

*“It feels as though I’ve got a surveillance camera in my head, watching my every move and it’s basically judging me, saying ‘Why the hell are you doing this?’, ‘Why the hell are you doing that?’ – ‘You should’ve done it this way or that way.’”*

Autistic CYP from Trembath et al., 2012

We know from various surveys that anxiety is one of the top concerns for autistic/neurodiverse people, their families, and the professionals who work with them.

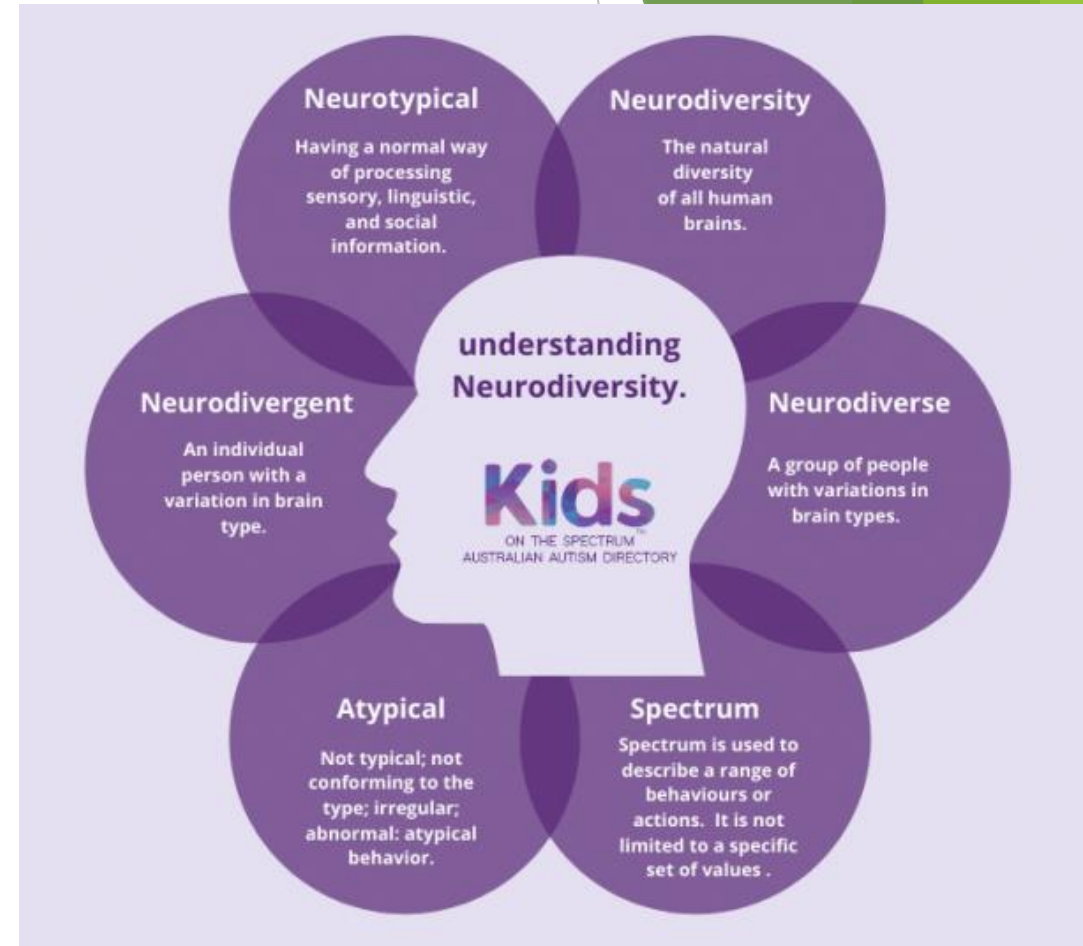


# Anxiety across the spectrum of Neurodiversity

A recent study, Kerns et al. (2020), identified anxiety at a rate of 52% in autistic CYP, compared to a rate of 8% in non-autistic children.

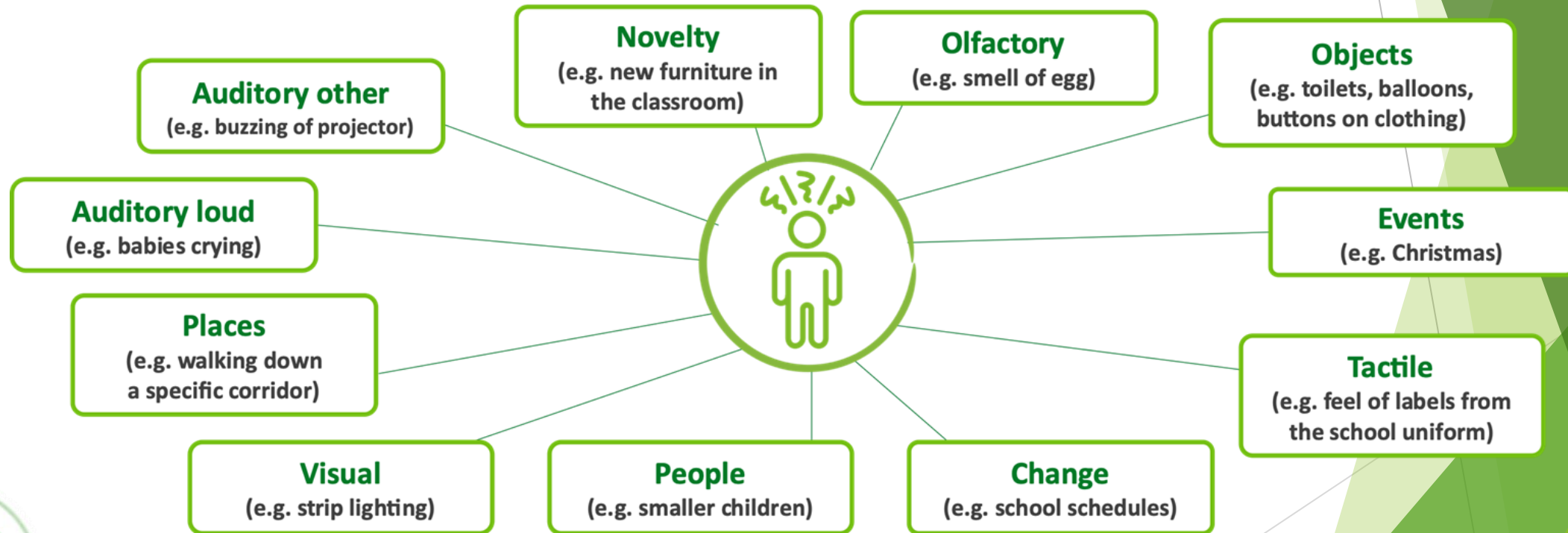
Anxiety is common in autistic/neurodiverse people of all ages and support needs.

However, some may show signs of anxiety more obviously than others.



# Anxiety triggers may be uniquely seen in neurodivergent CYP

A study by Lau et al. (2020) found common triggers for anxiety and ones that only autistic CYP showed, including:



# What kinds of words do we use when talking about anxiety?

We use lots of terms related to anxiety:

- Worried
- Stressed
- Concerned
- Panicked
- Frightened.
- Unengaged

Anxiety might underlie a range of behaviours and emotions:

- Anger
- Stubbornness
- Confusion
- Being tearful
- Perfectionism.



## The impact of anxiety

**autistica**

**[Voiced by Fern Brady]**



# Healthy Minds Resource Hub

Mental Health Support Teams, Healthy Minds Lincolnshire, CAMHS  
Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust


Supporting schools to recognise and respond appropriately to the emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of all children particularly those who are neurodivergent.

