

### Key PSP Agreements

- Will elements of virtual learning continue with time spent in school increased gradually?
- Should some non-core GCSEs or subjects be dropped to reduce the demand?
- Should homework be optional to reduce pressure? Or essential only, such as reading?

#### 4. Access to a safe base

Having a safe base within the school was extremely important to the pupils when they talked about their experiences. They talked about the 'safe' area as being 'welcoming', 'quiet' and 'accepting' and some pupils reported that without this area, they would not be in school at all. This was partly about the staff in the centre, but also the nature of this area was described as 'relaxing' and 'less pressured' than other aspects of the school, which allowed pupils to develop their confidence at their own pace. Anxiety was reduced through safe and supported exposure over time; pupils building their resilience and coping strategies such that avoidance behaviours were not inadvertently reinforced.

### Key PSP Agreements

- Has the pupil developed self-help techniques to lower arousal? (Healthy Minds Relaxation videos [here](#))
- Has the SENCO helped them understand their [anxiety curve](#) and when to use the time-out card, before crisis?
- Does the classroom teacher make use of the BOSS Regulation Framework strategies to reduce stress?
- Where is the safe base?
- Is it possible to access through use of time-out card?
- It is accessible during unstructured time?
- Can it be used to support the reduced timetable, so that subject learning can be consolidated?

- Do staff supervising know how to ground and regulate? Have they used BOSS's Regulation Framework?
- Can the safe base be accessed to remove known triggers – such as assembly?

## **5. Support for transition: 'soft landings'**

A soft landing on arrival was considered helpful.

### **Key PSP Agreements:**

- A sensory circuits club for regulation on arrival?
- A peer mentor to meet and greet?
- A job around the school – library helper?
- Check in with key adult, outside building if required?
- Access to calm box for a few minutes?

## **6. Communication with parents and carers**

All parents involved in the study spoke very strongly of the relationships and communication they had with school staff. For some parents, staff had been a 'lifeline for both me and [pupil]' and daily communication with a familiar member of staff was common, which would have been hugely supportive.

### **Key PSP Agreements:**

- Who contacts home, how often?
- Do notes and telephone calls celebrate what's gone well?
- Does this communication show the child they are valued & cared about as an important member of the community – so increasing safety and belonging?

## Guidance for parents/carers

### Helping your child feel less worried about going to school

#### 1. Empathise and encourage

It is important to let your child know that overcoming anxiety is hard work, and that you are proud of their efforts. Show that you understand their experience and are listening to what they have to say, but try not to reinforce their fears. The message you want to send is, *"I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here. I'm going to help you get through this."*



Help your child to understand that worry, fear and anxiety are all normal emotions and that they can learn to manage and cope with these normal responses to difficult or scary situations.

Make sure you recognise and celebrate their achievements in facing their fears. Reinforce these achievements and build on every small win. Don't avoid everything that causes anxiety – gradual exposure to challenging situations is really important because that is what builds resilience.



Introduce an 'exposure ladder'. This is a process where the child breaks down their anxiety into manageable steps, and gradually increases these steps to overcome their anxiety. This is something you can discuss at your PSP meeting – what the first small steps back to school will look like.

## **2. Don't ask leading questions**

Whilst it is important to encourage your child to talk about their worries, asking leading questions should be avoided as this can reinforce anxiety. For example, try asking *“How are you feeling about the school trip?”* rather than *“Are you worried about the school trip?”*

## **3. Calm parent, calm child**

Children copy their parents' behaviours, and so it is important to also consider how your own anxiety might be affecting your child. If you are anxious, your child will pick up on it and feel more worried. So when you want to reduce your child's anxiety, you must manage your own anxiety first.

You can do this by modelling how you successfully manage anxiety; let your child know when you are using a coping skill (e.g. *“I'm feeling a little bit nervous about that, I'm going to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down”*). If you model these skills and look for the positive in situations, so will your child.

