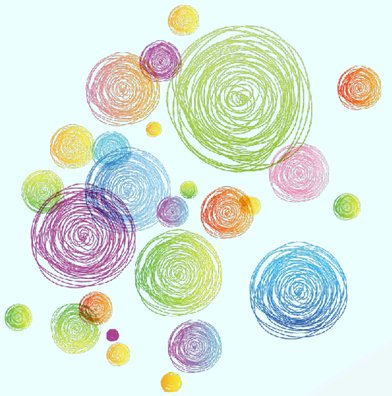
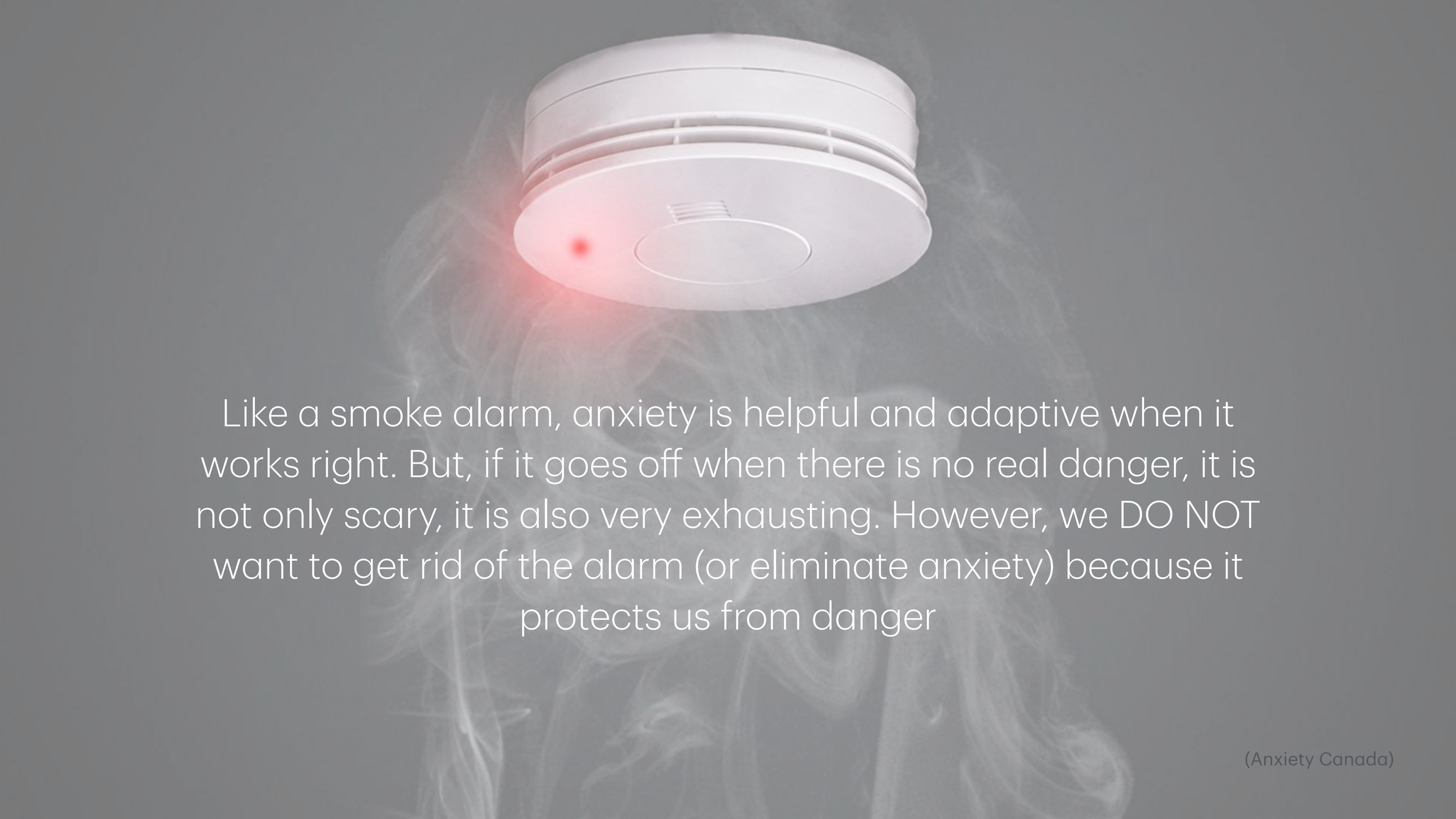
Supporting attendance for students with anxiety

Dr Jamie Speeden Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Paediatrician, Auckland

Outline



- Neurobiology and Flipping your Lid
- State and Trait Anxiety
- Anxiety Disorders & School based anxiety
- How to Support Parents
- How to support the Young person
  - Validation
  - Co-regulation or modelling
  - Red & Green thoughts (CBT)
  - Graded Exposure
  - Grounding and Sensory skills
- When to refer



Like a smoke alarm, anxiety is helpful and adaptive when it works right. But, if it goes off when there is no real danger, it is not only scary, it is also very exhausting. However, we DO NOT want to get rid of the alarm (or eliminate anxiety) because it protects us from danger

(Anxiety Canada)

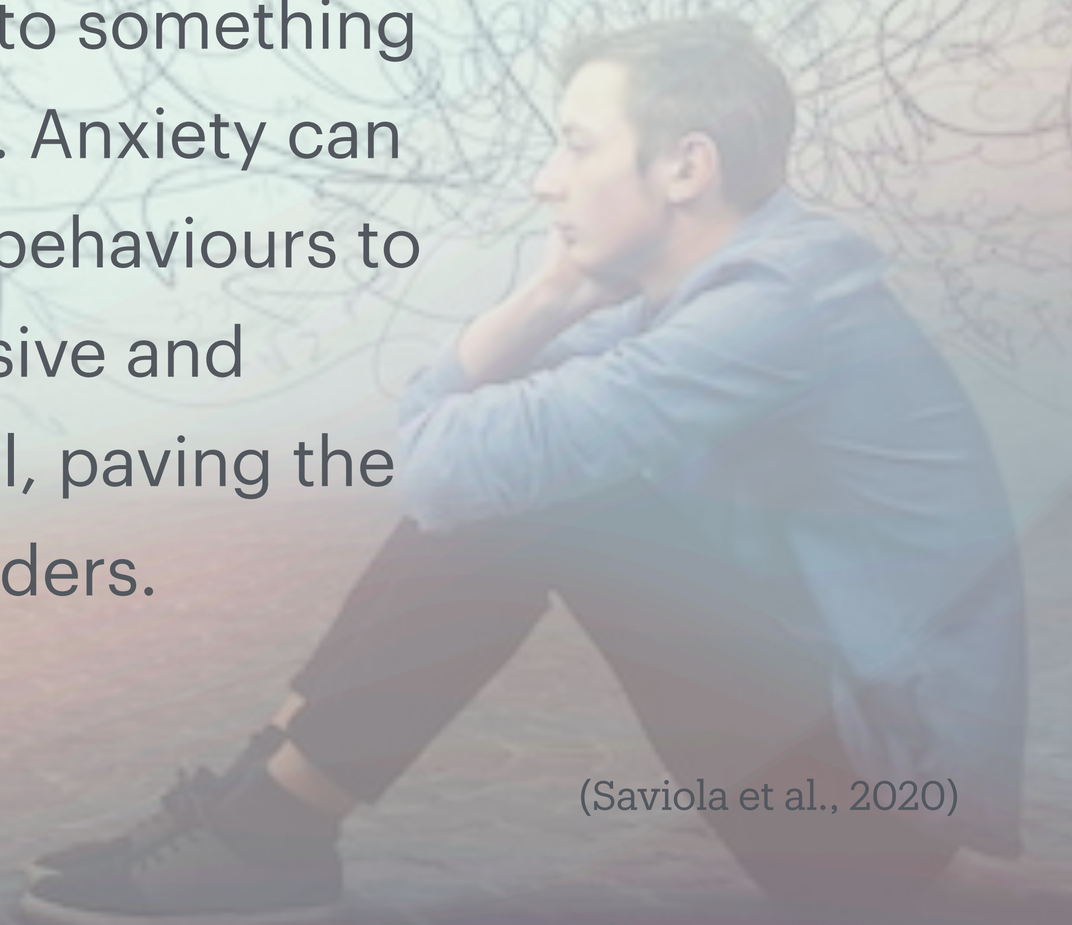
Anxiety and Fear

- **Anxiety** may be distinguished from **fear** both conceptually and physiologically, although the two terms are often used interchangeably.

- Anxiety is considered a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat.

(APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2024)

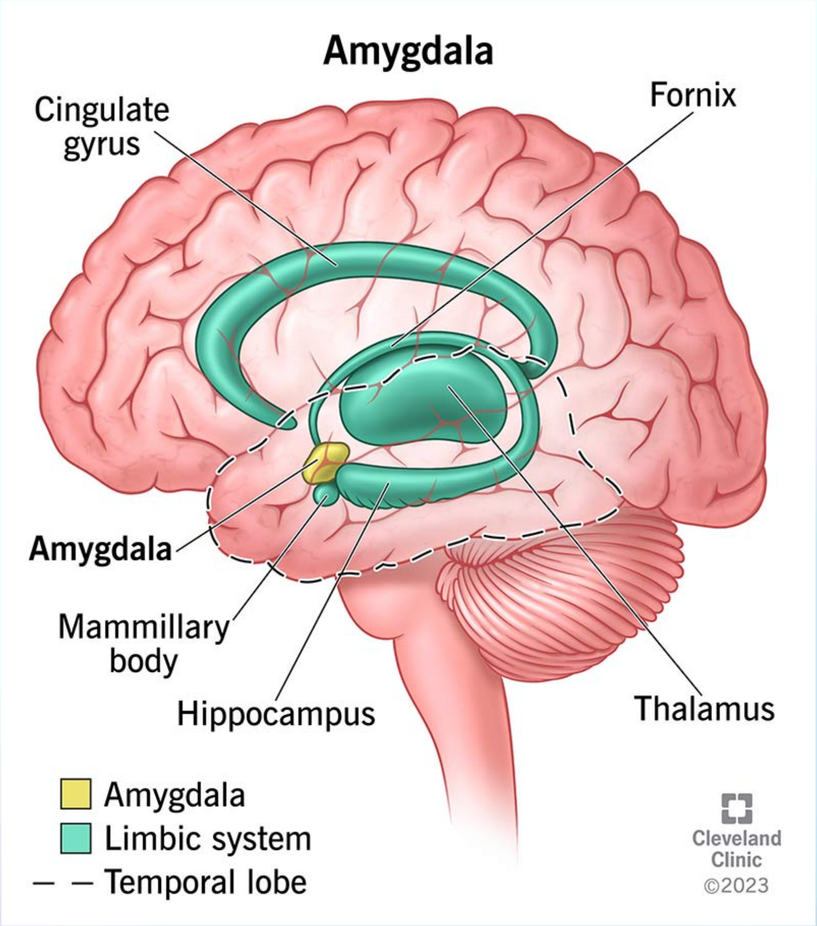
A contemporary definition considers anxiety as a mental state characterised by an intense sense of tension, worry or apprehension, relative to something adverse that might happen in the future. Anxiety can be an adaptive response driving coping behaviours to face possible dangers, but if excessive and unmotivated, can become dysfunctional, paving the way for developing anxiety disorders.