[Professionals Resource Hub :: Lincolnshire Young Minds](#)



# Professionals Resource Hub

[Professionals](#) > [Service offer and referrals](#) > [Healthy Minds Lincolnshire](#) > Professionals Resource Hub

 Print this page

Emotional Wellbeing Services have created this information hub to provide school staff with additional resources to support young people with their emotional wellbeing.

For more information on how to refer a young person please visit our [professionals information page](#). Should you have any concerns regarding a young person's emotional wellbeing, please contact the Here4You Line on **0800 234 63 42**.

## Jump to section:

- [Education Toolkit for Professionals](#)
- [Intervention Toolkit for Professionals](#)
- [Using a Graded Approach](#)
- [Information and Strategy Packs](#)
- [Guide to Supporting your Emotional Wellbeing](#)

[Click to view the Emotional Wellbeing Menu \(2024-25\)](#)

[Click here to download the Student Workshop Request Form](#)

[Click here to download the Menu - Staff training request form](#)

## Emotional Wellbeing Menu for Education Settings – Education Staff Training Request Form (2024-25)

We support education settings to implement a Whole School/College Approach to wellbeing. This aims to upskill the workforce to promote positive mental health, emotional resilience, early intervention and prevention and reduce stigma.

Training sessions may be delivered in a variety of ways, this may consist of a two part package: a pre-recorded presentation followed by a check-in session to consolidate learning. Please email requests to: [lpt.cyptraininglead@nhs.net](mailto:lpt.cyptraininglead@nhs.net)

<b>Education setting name</b>	
	Postcode:
<b>Contact name at education setting</b>	
<b>Job Role</b>	
<b>Email address</b>	
<b>Which of the training packages would you like to access?</b>	Anxious Feelings <input type="checkbox"/> Adverse Childhood Experiences <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional Regulation <input type="checkbox"/> Low Mood <input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health Awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Self-esteem <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harm <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>We recommend one package is requested at a time; due to the time it takes to embed strategies.</b>	



# Feeling anxious is natural

It is natural to feel anxious and it may have some benefits, e.g. keeping your distance from stray dogs or staying indoors in a lightning storm.

In addition, many people find stress good in terms of focusing thinking but too much stress can lead to being anxious.

So, we will define anxiety as:

“Thoughts and feelings about something or a range of things that are intense, usually not productive, and persevere or grow over time. These anxious thoughts and feelings can lead to reactions – such as fast breathing, needing to move about, escape the situation, or not being able to say how I feel.”



# When anxiety becomes too much

Anxiety can escalate very quickly... and is often 'cumulative'

*"I have a real problem dealing with sticky situations especially if feeling vulnerable, upset, anxious, and angry. I have noticed that personally a meltdown happens very suddenly, and I lose the words so can't verbalise my feelings and if not listened to, the only way is some physical aspects of anger to be displayed as if to let the person know I am really distressed and feel wronged!"*      **Neurodiverse adult**

And so, it is important for us to moderate anxious thoughts and feelings **before** they get out of control.





© PDA Society

### Behaviour pyramid

Fight, Flight, Flop/Panic.

Notice earlier changes in behaviour

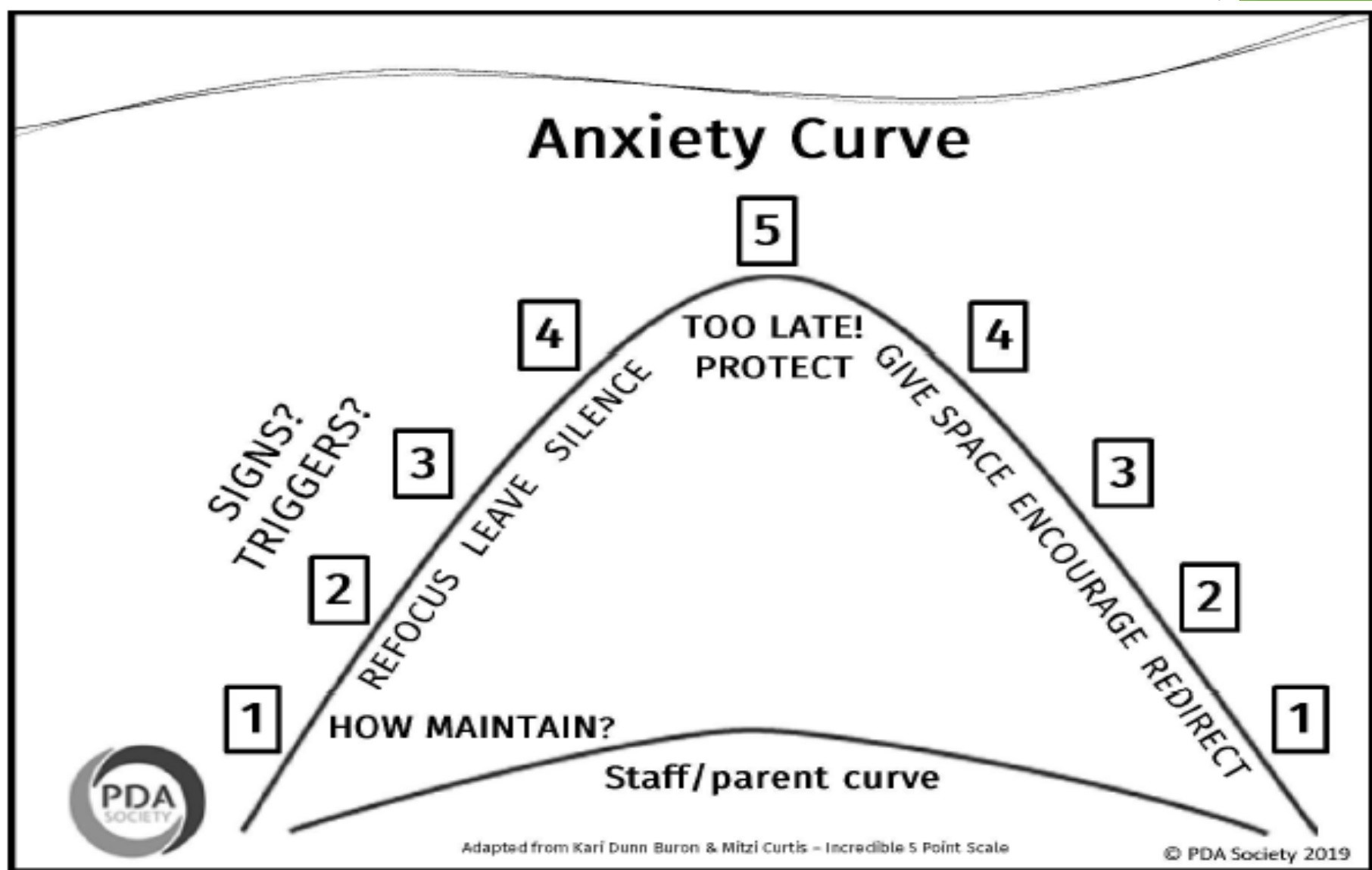
### Trauma

Refocus/Redirect, Co-regulation.