Healthy Minds have created some short relaxation videos to help. Spending 5 minutes per day practicing relaxation and mindfulness alongside your child can provide them with more skills in reducing their anxiety, and possibly you too! They can be found in the “Tips on looking after yourself” [Relaxation section](#).

## **4. Reduce the amount of time your child has to think about the event**

Often the hardest part for children who are anxious is the run up to the scary event. Therefore, you should try to keep this waiting period to a minimum.

## **5. Discuss with your child their reluctance and anxiety about going to school**

Try to explore their concerns (often easier said than done) and try to establish if there are specific worries about aspects of school. If successful in finding the specific reasons for avoidance, use the PSP meeting to explore ways of minimising the worries so that the anxiety can be better managed.

Consider:

- Are there any friendship issues?
- Could there be any social media related issues or bullying?
- Are they under any extra stress at school? (examples, transition from primary, exams, staff or class changes)
- Could there be any other school related issues? (subject or teacher issues)

Also explore whether experiences outside of school are at the root of the problem:

- How and what does the child benefit from by not going to school? (what are they doing at home? xbox, tv, laptop etc - is the home environment too enticing?)
- Have there been any recent stressful or traumatic events?
- Is there a history of worry, anxiety or stress within the family?
- Bereavement or loss in family and/or friends
- Long term illness in family or friends
- Could the child be reluctant to leave the parent for fear of something happening to the parent whilst they are at school?

Sometimes children struggle to know what is triggering their anxiety, or they are reluctant to say anything for fear of the consequences. Just setting aside some time every day to allow your child to download can be helpful in gradually uncovering the issues. Space and silence can be great for encouraging children and young people to talk. Or perhaps they could start by colour coding the day, using their timetable or

a map of the school – which elements are green (safe, enjoyable, fun, calm) and which are red (difficult, upsetting, causing anxiety)?

#### **6. Support your child in facing and confronting the fears (where possible)**

It is through this that they will learn the coping skills that they will need throughout life. Ensure that you are consistent in encouraging your child to go to (and remain at) school. Avoiding worries and fears is less painful (in the short term) for the child than confronting them. Some children learn how to 'stay off' school and they can soon learn the 'buttons' to press with parents that will allow them to stay away from school (and avoid their anxieties). This can lead to the habit of avoidance that can be a very tricky habit to break later on. Confront rather than avoid.

#### **7. Encourage your child to keep in touch with school friends outside of school clubs**

This will strengthen friendship bonds and could improve your child's support network within school. This will reduce worries.

#### **8. Preparation and routine**

Make sure your child gets everything prepared for school the night before so that there is no added rush (or opportunities for excuses and delays) in the morning. Establish and maintain good routines (eating, sleep and exercise). Sleep patterns are particularly important. Poor sleep patterns feed anxiety and sleeping during the day will just make it a harder to break a cycle of avoidance.

## Guidance for children and young people

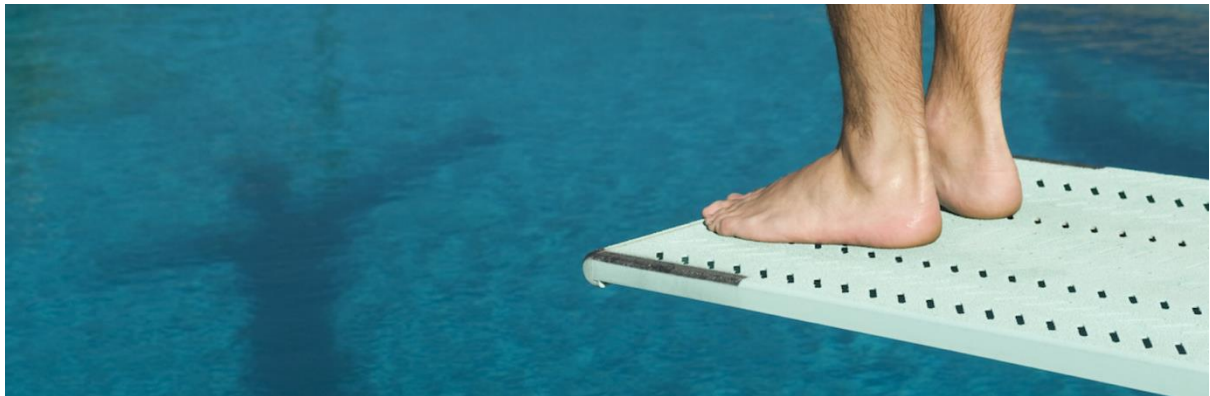
### How to manage worries and anxiety – some tips for young people