(Saviola et al., 2020)

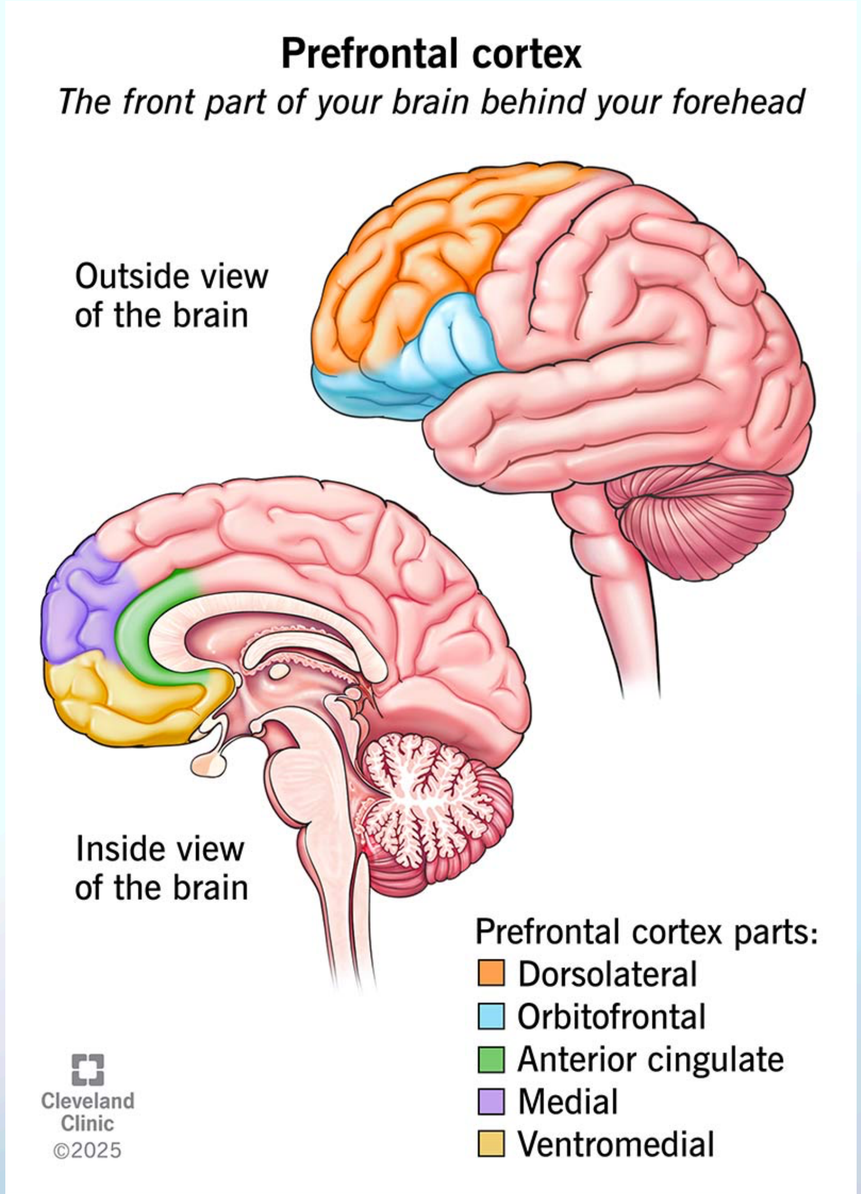
Anxiety and your brain

- Worry originates in the amygdala
- It is the ‘heart and soul’ of the nervous system
- The amygdala will detect a dangerous situation and prepare a response
- The amygdala is our **emotional** brain



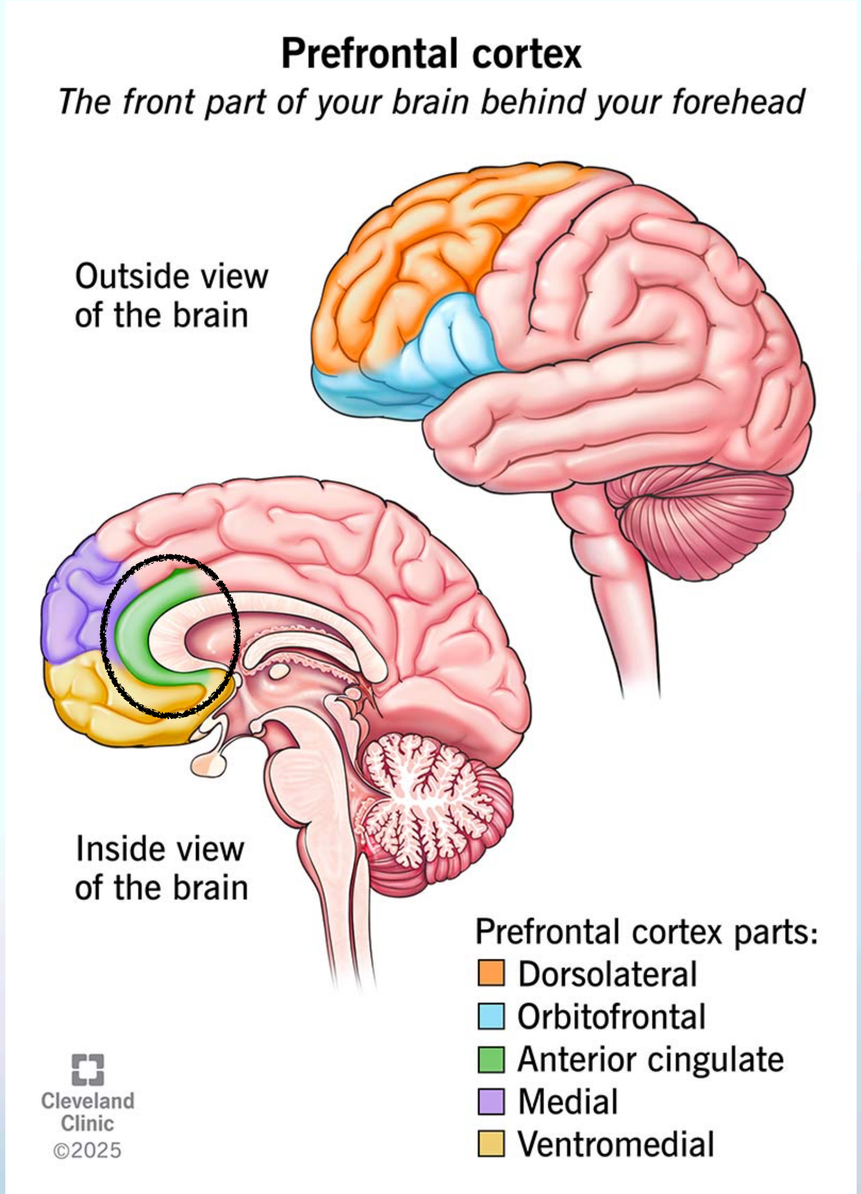
Anxiety and your brain

- The prefrontal cortex is where all our sensations and thoughts come from
- The cognitive brain: thinking, reasoning, judgement and decision making
- We feel anxious when the emotional brain (amygdala) send overpowering signals to the cognitive brain (prefrontal cortex)
- Also affected by ADHD, OCD, TBI, Depression

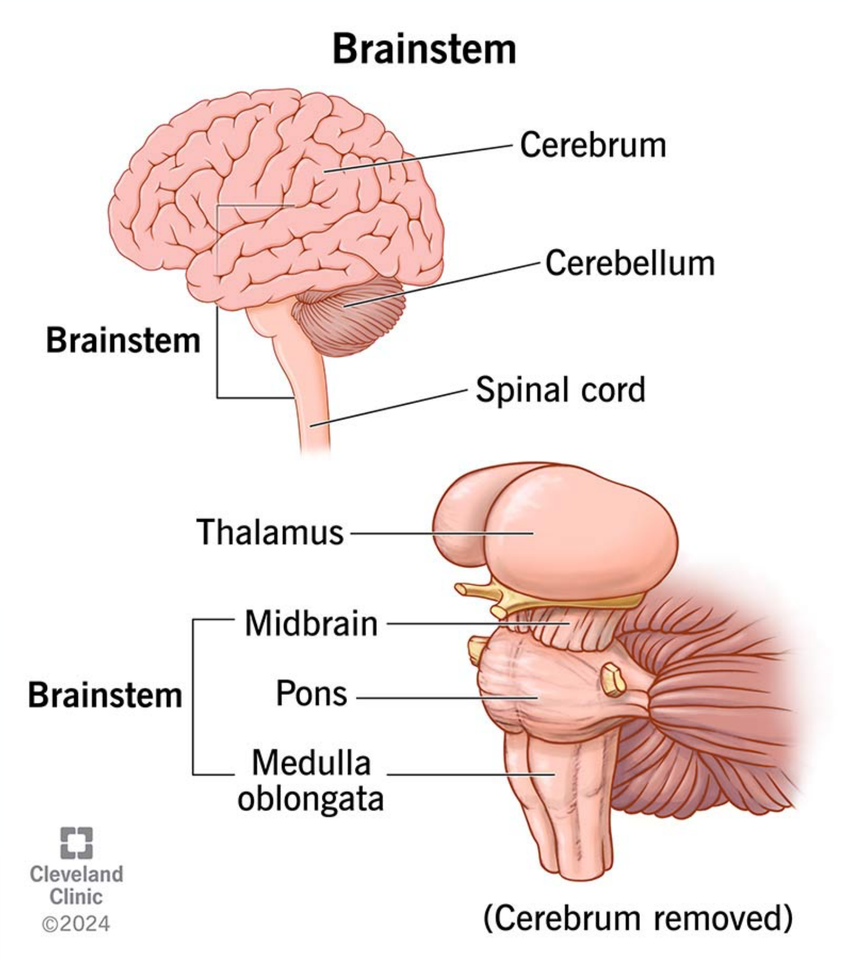


Anxiety and your brain

- The anterior cingulate is located in the prefrontal cortex
- This amplifies fear signals coming from the amygdala
- When fearful these two ‘chatter’ and produce palpable anxiety through autonomic functions like heart rate and blood pressure