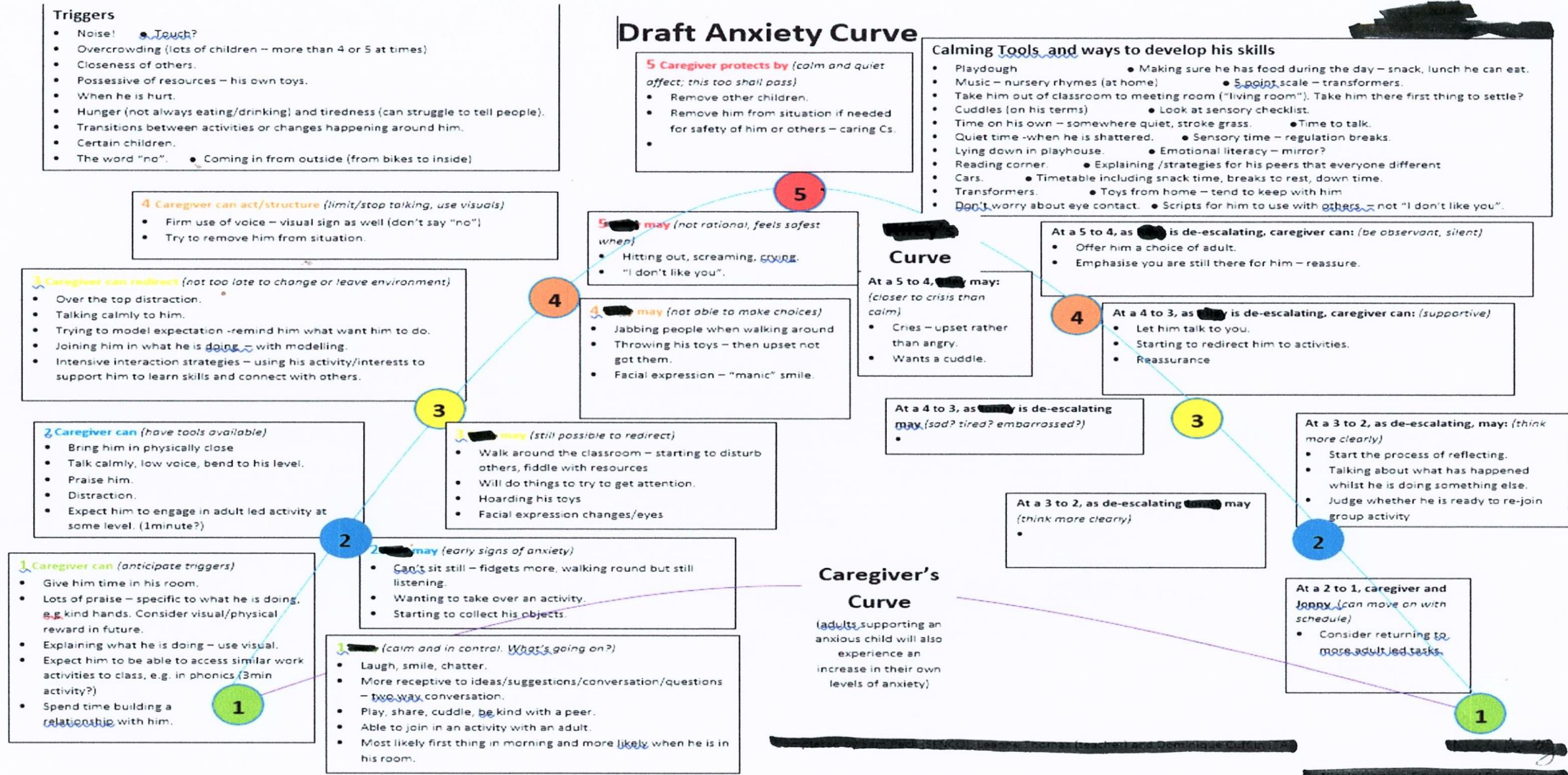
Connection before correction etc.



Visually what we've been talking about



# Visually what we've been talking about - worked example 1



# Visually what we've been talking about - worked example 2

Note: You may not know what is wrong. You may not be able to "fix" it.

- attempt to redirect him out of the class.
- 1 person talk at a time
- At this point sensory input's may not work.
- Keep language simple.
- Prepare to go to the cosy room to calm down.

- redirect using his interests.
- Keep interactions light + up beat.
- Offer "bear hugs"
- Try and make a game out of a body job

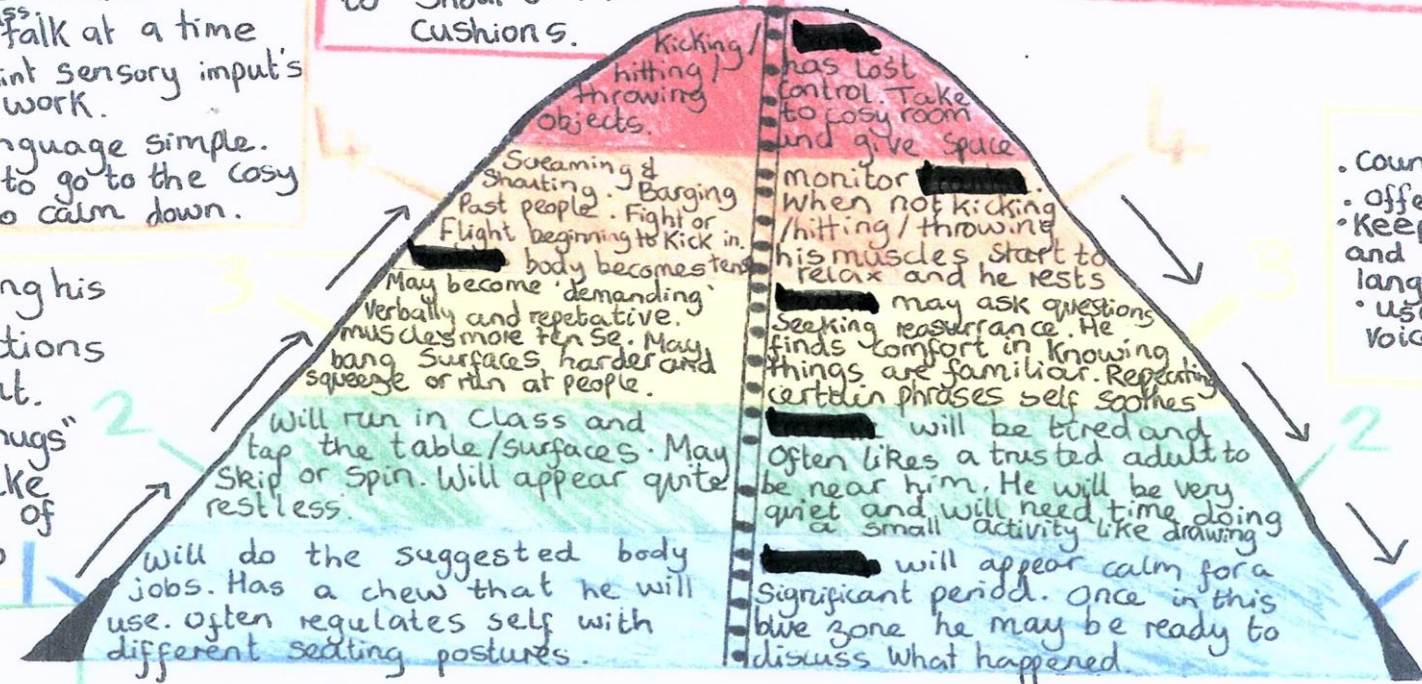
Try extra body jobs.

- Point of peak distress.
- 2 staff walk with Frankie to the cosy room.
  - Allow [redacted] time to shout or throw cushions.

5

Note: [redacted] needs consistency. If an adult has said he can or cannot have something this must be followed through.

- Monitor [redacted] to ensure his safety but give him space.
- Do not attempt to communicate or reason as [redacted] is too distressed.