We all experience anxiety - your teachers, your parents, others young people – it's a normal human feeling. What matters most is how it's managed, so it doesn't get in the way of you living your life to the full. Here are some tips to help you with that.

The fact that you have this guidance shows that your teachers really want to support you through this. You are not on your own. If you can tell us what will help, then things can be put in place or issues resolved so that school feels like a safer place.

#### 1. Face your fears!

Avoiding situations that make us feel frightened is natural but it makes the fear worse. This is because we never learn that those things we fear actually are okay and don't cause us any harm.



Avoiding does makes us feel better at first, but then we become more worried the next time. The more we avoid the worse it gets!

Avoiding school can mean that you lose touch with friends and the longer that goes on, the more of an issue it can become. The same applies to school-work – the more you miss, the more you might worry that you're behind and will never catch up. (We are not worried about that, by the way – we always go back over what we've covered) The point is worries just get bigger when we don't break the cycle.

Being BRAVE enough to break the pattern of avoidance is the first vital step – and we can work together to help you make it. We'll only move at the pace you tell us you can cope with.

## **2. Tell us about your classroom stressors so we can reduce them**

If we know what triggers your anxiety in the classroom, we can let teachers know by sharing a plan with them about what to do and what not to do. For example, some pupils really worry about being asked to read aloud in front of the class, or being called on to answer a question. We can make sure this doesn't happen.

Perhaps there is some work or some types of task you find really difficult and you worry about getting into trouble for not completing them. Again, let us know so that we can give you the help you need. Some pupils like to have a discrete way of showing the teacher that they are struggling. Maybe a planner page upturned on the desk. Again, this is something we can look at.

It might be just certain subjects that make you feel anxious, or certain teachers. Tell us so that we can help with that too. Some pupils feel much more able to cope with the classroom when they can use a **time-out card** – so when you feel your anxiety increase, you can escape to a **safe space** in school. That's something else for us to look at.

Think about who you are sitting with in each lesson, and whereabouts in the room. Perhaps the teacher's seating plan has created a problem for you that we need to know about. You might feel safer next to the door, so that you can use your time-out card without walking across the whole room. Or perhaps you are having to sit next to someone who makes you feel bad. You could tell us about a friend who really helps you to feel more comfortable in class and just that change of seat might make a big difference.

The more you can help us understand from your point of view, the better our advice to teachers about how to help you will be. Some simple dos and don'ts. They will all understand as they would all love to see you back with us and happy.

### **3. Tell us about what is difficult for you outside of class**

For many pupils, this is a difficult time because there isn't so much routine or structure. Just like you did with lessons, try to think about your break and lunchtime stressors so that we can reduce them. For example, if the crowded dining hall is a problem, you could leave the lesson before lunch 5 minutes early. It might be possible for you to use your safe space at lunch, with a friend – once we have agreed where that will be. You could help out in the library. There are lots of lunchtime clubs in school so we can talk through those. Perhaps you could even start one!

If you are being bullied, you must tell us so that we can stop that.

### **4. Talk to people you trust**

Try not to keep your feelings bottled up. If there is an adult in school who you have a good relationship with and trust, we can make them part of your plan. For example, they could come to your planning meeting – or you could have some one-to-one time with them first and they could share your views at the meeting.