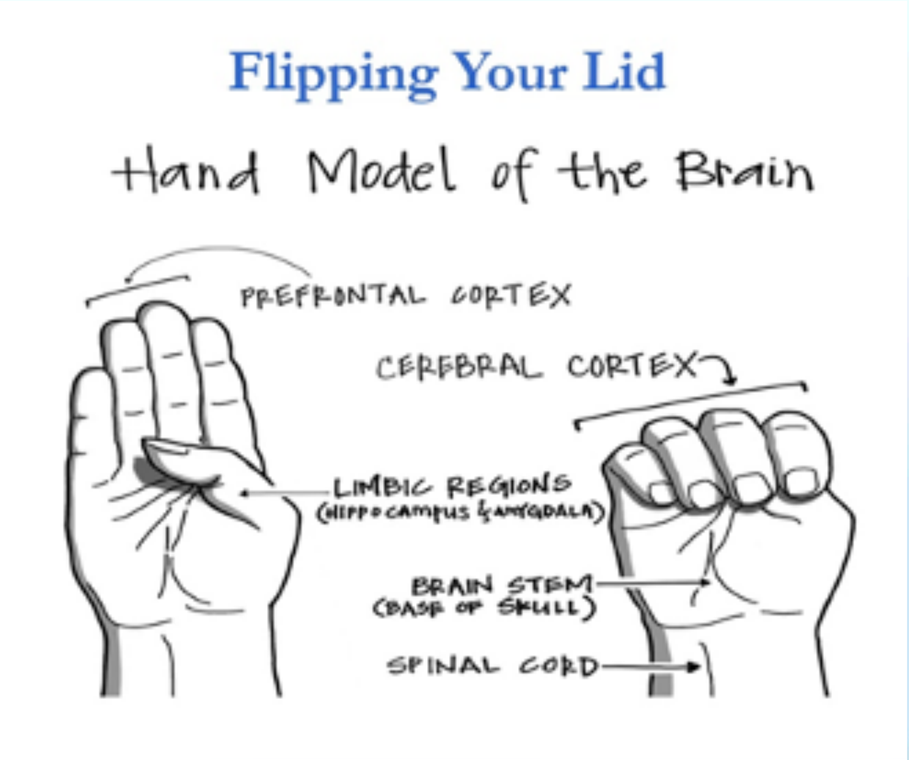
Anxiety and your brain

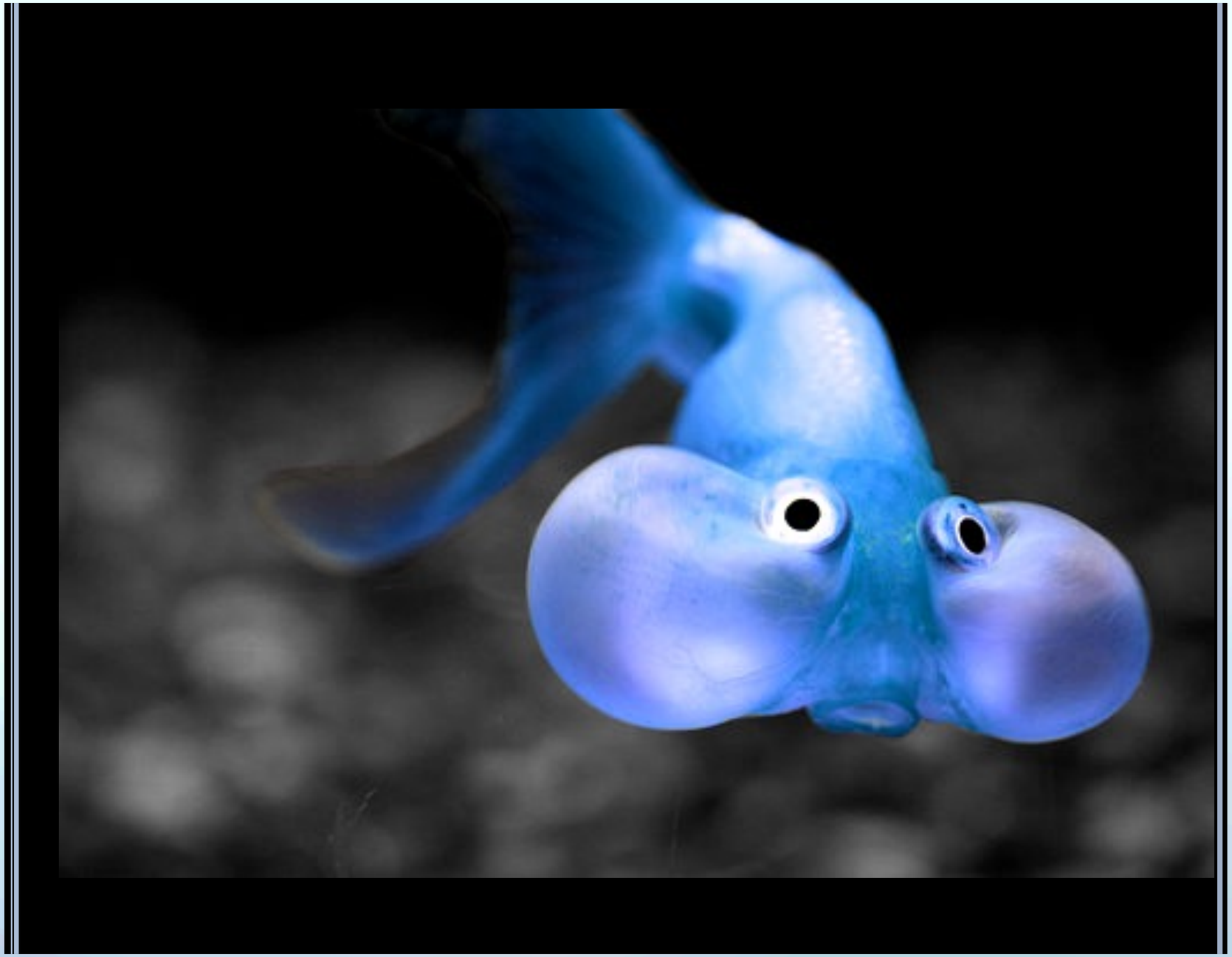


- The brain stem is known as the ‘animal, reptilian’ or ‘survival’ brain
- It sends messages back and forth between your brain and other parts of your body regulating functions like:
  - heart rate
  - blood pressure
  - breathing
  - balance
  - sleep and wakefulness

‘Flipping your lid’ theory

- Developed by Dr Dan Siegel is a way to explain what happens when our mid-brain (in brain stem) takes over and becomes disconnected from the rational / cognitive upper brain
- It’s what happens when the lower parts take over, resulting in the *fight, flight, freeze* response
- When others flip they lid this draws in our emotional brain and we also feel strong urges to flip our lid too.
- When someone has flipped their lid they are unable to understand direction or instructions as the thinking brain (PFC) becomes disconnected
- By using validation to calm, this ensures young people feel heard and understood and they have a secure base to co-regulate





State and Trait Anxiety

State anxiety (fear) defined as a temporary reaction to adverse events, and trait anxiety, a more stable personality feature, defined as a constant individual difference related to a tendency to respond with concerns, troubles and worries to various situations



Pride and Anxiety | Viv•i•fy : (verb) : to endow with remarkable life (wordpress.com)

State Anxiety

State anxiety occurs when you face a threat or a stressful, frightening situation. It is a normal response to various triggers, and many people who experience state anxiety do not have an underlying anxiety disorder. The symptoms of state anxiety include:

- rapid heartbeat
- difficulty concentrating
- intense feelings of worry
- muscle tension



Your sympathetic nervous system creates these symptoms of anxiety as your body prepares for a specific situation. State anxiety passes when the threat you are facing fades. For example, if you are taking an important exam, you may feel tense and worried beforehand; however, after you have finished, your anxiety will fade.

Trait Anxiety (high)

- Is considered apart of someone's personality rather than caused by a scenario.
- Catastrophise and think the worst-case scenario.
- Avoidance of fears or worries
- An inability to focus on tasks



Trait anxiety - the research

Research has shown that there are four dimensions of trait anxiety:

- **Threat in daily routines** – those with trait anxiety may be anxious about what could happen in their daily routines, such as making mistakes at work or school.
- **Ambiguous threat** – a sense of danger or a constant worry about bad things happening can constantly plague those with trait anxiety.
- **Threat of physical danger** – when driving or flying, those with trait anxiety may worry about getting hurt or injured. They may also experience intense fears of illness.
- **Threat of social evaluation** – people with trait anxiety can feel anxious about being criticised or judged in social situations.

Trait anxiety - the research

Trait anxiety can also lead to long-lasting somatic and mental symptoms, such as:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- An inability to focus on tasks
- Changes in appetite
- Avoidance of fears or worries

Unlike state anxiety, there is no apparent cause of trait anxiety. As trait anxiety is connected with personality, many people turn to personality models to better understand what may cause it.

Other potential causes of trait anxiety include:

- **Genetics** – research has shown that anxiety may be linked to different genes.[2]
- **Trauma** – recently experiencing a traumatic event or experiencing one during childhood or adolescence can affect how your brain perceives situations as safe or dangerous.

Anxiety Disorders

- Commonest mental disorder worldwide
- Affect 4% of global population
- More women affected than men
- Onset during childhood and adolescence
  - 35% emerging before age 14
  - 48% emerging before age 18
  - 62.5% emerging before age 25



Anxiety Disorders



- Most common psychiatric disorder in young people - mean onset age 11yr
- Specific Anxiety Disorders 13-18yr olds
  - Specific phobia 20%
  - Social Anxiety disorder 9%
  - Separation Anxiety disorder 8%
  - Generalised, Panic and Agoraphobia 3% each

Risk Factors

- Personality
- Family history and genes
- Trauma
- Drugs or alcohol
- Health problems

- Co-morbid with
  - Depression
  - BPAD
  - ADHD
  - Learning/ language difficulties
  - Behaviour
  - OCD
  - Eating disorders
  - Substance use disorders



The Harsh Realm of "Gentle Parenting" | The New Yorker

Risk Factors

- Personality
- Family history and genes *
- Trauma incl accidents, death in family *
- Parental separation *
- Drugs or alcohol
- Health problems and in parents *

- Co-morbid with
  - Depression
  - BPAD
  - ADHD
  - Learning/ language difficulties
  - Behaviour
  - OCD
  - Eating disorders
  - Substance use disorders

School Avoidance *



The Harsh Realm of "Gentle Parenting" | The New Yorker

COVID

Increased stress, anxiety, depression



- Meta-analysis, multiple countries and ethnicities / cultures
- Mean age 13.0 years (range 4.1 – 17.6 years)
- Usual rates of Anxiety or Depression 11-13%
- First COVID lockdown rates
    - Depression 25%
    - Anxiety 20%
    - Worse later in pandemic and in girls, more depression in older teens