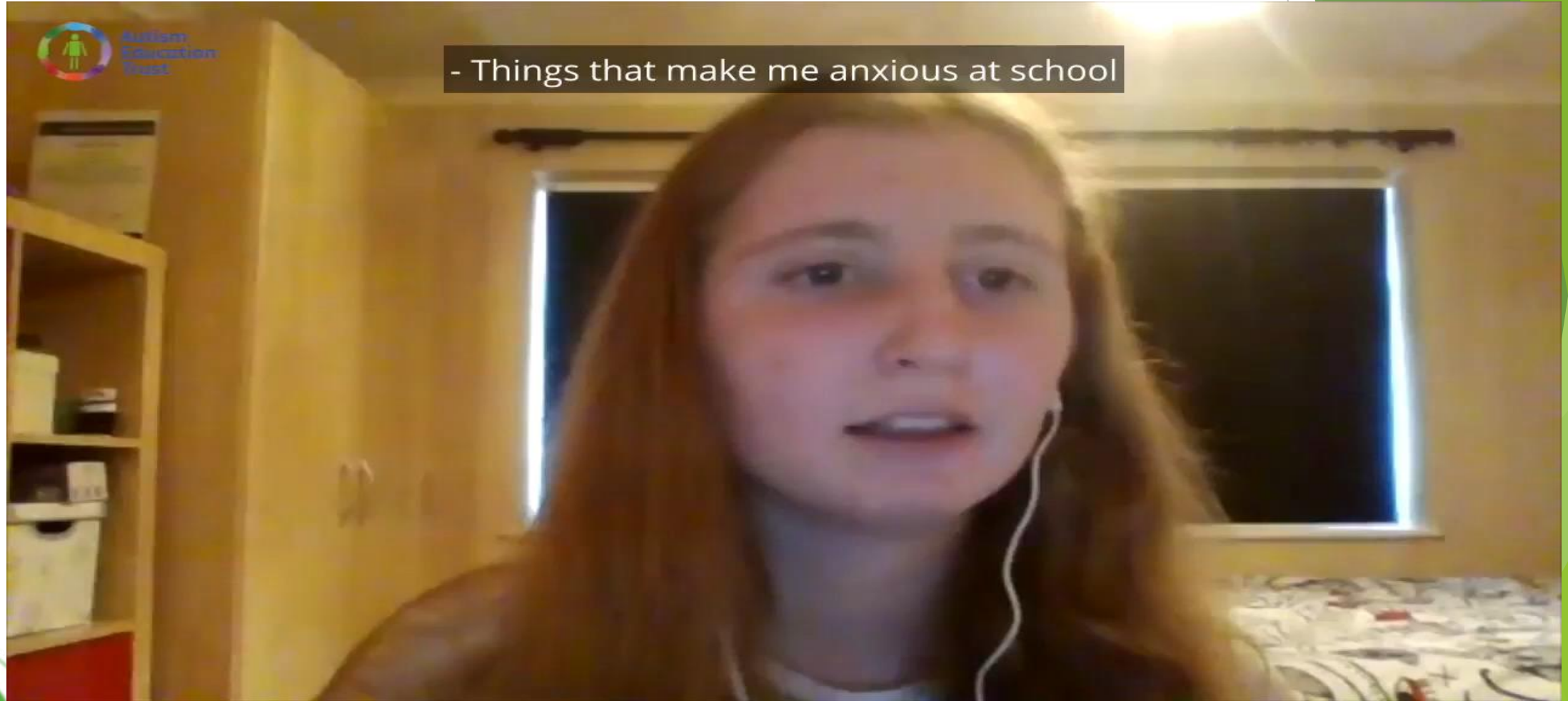
- count down from 100 with him.
- offer bear hugs
- Keep answers honest and use short simple language.
- use soothing tone of voice

- [redacted] needs a quiet activity in a safe quiet area
- He may want physical contact as reassurance
- offer weighted blanket

Note: [redacted] thrives on boundaries, routine and needs nearly constant sensory input to remain regulated. He seeks to control his external environment which may not always be appropriate or possible



# What can trigger anxiety?



## Social understanding and communication

- Being approached by other children.
- Large groups, with lots of social interaction going on.
- When the rules and expectations of a social interaction are unclear.
- A strong need to conform to social norms – e.g. being overly polite.
- Research has shown a link between bullying and school refusal (anxious non-attender) in CYP on the autism spectrum (Bitsika et al., 2021).

*“ ... I never know what to say to people ... I don't know when the person has had enough ... I have noticed conversations last for variable times, and both parties seem to know when to stop and I don't know when that is.”*

**Autistic CYP**  
(Spain et al., 2020)



## Social understanding and communication

- Worrying whether other pupils are adhering to school rules.
- Worrying about whether they have said or done the right thing.
- Social media and online worries:
  - Why did that person make that comment about me?
  - Am I safe? The CYP not being given clear instructions.
- Use of overly complex or figurative language.
- Being asked a question and not enough time being allowed to process it before answering.
- A confrontational tone.
- Feeling 'cornered' or being forced to communicate.
- Not being able to read facial expressions.



# Flexibility, information processing and understanding

- Concerns about whether the journey to school will be OK, and if it isn't, how will it affect the rest of the day?
- Worrying about the health of family, friends, and members of staff
- Not knowing what to do during unstructured times of the day:
- Changes to routines.
- Moving schools or classrooms - transitions.
- Returning from the summer holidays.
- Exam periods.
- Changes in the home environment, moving home, or family breakdown.
- Not understanding how to complete the homework correctly
- Being asked to complete multiple tasks at once.
- Not knowing what order to do tasks in.
- Putting oneself under pressure to achieve.





Lincolnshire Partnership  
NHS Foundation Trust



# Healthy Minds Lincolnshire Intervention Toolkit for Professionals



[HML\\_Intervention\\_Toolkit\\_for\\_Professionals\\_v120201008.pdf](#)

# Physical triggers to anxiety

- Discomfort or pain
- Worries about their own health
- Dietary
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Onset of puberty.

It is important to remember that triggers for anxiety can be cumulative and increase in scale over the school day.

## WHAT TRIGGERED ME

1. I felt excluded.
2. I felt powerless.
3. I felt unheard.
4. I felt scolded.
5. I felt judged.
6. I felt blamed.
7. I felt disrespected.
8. I felt a lack of affection.
9. I felt I couldn't speak up.
10. I felt lonely.
11. I felt ignored.
12. I felt I couldn't be honest.
13. I felt like the bad guy.
14. I felt forgotten.
15. I felt unsafe.
16. I felt unloved.
17. I felt like it was unfair.
18. I felt frustrated.
19. I felt disconnected.
20. I felt trapped.
21. I felt a lack of passion.
22. I felt uncared for.
23. I felt manipulated.
24. I felt controlled.

The Gottman Institute

BlessingManifesting



What behavioural signs have you noticed when a child or young person is anxious or becoming anxious and is a barrier to accessing school and learning?