We could make sure that there is a check-in with your **key adult** at agreed times through the week, to make sure you're okay - and also to make sure we know about what's gone well! There will be lots of wins as you face your fears – we all want to hear about those!

Talk to your parents/carers too. The more they know about what makes you anxious, the more they will be able to bring to our meeting. Talk to a close friends so that they know that they can support you too.

### **5. Practice breathing!**

The best way to calm your anxiety is to breathe deeply – there are techniques you should practice regularly at home, when you are calm as well as when you are worried. Then use the technique in school when you feel your anxiety rising - for example, before you use your time-out pass.

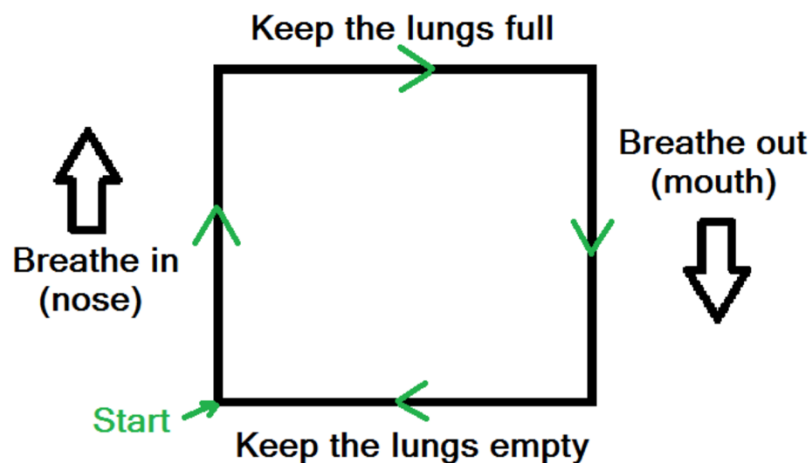
You need to take strong, deep breaths that come from your belly.

- in through your nose for three
- pause
- out through your mouth for three

Try imagining that you have a hot cocoa in your hands and you're breathing in the delicious smell through your nose for three seconds, then blowing it cool for three seconds.

Box breathing is another technique that helps lots of people. There's a video about it [here](#) and the diagram also explains it. Picture moving around the square as you breathe:

**Box Breathing Technique**



Health Minds Lincolnshire has a series of videos on different breathing techniques, [here](#). We are all different, so it's a good idea to spend some time finding the one that works best for you – it will then become a great friend for life!

Breathing calms your brainstem, which is the part of your brain that is causing your racing heart and mind, sweatiness, trembling or any of the other physical symptoms of anxiety. It will definitely take the edge off those sensations.

Try to build practice into your routine, at least five minutes twice a day. You'll gradually master the skill and feel the benefits. You can then start using it in any situation that causes anxiety.

## **6. Use relaxation techniques**

Try out different **relaxation techniques**. There are many resources online. For example, the [30-3-30](#) approach introduces a wide range. You should try them out and then record which ones work for you on [My Wellbeing Plan](#). We will be very interested to see this in school so that we know what you have found helpful and what coping skills you have developed. **Muscle relaxation** also relieves tension and will help you sleep. There's a step by step guide at the end of this sheet.

## **7. Get physical!**

Some people benefit from using stress balls or fiddle toys and they find this can reduce anxiety through distraction (if the mind is occupied, it is distracted from focusing on the anxiety). You could also try other exercises such as having a cold drink, splashing your face with water. **Exercise is recognised as being particularly beneficial for anxiety and low mood.** Doing physical things like sport, playing football, dancing or riding a bike can help us to relax and not think about our worries. It can help us escape from thoughts and feelings.

## **8. Eat a healthy diet**

Sometimes if we have worries we can eat too much or we may not want to eat at all, which makes us more anxious. Make sure you make healthy eating part of your daily routine.