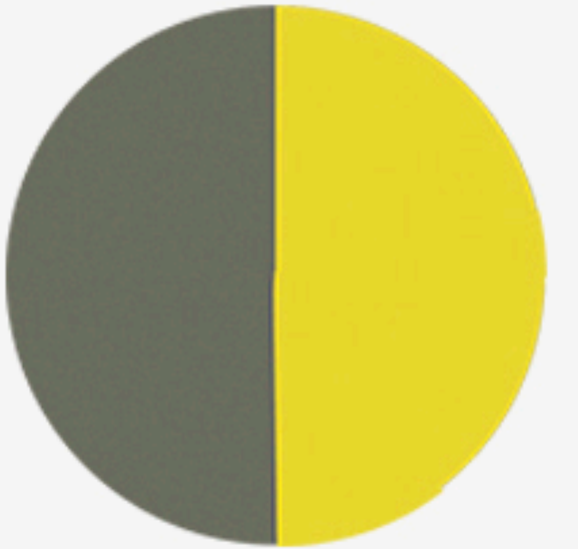
Racine N, et al. JAMA Pediatr 2021

COVID

NZ data GuiNZ October 2021

- 10-11 year olds
- General **decline** in Anxiety
- Maori and Pacific children: **decrease** in depressive symptoms
- Pasific children: significantly **lower** anxiety scores
- Bubbles of 6+ people are protective
- Depressive symptoms increased: girls, families with financial concerns, maternal depression

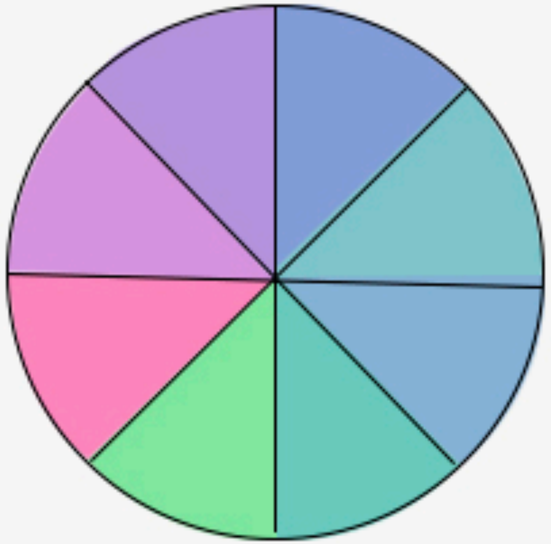
What people think anxiety looks like



Nervousness

Worry

What it actually looks like



- Insomnia
- Uncontrollable feelings
- Intrusive thought
- Always feeling of being on edge
- Loss of appetite
- Irritability
- Body symptoms
- Feeling of guilt and shame

Lifebulb

What Causes Anxiety disorders - Symptoms and types - Lifebulb

Fight, Flight, Freeze (and Fawn)

- Humans are designed to respond to danger quickly so that we can protect ourselves. This is both when the danger is real and when it is perceived. We call this the fight or flight response. When a person's fight or flight response is activated, three major types of responses occur, these including physiology (body responses), behaviour (action responses), and cognitions.

- Sometimes, the fight-flight-freeze response can become overactive and impact our physical and mental health. When it becomes overactive its easy to switch into this state more easily and can feel like the person is on edge constantly looking for threats. For people that have an overactive response the smallest inconvenience can cause this to flip and often these people have limited coping skills due to in this state it is highly unlikely you are able to access your frontal lobe. Which is responsible for higher cognitive functions such as memory, emotions, impulse control, problem solving, social interaction, and motor function.

- It is exhausting to spend a lot of time in this response as it affects not only mental state but blood pressure, headaches, chronic gastritis, etc



WHAT 'FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE' LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

FIGHT

- Acting out
- Behaving aggressively
- Acting silly
- Exhibiting defiance
- Being hyperactive
- Arguing
- Screaming/yelling



FLIGHT

- Withdrawing
- Becoming disengaged
- Fleeing the classroom
- Skipping class
- Day dreaming
- Sleeping
- Avoiding others





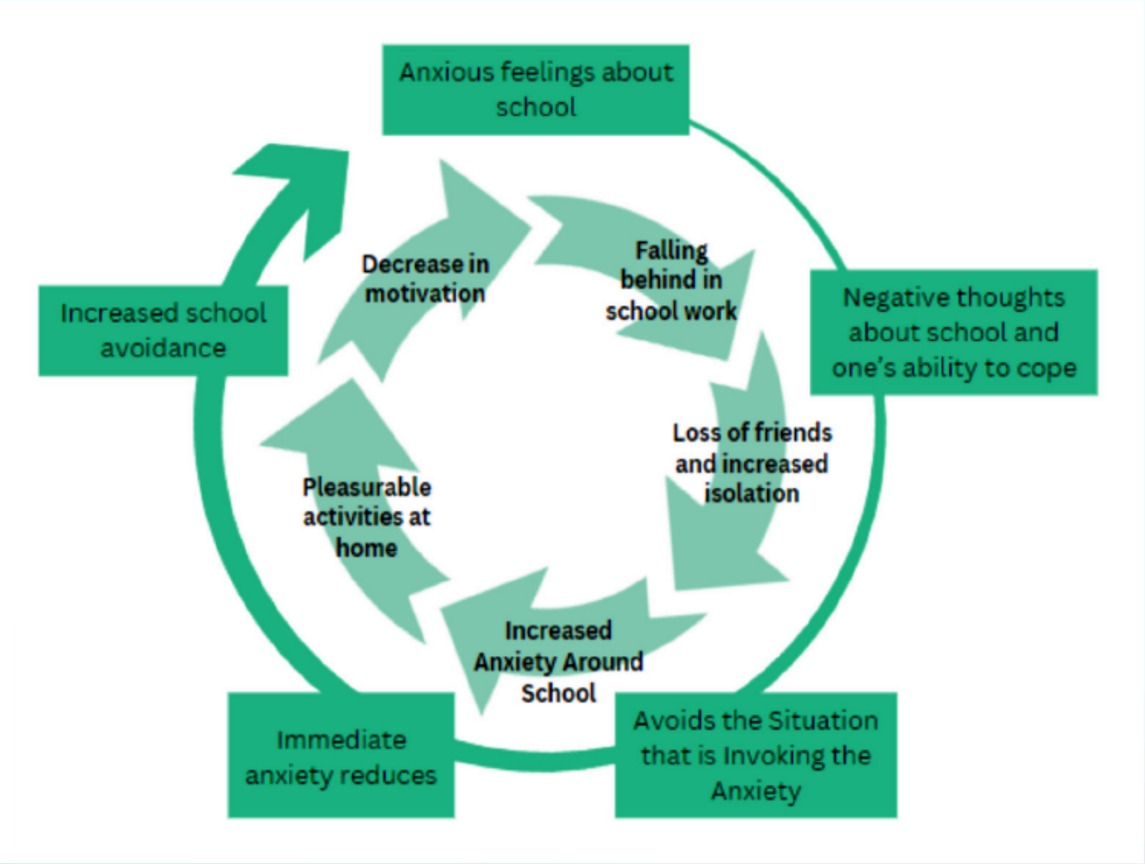
FREEZE

- Exhibiting numbness
- Refusing to answer
- Feeling unable to move or act
- Refusing to get needs met
- Giving a blank look
- Sense of stiffness
- Feeling numb



CAMHS

School Based Anxiety



- The **outer** layer of the diagram are the causes of school avoidance.
- **Inner** layer of the diagram are the causes of this anxiety to continue

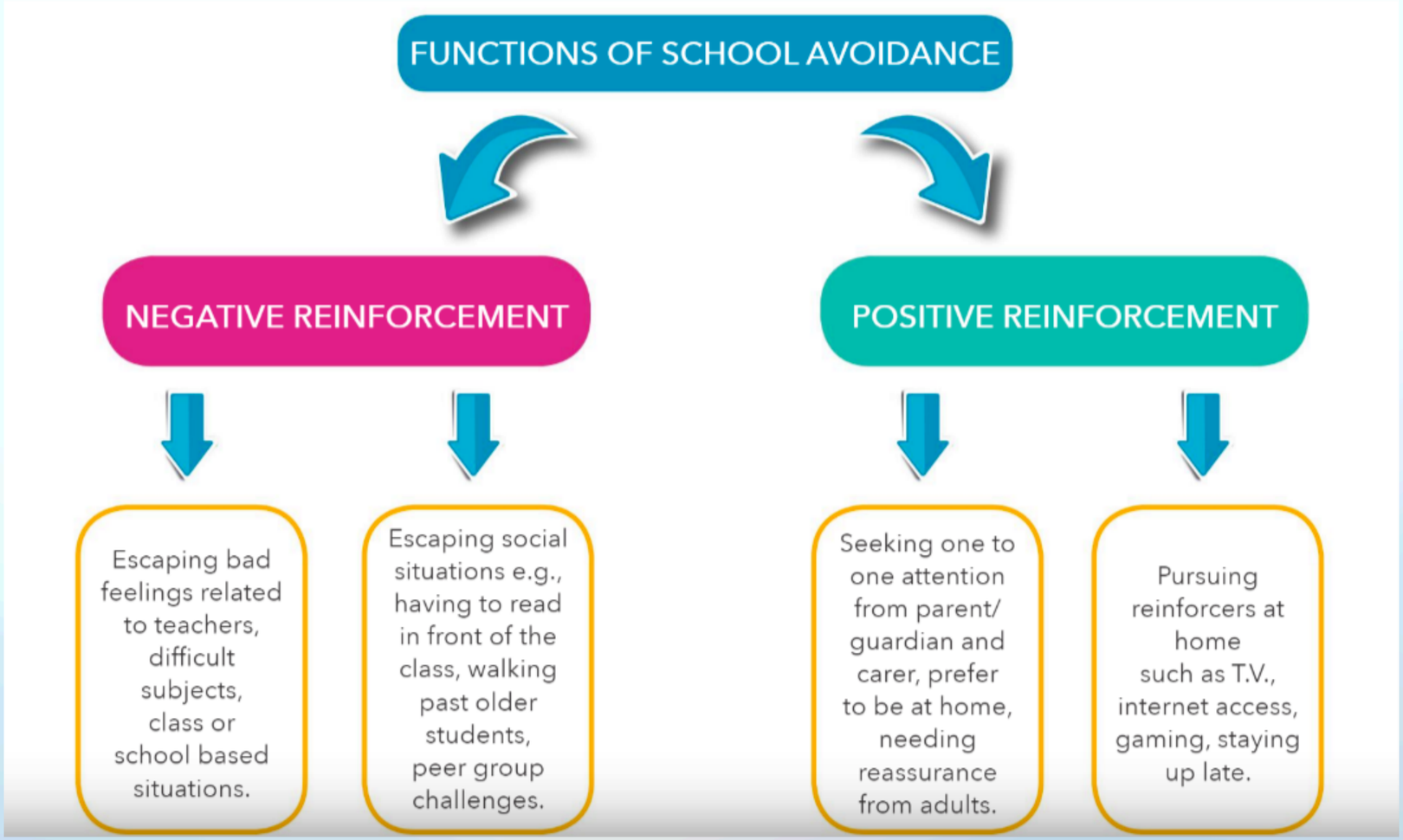
- Any period of time away from normal school routine can cause this cycle to begin: sick leave, school holidays, negative social experiences, negative perception of school or personal performance.