# How to identify triggers of anxiety

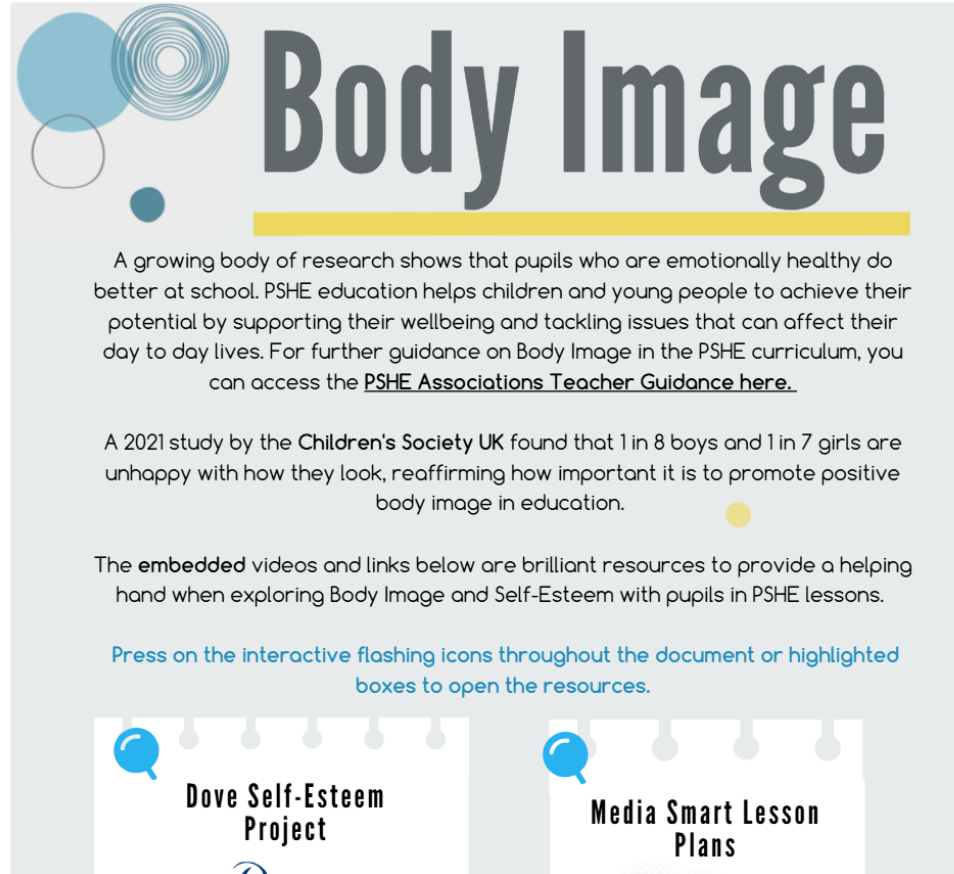


# Changes in behaviour and appearance to look out for.

- Fight, flight, or freeze
- Fatigue from lack of sleep
- Increased distress behaviour (e.g. self-injury or injuring others)
- Being confused or unsure
- Overthinking (e.g. going over and over the different options)
- Reticent to talk or talking too much
- Taciturn (e.g. withdrawing from usual social contacts)
- Reduced eye contact.



# Healthy Minds Body Scan / Body Image



**Body Image**

A growing body of research shows that pupils who are emotionally healthy do better at school. PSHE education helps children and young people to achieve their potential by supporting their wellbeing and tackling issues that can affect their day to day lives. For further guidance on Body Image in the PSHE curriculum, you can access the [PSHE Associations Teacher Guidance here.](#)

A 2021 study by the Children's Society UK found that 1 in 8 boys and 1 in 7 girls are unhappy with how they look, reaffirming how important it is to promote positive body image in education.

The embedded videos and links below are brilliant resources to provide a helping hand when exploring Body Image and Self-Esteem with pupils in PSHE lessons.

Press on the interactive flashing icons throughout the document or highlighted boxes to open the resources.

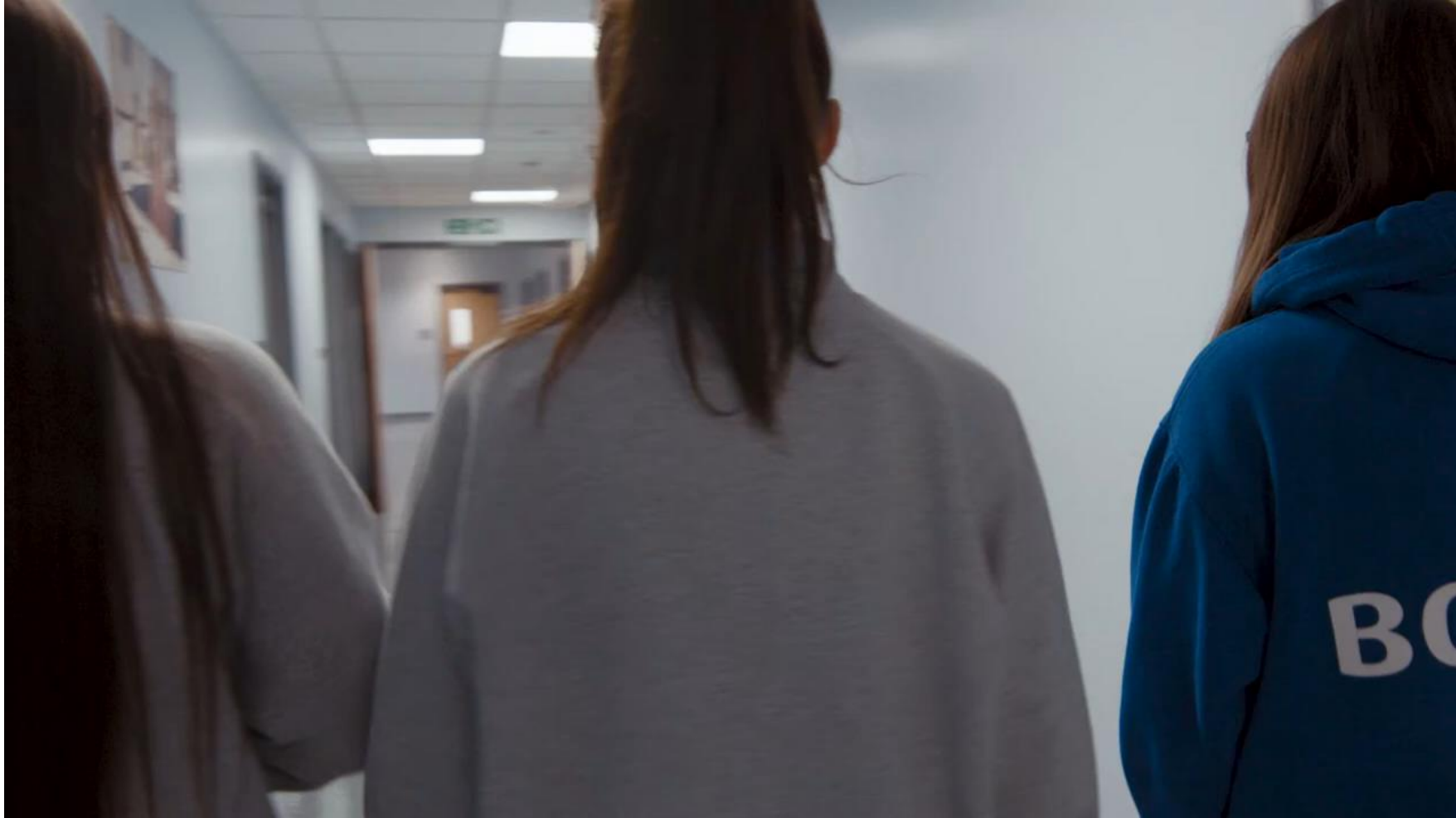
- Dove Self-Esteem Project
- Media Smart Lesson Plans

Content coverage

- Anxious Feelings
- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Emotional Regulation
- Low Mood
- Mental Health Awareness
- Self-esteem
- Self-harm
- School Based Anxiety
- Using a Graded Approach



# Body confidence - Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.



# Working with parents to understand signs of anxiety in their child

You may want to raise concerns you have about an anxious child with the parent/caregiver.

Working with parents is key to understanding signs of anxiety and what helps reduce anxiety.

It is worth remembering that autistic CYP may be masking their anxiety in school and then letting it out at home.



# Impacts on school attendance

When it comes to excluding autistic children or them not wanting to attend, anxiety clearly has a role to play.

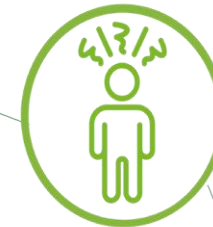
A recent survey conducted by the University of Birmingham ACER team found that 67% of parents reported that their child was anxious around the time of exclusion occurring.

*“Exclusions aren’t a sanction for a child who is stressed and in need. It re-enforces the behaviour to get them out of a difficult situation. It re-enforces their belief that school is a stressful and unsafe place.”*

**Parent whose child was excluded at age 6 from primary mainstream.**

## Sleep

– being kept awake by anxious thoughts.