## **9. Sleep well**

It is very important to have a good sleep routine and to get enough sleep. If this is a problem, see your GP about it.

## **10. Try to balance your thoughts**

Analyse your thoughts using the balance thinking resource (below). Often it is easy for thoughts to become unbalanced and overly negative. After making a note of the thought, consider whether it is accurate and think about what evidence you may



have to support or not support that thought. Try and finish with developing a more balanced/positive thought that you can write down and remember when you need to. There is a table below to help you with this.

### **Interested in finding out some more?**

There is a lot of information online about managing anxiety, because it is a very common and normal feeling. Healthy Minds Lincolnshire have a series of YouTube clips about [coping with change](#). If your anxiety has increased because of the changes in your life brought about by lockdown, you will find this really helpful. There are activities to complete as you listen to the videos so you'll need paper and pens.

- For online counselling support, visit [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)
- For advice about your mental health, call the Here4You advice line: 01522 309120
- For urgent help, contact the CAMHS crisis team: 0303 123 4000

### **How to do progressive muscle relaxation**

Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First, you systematically tense particular muscle groups in your body, such as your neck and shoulders. Next, you release the tension and notice how your muscles feel when you relax them. This exercise will help you to lower your overall tension and stress levels, and help you relax when you are feeling anxious. It can also help reduce physical problems such as stomach aches and headaches, as well as improve your sleep.

People with anxiety difficulties are often so tense throughout the day that they don't even recognize what being relaxed feels like. Through practice you can learn to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. Then, you can begin to "cue" this relaxed state at the first sign of the muscle

tension that accompanies your feelings of anxiety. By tensing and releasing, you learn not only what relaxation feels like, but also to recognize when you are starting to get tense during the day.

Helpful hints:

- Set aside about 15 minutes to complete this exercise.
- Find a place where you can complete this exercise without being disturbed.
- For the first week or two, practise this exercise twice a day until you get the hang of it. The better you become at it, the quicker the relaxation response will “kick in” when you really need it!
- You do not need to be feeling anxious when you practise this exercise. In fact, it is better to first practice it when you are calm. That way, it will be easier to do when feeling anxious.
- Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit, then close your eyes and let your body go loose. A reclining armchair is ideal. You can lie down, but this will increase your chances of falling asleep. Although relaxing before bed can improve your sleep, the goal of this exercise is to learn to relax while awake. Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and don’t forget to remove your shoes. Take about five slow, deep breaths before you begin.

## **How to do it**

### **The tension – relaxation response**

#### *Step one: Tension*

The first step is applying muscle tension to a specific part of the body. This step is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are targeting. First, focus on the target muscle group, for example, your left hand. Next, take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds. It is important to really feel the tension in the muscles, which may even cause a bit of discomfort or shaking. In this instance, you would be making a tight fist with your left hand.

It is easy to accidentally tense other surrounding muscles (for example, the shoulder or arm), so try to ONLY tense the muscles you are targeting. Isolating muscle groups gets easier with practice.

Be careful! Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while completing this exercise. Make the muscle tension deliberate, yet gentle. If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones, or any medical issues that would hinder physical activity, consult your doctor first.

### *Step two: Relaxing the tense muscles*

This step involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles. After about 5 seconds, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do this step. You should feel the muscles become loose and limp, as the tension flows out. It is important to very deliberately focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. This is the most important part of the whole exercise.

Note: It can take time to learn to relax the body and notice the difference between tension and relaxation. At first, it can feel uncomfortable to be focusing on your body, but this can become quite enjoyable over time.

Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group. Repeat the tension-relaxation steps. After completing all of the muscle groups, take some time to enjoy the deep state of relaxation.