School Based Anxiety

Four-factor functional framework

- To avoid school-related situations that cause distress or neg reactions (Specific Phobias)
- To escape aversive social and/or evaluative situations (Social Phobia/GAD)
- To receive attention from significant others outside of school (Sep Anx Dis)
- To pursue reinforcement outside of school (ODD/CD)

Functions of school avoidance



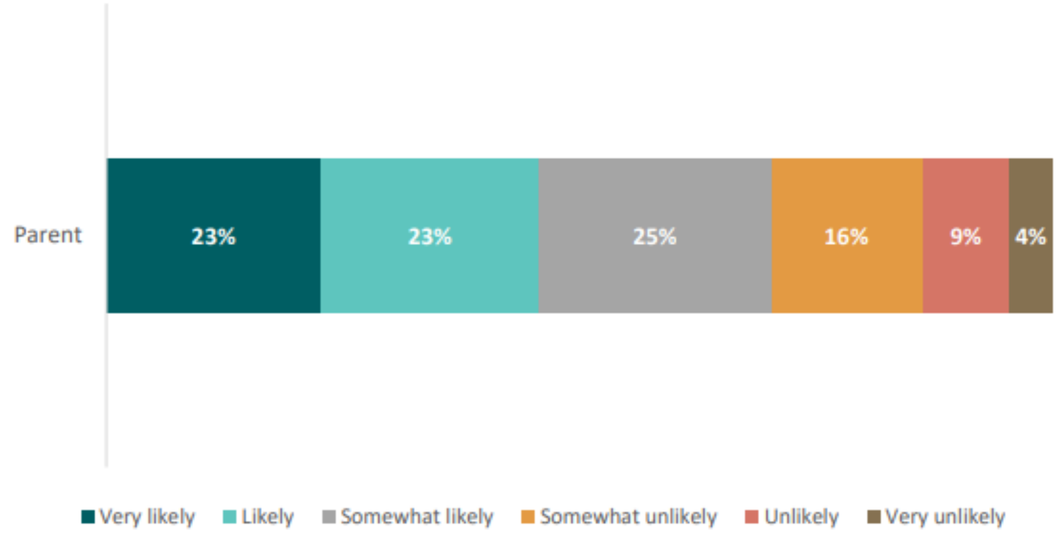
Findings of the Attendance report

- Attendance - Getting back to school: Guide for primary school teachers (ero.govt.nz)

- Missing Out: Why Aren't Our Children Going to School? (ero.govt.nz)

("Missing Out: Why Aren't Our Children Going to School," 2022)

Figure 23: *Likelihood of parents keeping their child out of school for 'child having mental health challenges/anxiety'*



For some learners, mental health and anxiety are barriers to attendance

Some learners identified mental health and anxiety challenges as reasons for not attending.

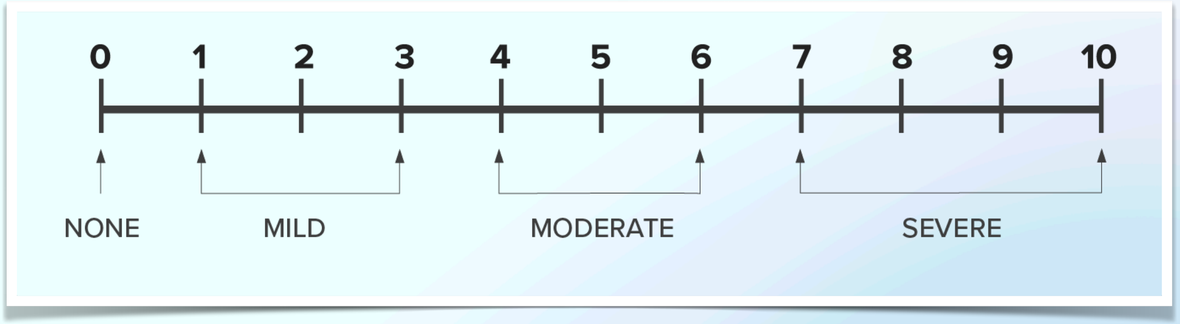
Addressing Anxiety at school



Understanding Anxiety in Children & Teens | McLean Hospital

Brief Anxiety assessment

- Do they have difficulty controlling worries? State or trait anxiety?
- More often that not are they restless, on edge?
- Easily fatigued?
- Mind blanks?
- Irritable?
- Sleep disturbance?
- Impact on social interactions?
- Negative self-image?
- Impacts on self-care?
- Reassurance checking vs. information seeking?
- Consider physiological responses, thoughts and behaviour



Creating a path forward

(and back to school)



- Systemic approach: student, whanau, school and peers
- Manage adult anxieties and exhaustion
- Have a plan at home and at school

- Aim is to expose them to the feared context / place
- Build in rewards: small daily ones for younger, point to add to larger, later one for teens

How to support parents



- Working together as a team
- Validating parents
- You can not calm someone if you are not calm your self
- Modelling coping skills and teaching calm down skills.
- Parents can use the STOP skill to manage their distress during their child / young person's anxious episode
- https://youtu.be/bZuioqGM2Vs?si=cuP-bYUb_-js0fGI
- Free Resources (therapyinanutshell.com)

How to support children / young people with anxiety



Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



Graded exposure

Red and green thoughts



Validation & rewards

How to support children / young people with anxiety



Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



Graded exposure

Red and green thoughts



Validation & rewards

Validation

- Validation communicates to another person that their feelings. Thoughts, actions make sense and are understandable to you in a particular situation. Validation does not necessarily mean that you like or agree with what the other person is doing, saying, or feeling. It means that you understand where the other person is coming from.
- What should we validate? Feelings, thoughts, and behaviour. Validate the valid.
- Tips for validating:

- Replacing ***but*** with ***and***
- Validate the valid, such as someone's emotion. You can validate that a young person is upset about failing the test without validating they didn't study.
- Actively listening
- Rephrasing
- Praise is not always validating
- Don't minimise the experience



How to Validate



- **Validate**: communicate to the other person you can see they're struggling with feelings / thoughts. "I can see you're struggling" "you seem frustrated... sad .... anxious"
- **Reassure**: "it's ok to feel that way" "we can figure it out together"
- **Direct**: "what do you think will be helpful right now?" "What can you do to settle?"
- **Easy manner**: use non-threatening body and verbal language. Do not communicate with judgement about their worries or their response.

Things to keep in mind:

- Why are they upset currently
- Aim to find a solution together
- Be clear about your role and how to support them. Is this an appropriate time / place to be discussing this topic?
- Changing langue to AND rather than BUT

How to Validate

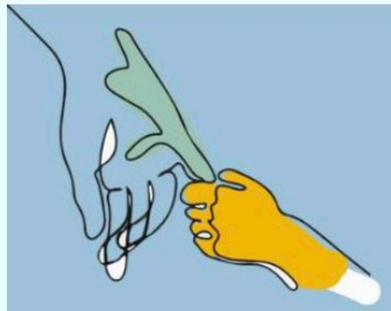


- Example: “I can see you are very upset about this situation/ I’m sorry you feel that way. Let focus on what we can do right now to help and not waste anymore time”

- “It sounds like that situation has been very stressful for you, lets set aside 5 mins at lunchtime to talk about this”

- Stick to the boundary of the agreed timeframe that they will engage with learning, making sure that young person feels validated while sticking to the timeframe. (what is the next step in the plan should they not stick to it)

- Listen
- Reflect
- Summarise
- Redirect/ strategies
- Boundary



Validation and Boundaries sound like:

"I hear you, you really wish we could have pizza for dinner. I know it's hard to not get what you want.
Tonight, this is what we're having.
Let's plan together when we can have pizza next."

@dr.siggie

Brief Interventions

- **TALK** to the child / young person about their worries - listen carefully, validate, affirm and reflect
- Do not dismiss their worries
- **Describe** anxiety as a natural reaction to stress that affects our thoughts, emotions and behaviour
- **Help them find solutions** - this could be discussing concerns with school faculty, talking to their friend's parents about a sleepover, ...

Brief Interventions

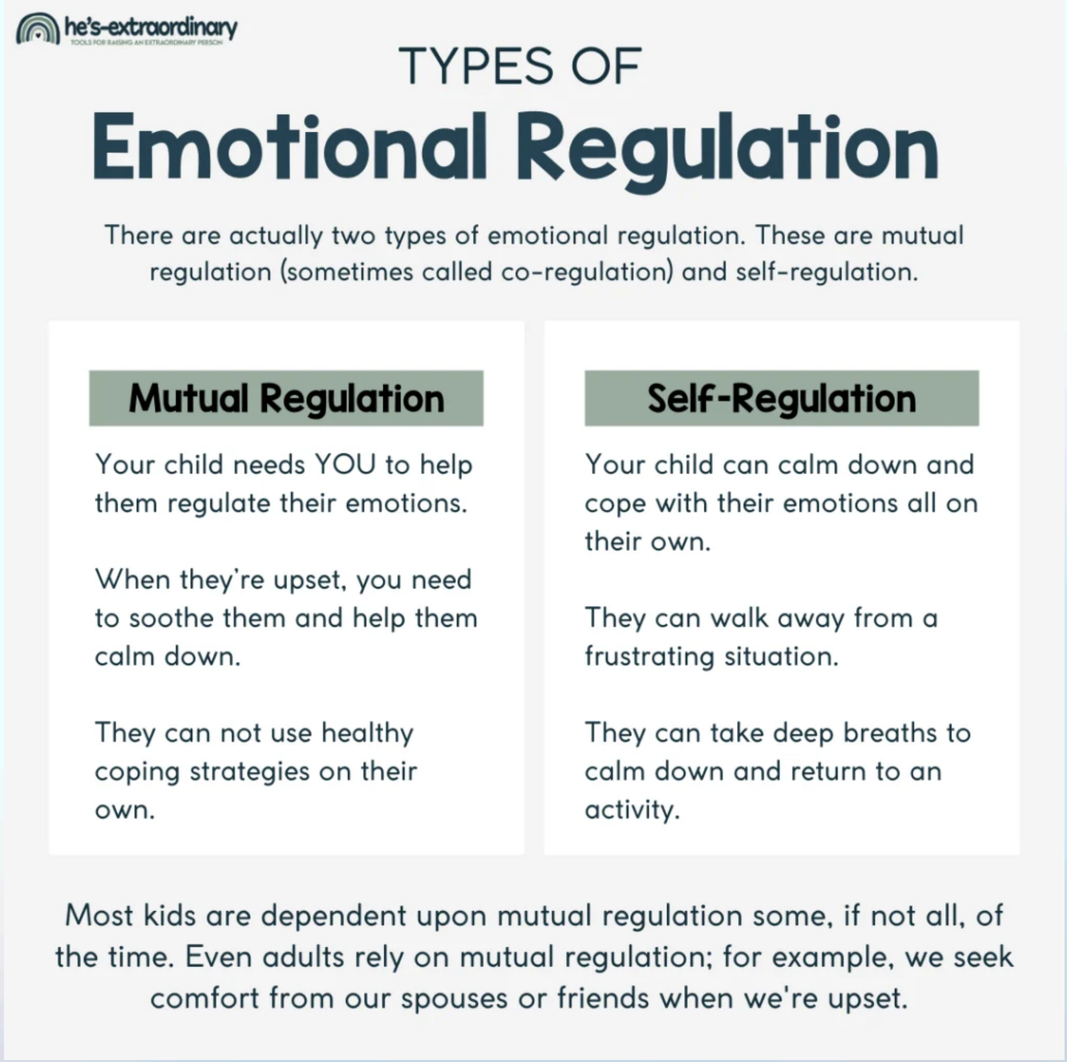
- **Teach** the young person to recognise the signs and symptoms in themselves
- **Encourage** then to ask for help
- Stick to **routine** - these are reassuring
- **Prepare** the young person for stressful experiences like exams, house moves, new schools.