## Food and eating

– will only eat under certain conditions.

## Attention

– being distracted by anxious thoughts in class.



# So, to summarise so far...

## We now know that anxiety:

- Is very common in autistic/neurodivergent CYP.
- Can be triggered by differences in the three key areas:
  - Social and communication
  - Flexibility and understanding
  - Sensory processing and integration.
- Signs can be identified using questionnaires and observations.
  - Can lead to changes in behaviour and thinking.
  - Affects general physical and mental health.
  - Can lead to attendance issues and exclusion.



# MHST support

## ASSEMBLIES

Each 20-minute assembly, delivered by our practitioners, briefly introduces the topic and some simple skills that can be supportive.

**Anxious Feelings** 😊 👤

**5 Steps to Wellbeing** 😊 👤

**Mental Health Awareness** 👤

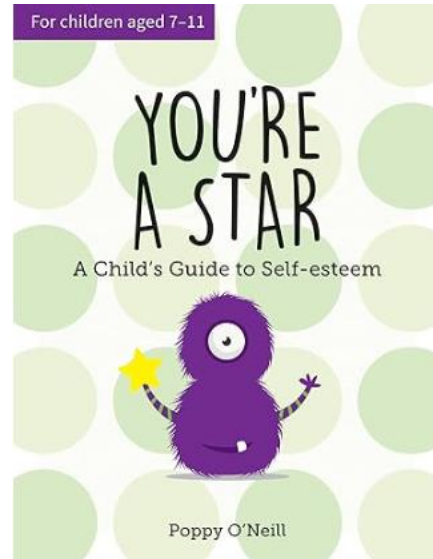
[Don't Worry, Be Happy: A Child's Guide to Dealing With Feeling Anxious](#)

[You're a Star: A Child's Guide to Self-Esteem](#)

[Lucy's Blue Day: Children's Mental Health Book](#)



## MHST support



[Don't Worry, Be Happy: A Child's Guide to Dealing With Feeling Anxious](#)

[You're a Star: A Child's Guide to Self-Esteem](#)

[Lucy's Blue Day: Children's Mental Health Book](#)



# MHST / NHS support

## RESOURCES

Normalising the challenges that we all face helps to build an ethos and environment that supports positive wellbeing. Therefore, the following resources have been created for school professionals to deliver.

Email [lpft.cyptraininglead@nhs.net](mailto:lpft.cyptraininglead@nhs.net) to request content.

**Healthy living – Key Stage 1 - Story Book** 😊

**Exam Stress – Workshop** 👤

**Exam Stress – Assembly** 👤

**Moving up - Year 6 Workshop** 😊

**Managing change - Year 11 Workshop** 👤

**Sleep Hygiene Secondary Workshop** 👤

**Mindfulness Curriculum/ Resource bank** 😊 👤

**Professionals Resource Hub** 🔗

## EDUCATION STAFF TRAINING

Each session introduces the topic, skills you can use in your setting and resources for further reading. These sessions might be delivered live or pre-recorded.

**Anxious Feelings**

**Adverse Childhood Experiences**

**Emotional Regulation**

**Low Mood**

**Mental Health Awareness**

**Self-esteem**

**Self-harm**

**School Based Anxiety/Using a Graded Approach**

**Staff Wellbeing** 🔗

**Whole School Approach – Action Planning**

**Mental Health Posters -  
Set of 7 - Laminated - 594  
x 850 mm (A1) -  
Educational School and  
Classroom Posters.**

## Books

[Mental Health and Well-being in Primary](#)

[Education: A Practical Guide and Resource](#)

[Supporting Staff Mental Health in Your School](#)

[Cultures of Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools: Reflecting on Positive Case Studies](#)



Here's a simplified anxiety tracker template and some next steps that could support ongoing monitoring and management of anxiety:

## **Anxiety Tracker**

**Date:**

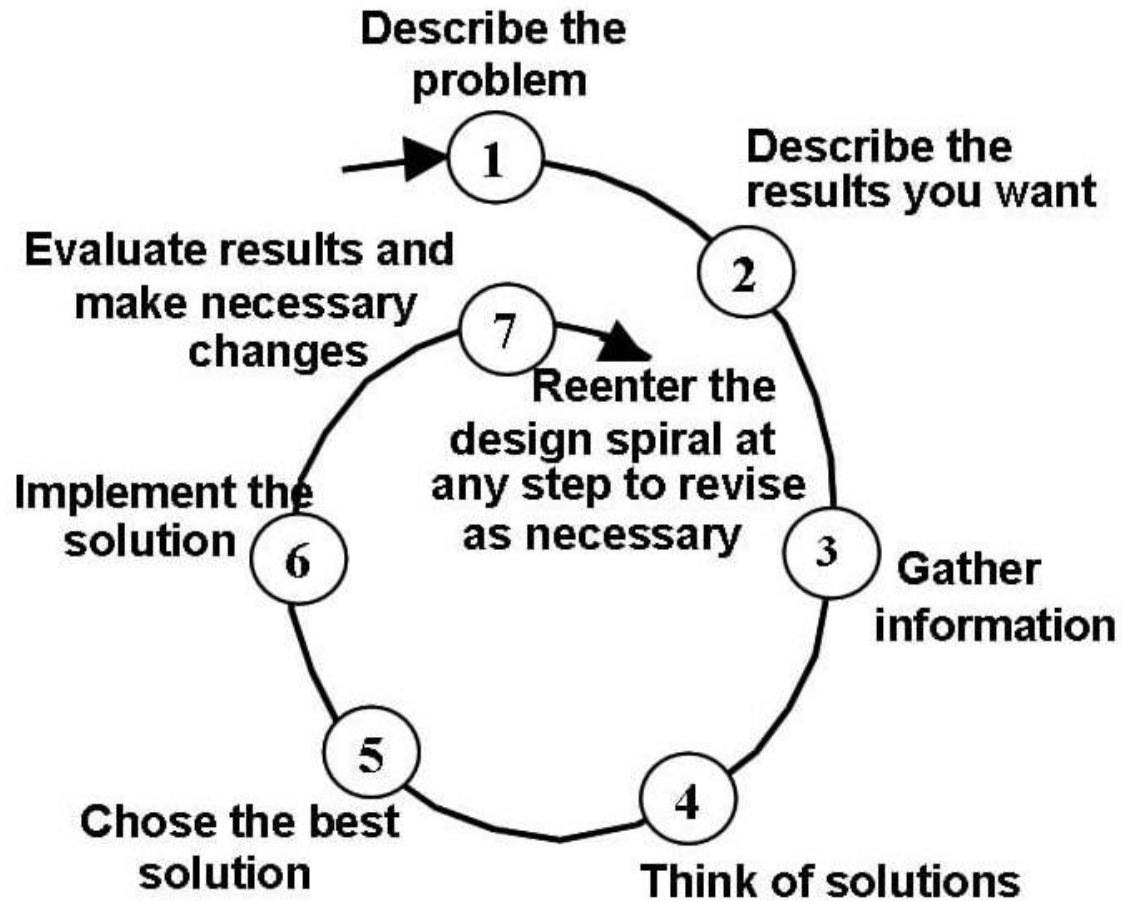
**Time:**

**Location/Context:**

1. What happened?  
Briefly describe the situation (e.g., test, group activity, unexpected change).
2. Anxiety Level (1-10):  
Use a scale to rate the level of anxiety from 1 (calm) to 10 (extremely anxious).
3. Physical Symptoms/Behaviours Noticed:  
Note any visible signs of anxiety (e.g., fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, repetitive movements).
4. Coping Strategies Used:  
List strategies tried (e.g., deep breathing, fidget tools, asking for a break).
5. Outcome:  
Describe how the student responded after the strategies were used (e.g., calm, still anxious, heightened).