### **The different muscle groups**

During this exercise, you will be working with almost all the major muscle groups in your body. To make it easier to remember, start with your feet and systematically move up (or if you prefer, you can do it in the reverse order, from your forehead down to your feet). For example:

- Foot (curl your toes downward)
- Lower leg and foot (tighten your calf muscle by pulling toes towards you)

- Entire leg (squeeze thigh muscles while doing above)
- (Repeat on other side of body)
- Hand (clench your fist)
- Entire right arm (tighten your biceps by drawing your forearm up towards your shoulder and “make a muscle”, while clenching fist)
- (Repeat on other side of body)
- Buttocks (tighten by pulling your buttocks together)
- Stomach (suck your stomach in)
- Chest (tighten by taking a deep breath)
- Neck and shoulders (raise your shoulders up to touch your ears)
- Mouth (open your mouth wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw)
- Eyes (clench your eyelids tightly shut)
- Forehead (raise your eyebrows as far as you can)

It can be helpful to listen to someone guide you through these steps. There are many relaxation CDs for sale that will take you through a progressive muscle relaxation (or something very similar). Alternatively, you can record a script of this process on a tape or CD, or ask a friend or relative with a calm, soothing voice to record it for you.

It would sound something like this:

"Take a deep breath in through your nose...hold your breath for a few seconds...and now breathe out...take another deep breath through your nose... Now pay attention to your body and how it feels.... Start with your right foot... squeeze all the muscles in your right foot. Curl your toes as tight as you can, now hold it....hold it...good...now relax and exhale...let your foot go limp...notice the difference between the tension and relaxation....feel the tension flow out of your foot like water..." (then repeat with right lower leg and foot, entire right leg, etc...)

### **Quick tense and relax**

Once you have become familiar with the “tension and relaxation” technique, and have been practicing it for a couple weeks, you can begin to practise a very short

version of progressive muscle relaxation. In this approach, you learn how to tense larger groups of muscles, which takes even less time. These muscle groups are:

- Lower limbs (feet and legs)
- Stomach and chest
- Arms, shoulders, and neck
- Face

So instead of working with just one specific muscle group at a time (e.g., your stomach), you can focus on the complete group (your stomach AND chest). You can start by focusing on your breathing during the tension and relaxation. When doing this shortened version, it can be helpful to say a certain word or phrase to yourself as you slowly exhale (such as “relax”, “let go”, “stay calm”, “peace” “it will pass” etc...). This word or phrase will become associated with a relaxed state; eventually, saying this word alone can bring on a calm feeling. This can be handy during times when it would be hard to take the time to go through all the steps of progressive muscle relaxation.

### **Release only**

A good way to even further shorten the time you take to relax your muscles is to become familiar with the “release only” technique. One of the benefits of tensing and releasing muscles is that you learn to recognize what tense muscles feel like and what relaxed muscles feel like.

Once you feel comfortable with the tension and relaxation techniques, you can start doing “release only”, which involves removing the “tension” part of the exercise. For example, instead of tensing your stomach and chest before relaxing them, try just relaxing the muscles. At first, the feeling of relaxation might feel less intense than when you tensed the muscles beforehand, but with practice, the release-only technique can be just as relaxing.

Final note: Remember to practise progressive muscle relaxation often, whether you are feeling anxious or not. This will make the exercise even more effective when you

really do need to relax! Though it may feel a bit tedious at first, ultimately you will gain a skill that will probably become a very important part of managing your anxiety in your daily life.

## Searching for evidence – balanced thinking

Thoughts – what were you thinking?	What evidence supports your thoughts?	What evidence is there that the thought is not accurate?	What is a more balanced thought?	How are you going to remember this more balanced thought when needed?
<b>EXAMPLE</b> <i>If I go to French, I will be asked to read out loud and everyone will laugh at me.</i>	<i>Someone laughed at me in French before</i>	<i>The teacher knows I get anxious and wouldn't ask me to read out loud. Not everyone laughed at me before.</i>	<i>The teacher knows me and I won't get asked to read out if I don't want to. If I do read, someone may laugh, but not everyone.</i>	<i>I am going to write this at the front of my French book as a reminder</i>