Self regulation

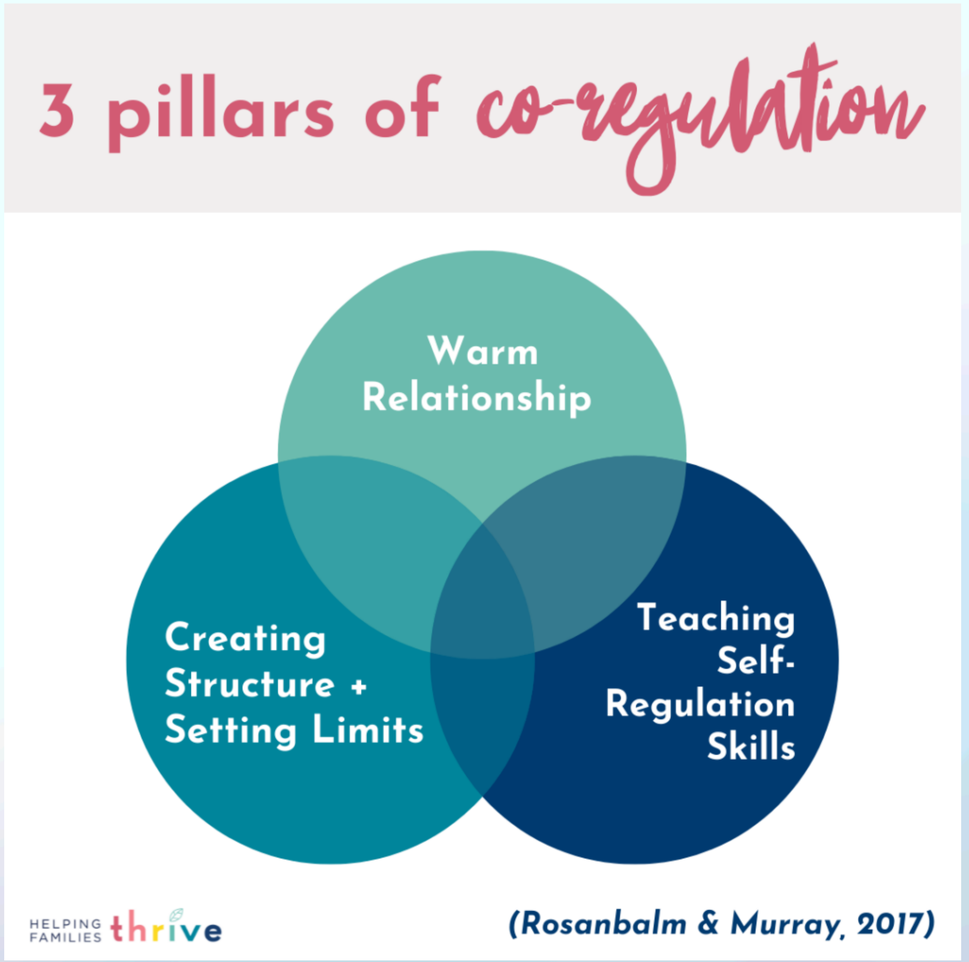
- The child brain seeks the adult brain, when discussing/ feeling overwhelming things. If the adult is looking/ responding in a stressed or heightened manner, this escalates the child further.
- Co-regulation is the supportive process between a caring adult and their young person that fosters self-regulation

- There is no age developmental age that a young person can self regulate every time.

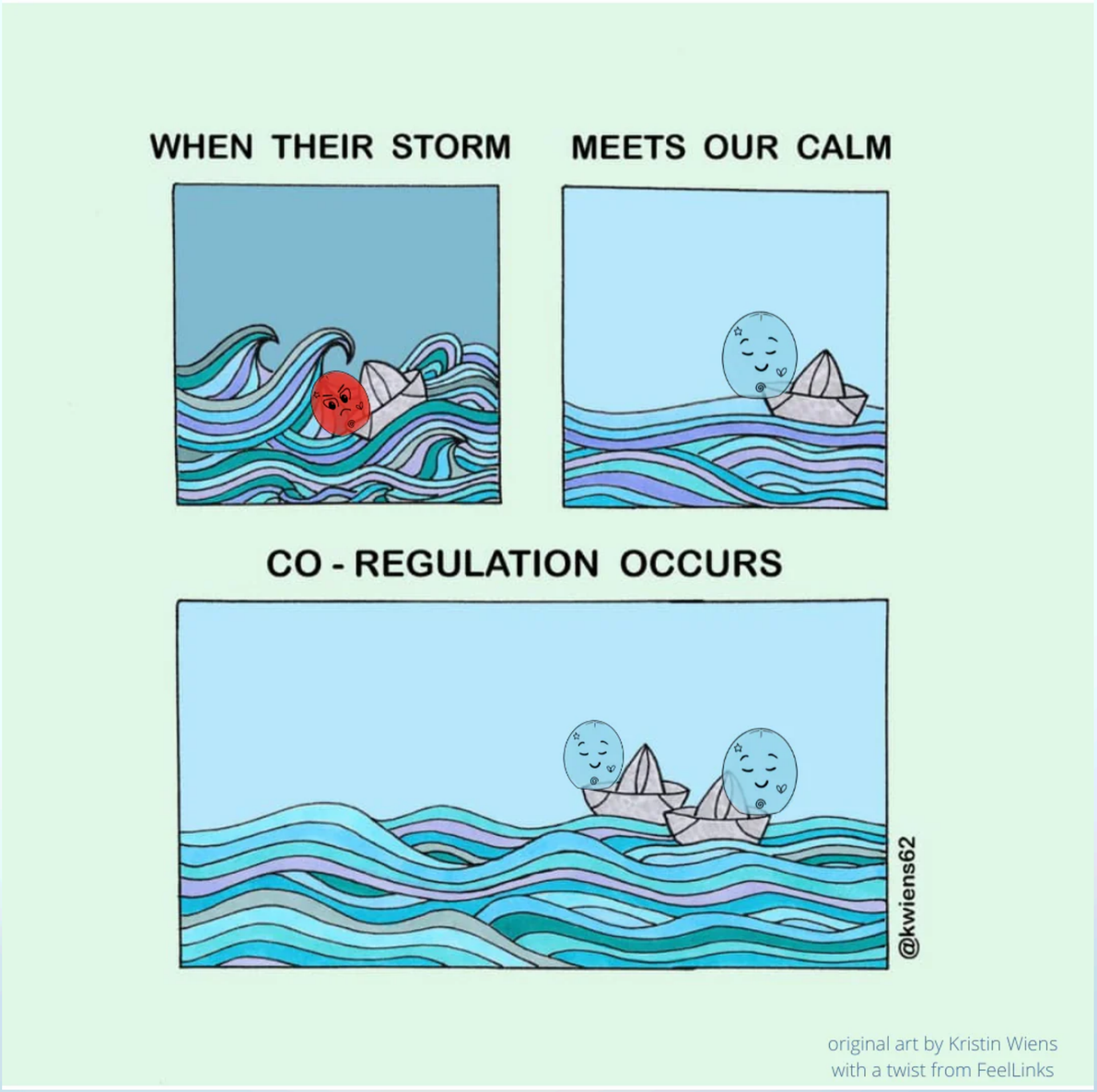


Co-regulation

- Effective co-regulation by a key adult will promote self-efficacy and allow a young person to feel secure enough to practice new skills and learn from mistakes.
- There are many different words for co-regulation (emotional coaching, modelling) they all have the same principles.
- Modelling is one of the most useful skills to show child/ youth how to regulate emotions in a positive way.
- Co-regulation is useful for all ages.



Three Pillars of Co-Regulation - Helping Families Thrive


WHEN THEIR STORM
MEETS OUR CALM
CO - REGULATION OCCURS
@kwiens62
original art by Kristin Wiens
with a twist from FeelLinks

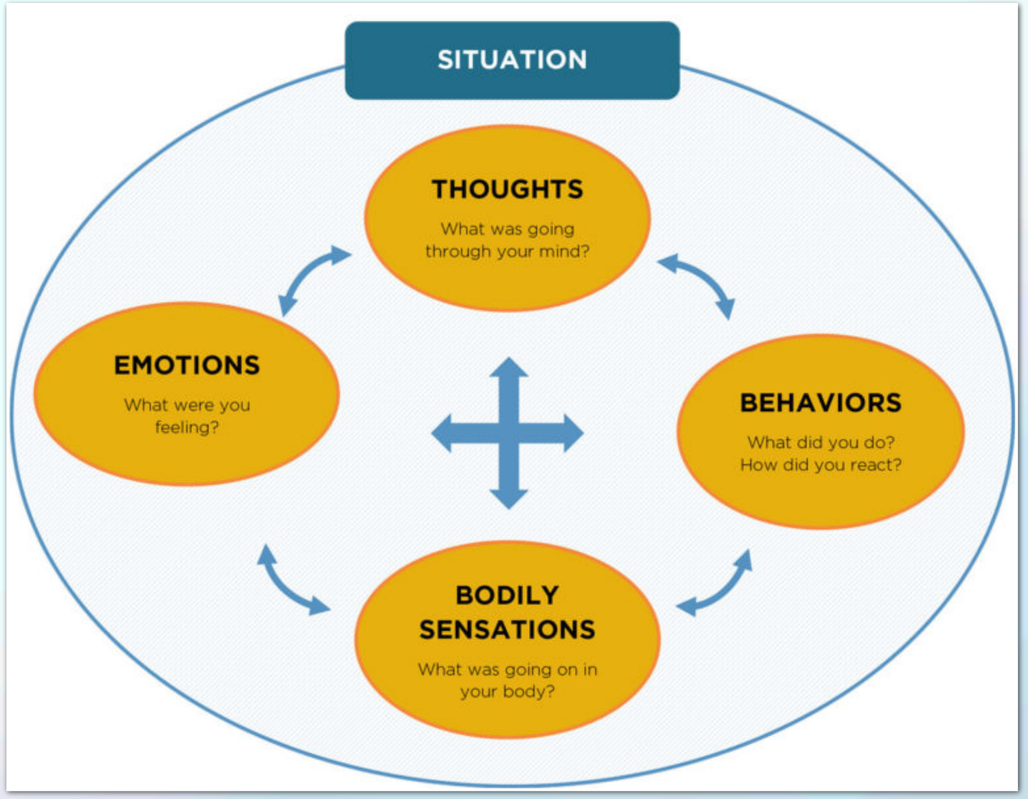
Co-regulation strategies

Co-Regulating Moves	This Might Look Like:
 Set the scene	*Using lighting as a cue – dimmer to bring the energy down, brighter to bring the energy up*
 Match volume and tone	*When a situation is escalating, keeping a quiet or moderate volume with a serious, calm, steady tone*
 Check your physical presence	*Getting on students' eye level to balance power*
 Use reflecting language	*Naming the emotions students express as a way to show you are listening to or seeing them*
 Prompt strategies and choices	*Remind students of available supports or strategies, when they might not be at their best*