# Assess Plan Do Review



# Ways you can learn about an individual's particular anxiety and triggers

Knowing as much as possible about the neurodiverse CYP will help guide you in terms of ***what will work best***.

Look to find the best ways to elicit from the CYP what their anxieties are, what their triggers are, how long their anxieties have lasted for, and what they find helps.

Some CYP may have difficulty with recognising and interpreting their own internal emotional and physical states. In that case you will need to work even more closely with the CYP and also discuss this with the parent(s).

## Things you could try:

- **Use an outline of a body, including the brain, for them to point out where their anxiety affects them most.**
- **Use a Comic Strip conversation or draw out a cartoon to find out what they are experiencing and the triggers of their anxiety.**
- **Role-playing a scenario that caused anxiety and identify the triggers.**
- **Hold a person-centred meeting to discuss their anxiety**



## Whole-school approaches

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

There are guides and tools to help support a whole-school approach to better mental health, such as that developed by the Mentally Healthy Schools website

This includes guidance on how to:

- **Audit your school** in terms of mental health.
- Develop a mental health and wellbeing policy for the school.
- Engage with parents and carers around a mental health action working group.
- Assess and understanding mental health needs.
- Promote wellbeing.
- Support staff.



## Mentally Healthy Schools

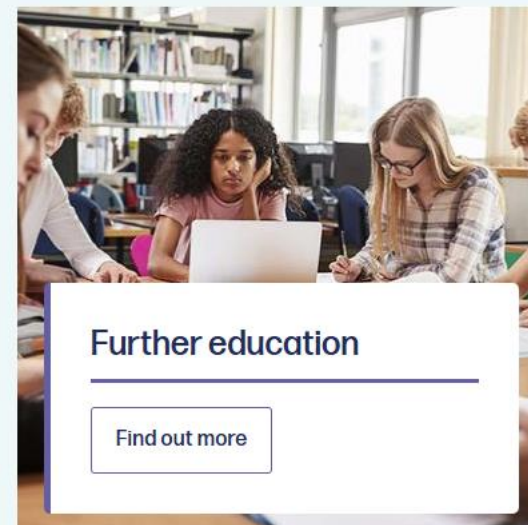
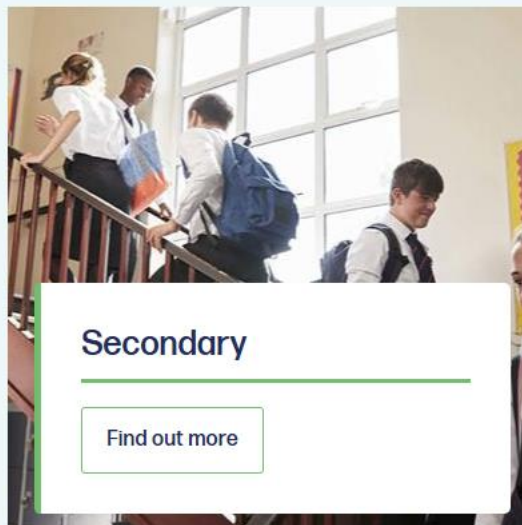
Mentally Healthy Schools brings together quality-assured mental health resources, information & advice for schools and further education settings in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

► Resources

Login/Register



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



# Whole-school approaches - link in your packs

Schools should also seek to build the self-esteem of their pupil population.

In Learning Disabilities and Challenging Behaviours, **Nancy Mather** and colleagues outlines what schools could be doing:

- Accept students for who they are.
- Help students develop a sense of responsibility.
- Increase students' sense of ownership.
- Help students establish self-discipline.
- Promote self-advocacy.
- Provide positive feedback and encouragement.
- Teach students to cope with failure.



# Reasonable adjustments in the key areas of difference



# THE EMOTIONAL CUP

Imagine that every child has a cup that needs to be filled – with affection, love, security, and attention. Some seem to have a full cup most of the time, or know good ways to get a refill. But most children get a little nervous when their cup gets near empty.

## Some ways that children deal with having an empty cup:

- steal from other people's cups
- misbehave to get your attention and show that they need a refill
- seem to have bottomless cups, or need constant 'topping off'
- can't sit still for refills or actively refuse them
- bounce off the walls when they approach 'empty'
- think they have to fight or compete for every refill

## What fills a child's cup:

- play
- friendship
- one-on-one time
- love and affection
- connection
- succeeding
- doing what they love to do or what they choose to do



## What empties the cup:

- stress and strain
- rejection by peers
- loneliness and isolation
- yelling and punishment
- failing
- fatigue
- doing what they're forced to do or they hate to do

**upbidity**

Publisher of Therapy Resources



I'm worried about...

new school

being alone

what to wear

exclusion

Things I can do something about

teachers will hate me

making friends

Things I can do nothing about

autism

people looking at me

Things for the future

getting a job

money



# TAKE WHAT YOU NEED

Make Things Happen	Keep Going!	MEDITATE	shine your LIGHT	KEEP CALM	Have Fun	Stay Strong	Think Positive	Follow your Dreams	Stay Focused	anything is Possible	RELAX	HARD WORK PAYS OFF		
★	take it easy	Well Done!	Imagine	Be Yourself				Believe & Achieve		Never Give Up	HONESTY	Make a Difference		
I AM IN CONTROL	YOU ARE SMART	READY SET GO!	SMILE	Breathe				BRAVE	YOU DID IT!	Loving Life	way to go!	YOU ARE LOVED!		
Thank you	IT'S OK	I CAN SAY NO!	HUGS	TGIF				Happy Monday	♥	DREAM ON	Be Yourself			
LOVE	YES YOU CAN	Don't worry. Be happy.	😊	Aspire to Inspire				STAY STRONG	Follow Your Heart	you rock!	MAKE IT HAPPEN			
Be a Leader	TODAY IS YOUR DAY	HAPPINESS	HAVE A NICE DAY	HUMOR				Be Happy	Shine	believe in yourself	Refuse to Sink	Get the ball rolling		
LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE	ICAN DO IT	Be Fearless	Forgive	Perspective	HOPE			You are Beautiful	Be Kind	face your fears	I CAN & I WILL			
TURN KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION	be a shooting star	kindness	Adventure	You're Doing Great				Empower	STAY CALM	I CAN DO IT	ENABLE			
Enhance	DREAM ON	Be Yourself	LOVE	YES YOU CAN				Don't worry. Be happy.	😊	Aspire to Inspire	STAY STRONG			
Follow Your Heart	you rock!	MAKE IT HAPPEN	Be a Leader	TODAY IS YOUR DAY	HAPPINESS	HAVE A NICE DAY	HUMOR	Be Happy	Shine	believe in yourself	Refuse to Sink	Get the ball rolling	LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE	ICAN DO IT
Be Fearless	Forgive	Perspective	HOPE	You are Beautiful	Be Kind	face your fears	I CAN & I WILL	TURN KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION	be a shooting star	kindness	Adventure	You're Doing Great	Empower	



# Exercise/movement

Research has shown that, for neurodiverse children, there are beneficial effects of physical exercise in terms of reducing anxiety and depression, whilst improving self-esteem and academic performance (Strong et al., 2005).

For some autistic CYP, a movement break that will allow them to get rid of nervous tension.

Rocking or other repetitive body movements can also be ways to reduce levels of anxiety (Gillot et al., 2001).



# Progressive relaxation / breaks while in class?

			
<b>raise your hand</b>	<b>clap</b>	<b>wiggle your toes</b>	<b>make a funny face</b>
			
<b>bend your wrist</b>	<b>open &amp; close your hands</b>	<b>flex your foot</b>	<b>bend your neck</b>

3-Part Movement Cards created by Martianne Stanger, 2010 \* graphics from Microsoft ClipArt and Google \* further ideas can be found at [traininghappyhearts.blogspot.com](http://traininghappyhearts.blogspot.com)



# Exercise/movement

Deep pressure massage has been shown to be emotionally calming for some neurodiverse CYP.