What Is Co-Regulation and What Does It Look Like in the Classroom? - Center for Whole-Child Education (Turnaround for Children) (turnaroundusa.org)

Modelling

- Teachers talking through a model like CBT, when they are feeling slightly heightened in emotions
- Alternatively can use te whare tapa wha
- Completing a collective class regulation activity when the teacher does this modelling activity.
- This demonstrates a positive way to process thoughts, feelings and actions while also teaching a positive coping skill
- This is able to fit in to any school policy and procedures/ programmes



Modelling


Te Whare Tapa Whā
Taha wairua
Spiritual
Taha hinengaro
Mental & emotional
Taha tinana
Physical
Taha whānau
Family & social
Whenua
Land, roots

How to support children / young people with anxiety



Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



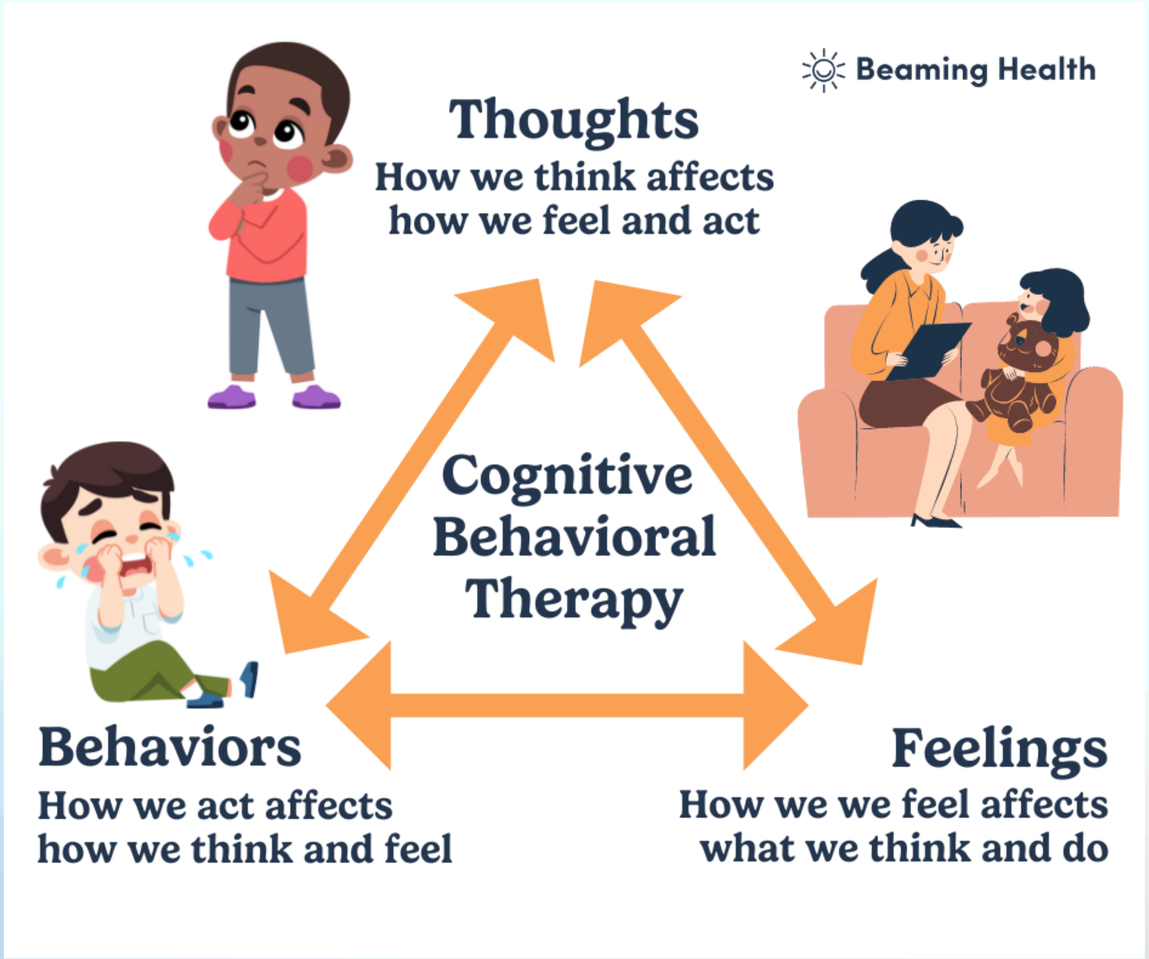
Graded exposure

Red and green thoughts



Validation & rewards

Red and Green Thoughts



RED THOUGHTS

- "Unhelpful thoughts"
- Tend to make us feel anxious and less confident and stop us from doing things we want and need to do.

GREEN THOUGHTS

- "Helpful thoughts"
- Tend to be more positive and strengths-based and help us to do what we want and need to do!
- Can be a direct challenge of a red thought

HOW TO CHANGE THOUGHTS

- Swapping negative thoughts for positive or realistic thoughts

How to support children / young people with anxiety



Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



Graded exposure

Red and green thoughts



Validation & rewards

Graded Exposure

- Is a form of CBT is useful for people with phobias or OCD
- Exposure therapy is the most effective treatment for anxiety
- Facing the anxiety in small manageable steps, to build confidence and desensitise

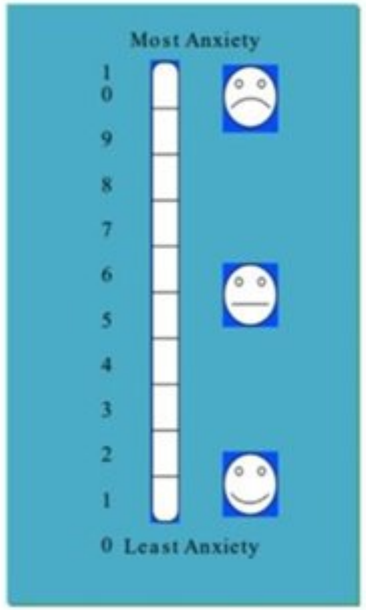


Exposure Therapy: Definition, Types, & Techniques | Sandstone Care

Graded exposure therapy

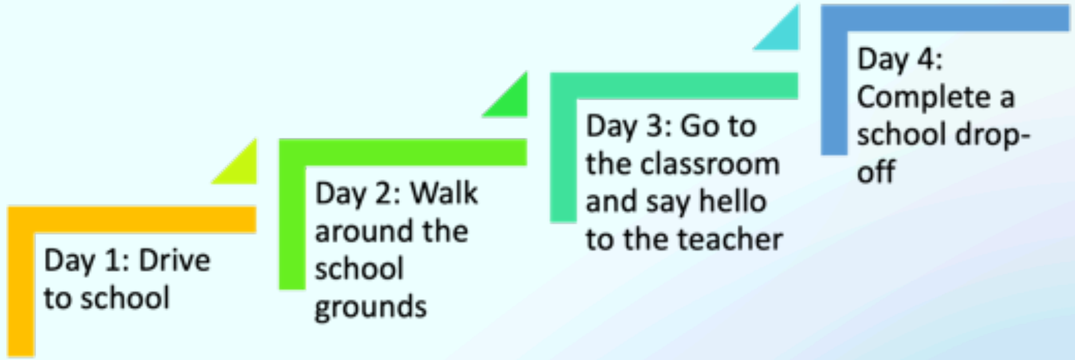
School Attendance Hierarchy

Fear Thermometer (SUDS)