Yoga and breathing exercises have also been reported to work well with some CYP, although there is limited research evidence to date.

You may want to suggest to the child that when they are anxious, they slow down their breathing and count down slowly from 10 to zero.



You could also suggest that they count something related to any special interests.



## Empowering the CYP to develop their own strategies

Try to find out if the CYP has already developed their own strategies that they use to reduce anxiety.

Discuss these with them and if you feel there is room for improvements (e.g. avoidance is their only strategy) then look to make suggestions.



You may want to discuss with the CYP the benefits of keeping a diary of their emotions.

This could be a useful way for them to identify triggers as well as self-calming strategies.

Alternatively, they may prefer drawing things out or using computer animations.



# Talking things over

**A number of approaches can be taken whilst discussing anxieties:**

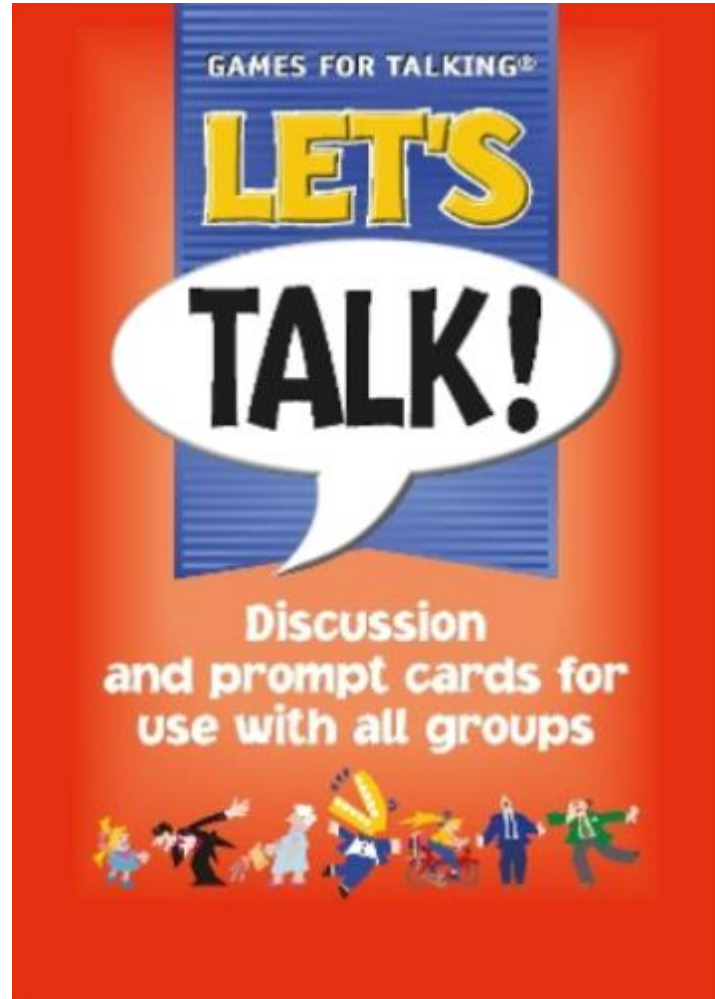
- Work with the child to write down their anxieties or use symbols to describe them.
- You could use a whiteboard to draw out their anxieties and work together on a logical sequence of how not to let anxiety get out of control.
- Consider role-playing anxiety-provoking scenes and how they can be resolved.
- Consider working on a social story together about an anxiety trigger and how it can be resolved.
- Describe your own anxieties and how you manage them.



# Distraction from and dismissing unwanted thoughts

For neurodiverse CYP who have repetitive anxious thinking, one strategy you could use is distraction.

This may simply be allowing the CYP to focus on things that provide enjoyment or that replace anxious thinking and give them an opportunity to rest their mind and body.



One example would be to teach the CYP to list on their hand five favourite things (people, places, or objects) and when they are anxious, they can squeeze each finger and think about each thing in turn. Ask that they do that repeatedly for a few minutes.

You could consider writing unwanted thoughts on one side of a card and then the solution on the other side.

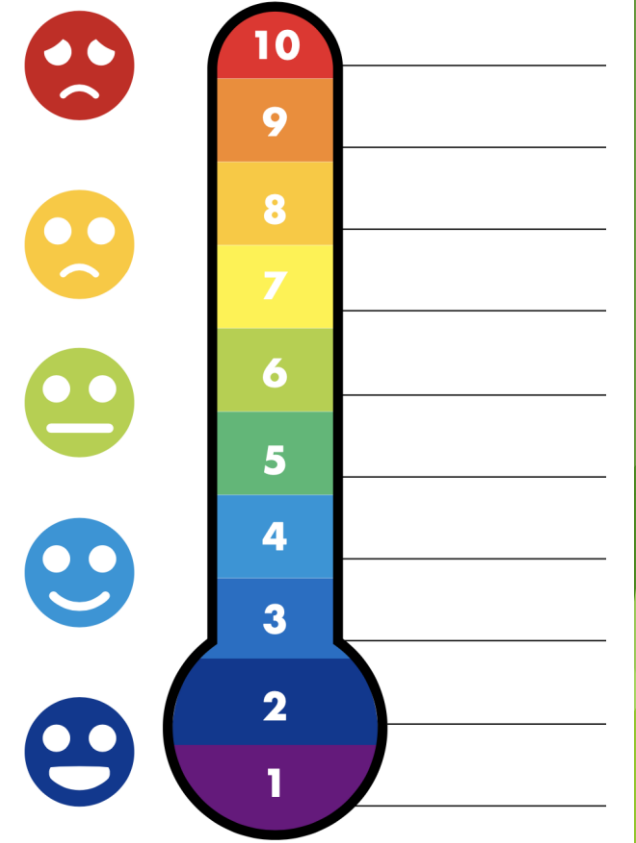


# Helping the CYP understand about levels of anxiety

You may want to help the CYP understand that anxiety is a normal emotion but sometimes it can become too much.

You could use a visual scale or emoticons for them to measure their own anxiety. They can also use such a scale to communicate their feelings to a member of staff.

You could also use special interests here.





# GREAT MINDS TOGETHER COPING WITH ANXIETY WORKBOOK

- Activity 1 – Anxiety Levels
- Activity 2 – Anxiety Preparation
- Activity 3 – Break it Down
- Activity 4 – Anxiety v Truth
- Activity 5 – My Support System
- Activity 6 – Star Breathing
- Activity 7 – I Can
- Activity 7 – Sort and Recycle
- Activity 8 – Anger Thermometer
- Activity 9 – Colour and Relax
- Activity 10 – Mindfulness Meditation
- Activity 11 – 5,4,3,2,1
- Activity 12 – Umbrella
- Activity 13 – Positive Affirmations
- Activity 14 – Decatastrophising
- Activity 15 – Challenging Anxious Thoughts
- Activity 16 – Challenging Anxious Thoughts
- Activity 17 – Anxiety Symptoms
- Activity 18 – Are You Happy?
- Activity 19 – Positive Self-Talk
- Activity 20 – NOW es-%26-
- Activity 21 – Butterflies
- Activity 21 – Mindfulness Minute
- Activity 22 – Positive Affirmations Wordsearch



# Bringing it all together



Once you have worked with the CYP and have identified strategies that can be implemented by the school and the CYP, consider bringing these together in a form that the CYP can easily access and use.

You can also consider these approaches for all pupils and staff in the school, so everyone has a toolkit of strategies to keep anxiety low.