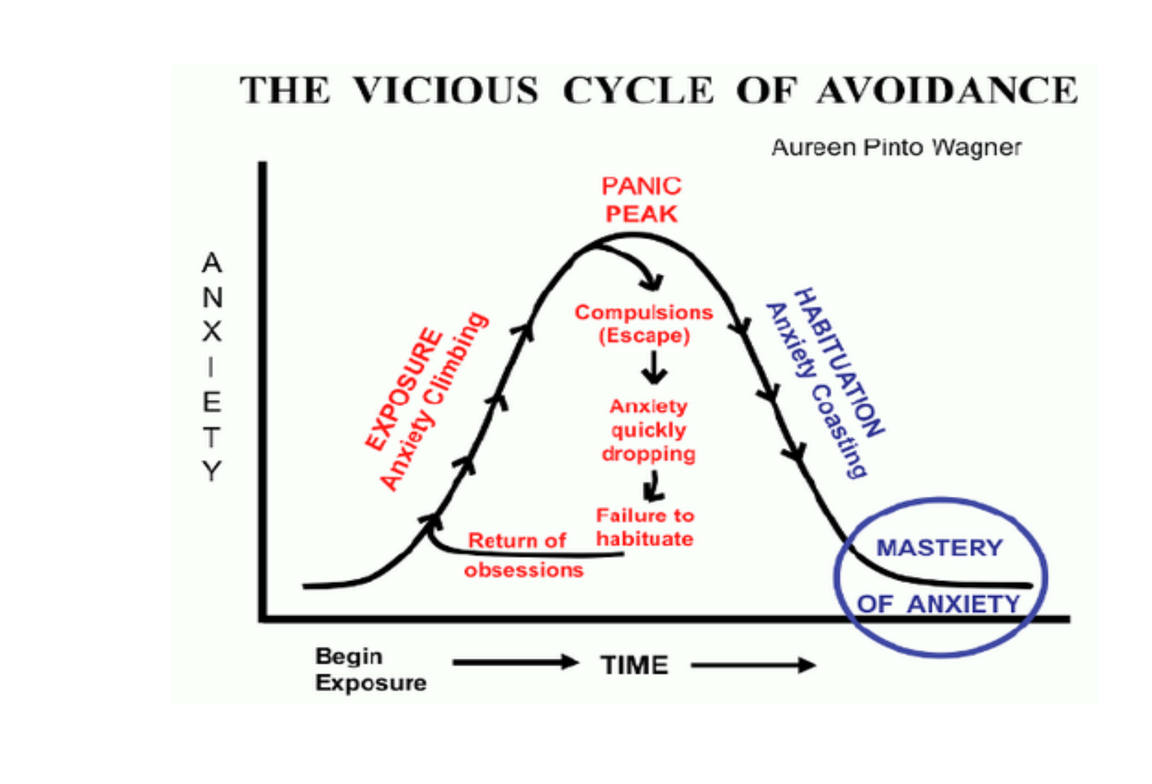


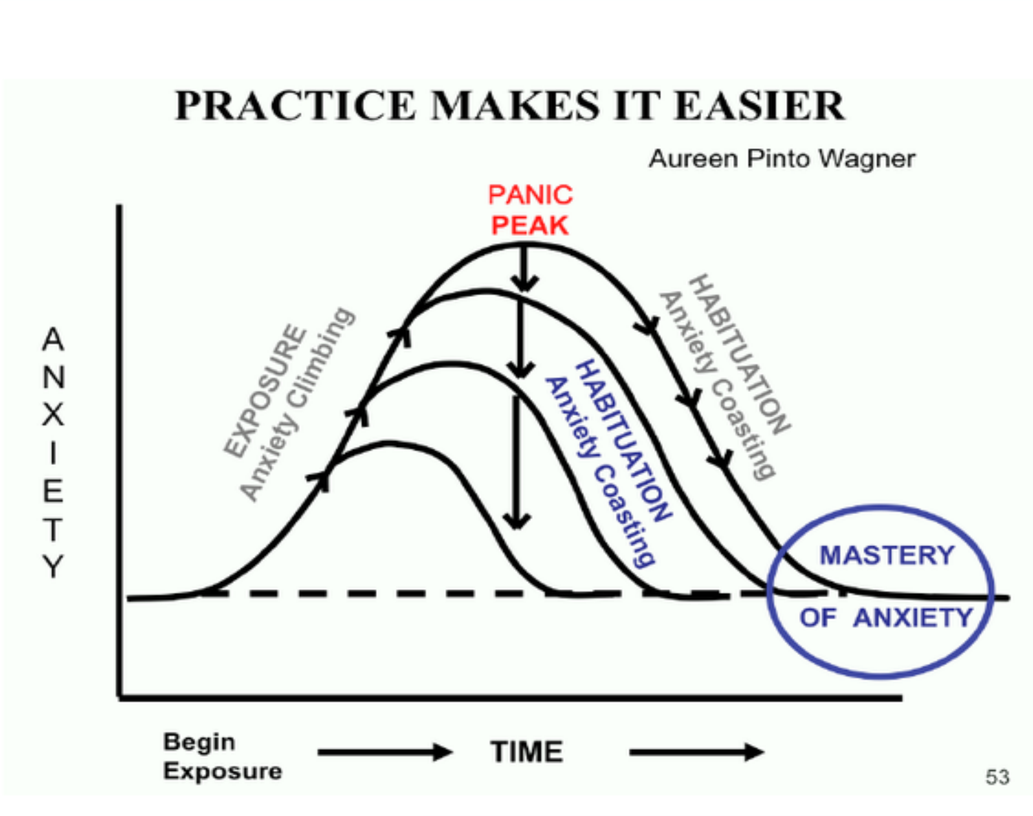
School Refusal Fear Hierarchy

Situation	SUDS
Spending a whole day in school	10
Spending 2 hours at school	8
Going to select classes, rest of day in library	7
Go to school in AM; sit in library	7
Visit a teacher at school	5
Meet with guidance counselor	4
Talk to a teacher on the phone	3
Regulate morning routine	2



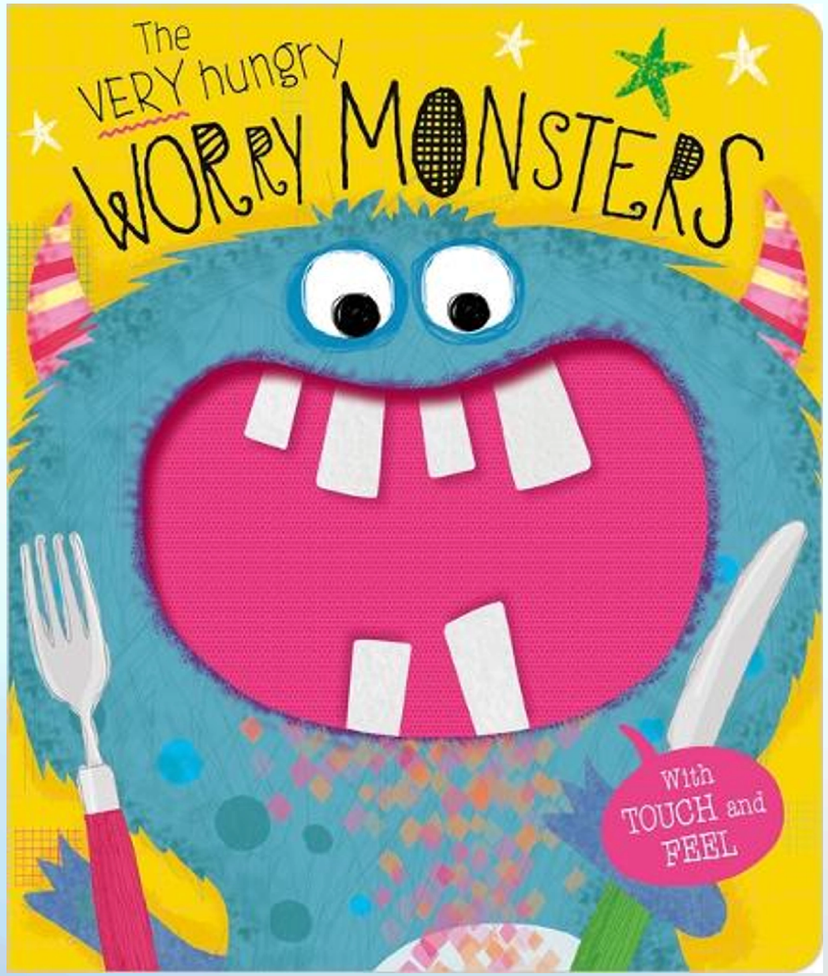
Cycle of Avoidance





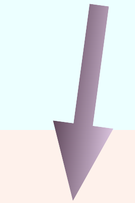
FROM UP AND DOWN WORRY HILL – Areen Pinto Wagner

Externalisation



- A useful tool to help children with anxiety is to externalise it. This helps the young person feel like the blame of what they are feeling is not on them and can be directed at the unhelpful thought/ reaction to the anxiety.
- It can remind the young person that they have choices in how they respond to emotions. The easiest way to do this is to describe it as a creature that is separate from themselves, they could draw what they think it looks like and give it a name. for older children it could be described as going to battle against the anxious thoughts.
- Externalising anxiety helps young people learn that they are in control of their anxiety, that they are the boss of there thoughts and can disregard anxious thoughts if they wish.

How to support children / young people with anxiety





Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



Graded exposure

Red and green thoughts



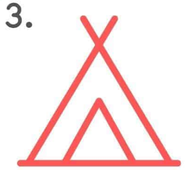
Validation & rewards

Sensory Toolkit



Sensory Diet Example

Child is overstimulated after school

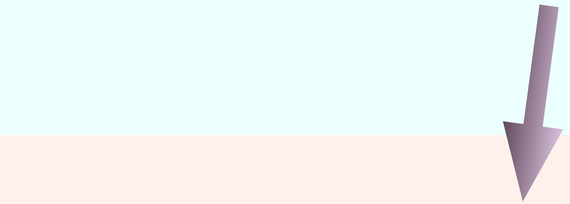
1. 
2. 
3. 

Sensory Profile

Student:

Sensitivity	Seeks	Avoids	Strategies
Touch 	•	•	•
Auditory/ Listening 	•	•	•
Vision 	•	•	•
Taste and Smell 	•	•	•
Proprioception (Body Sense)	•	•	•

How to support children / young people with anxiety



Sensory strategies



Breathing exercises and grounding



Graded exposure

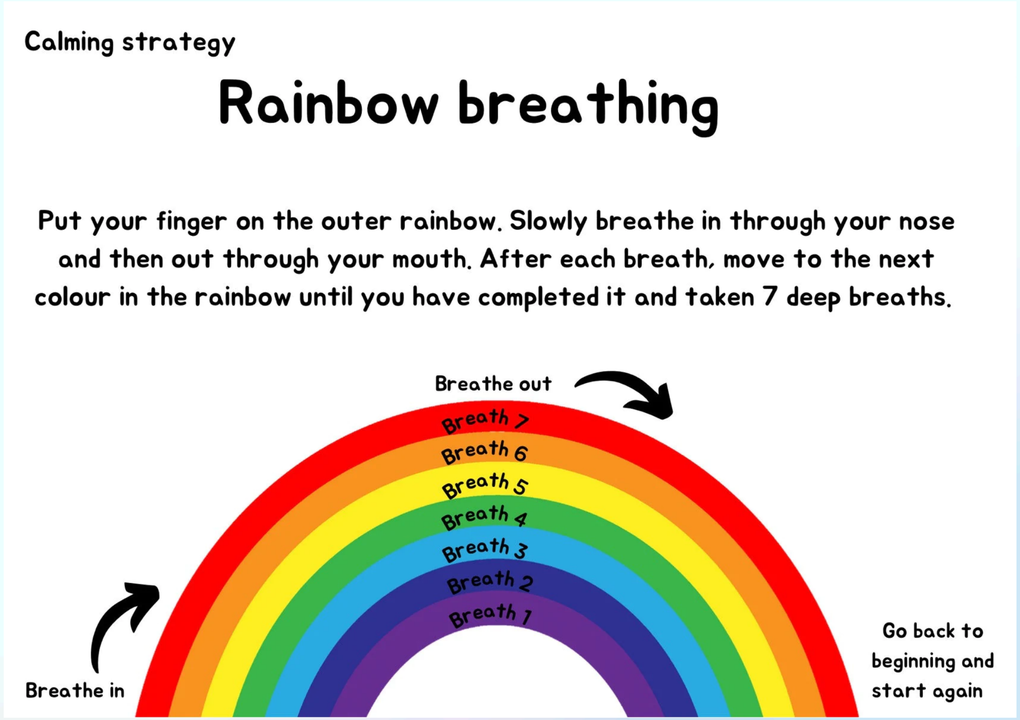
Red and green thoughts



Validation & rewards

Breathing and grounding



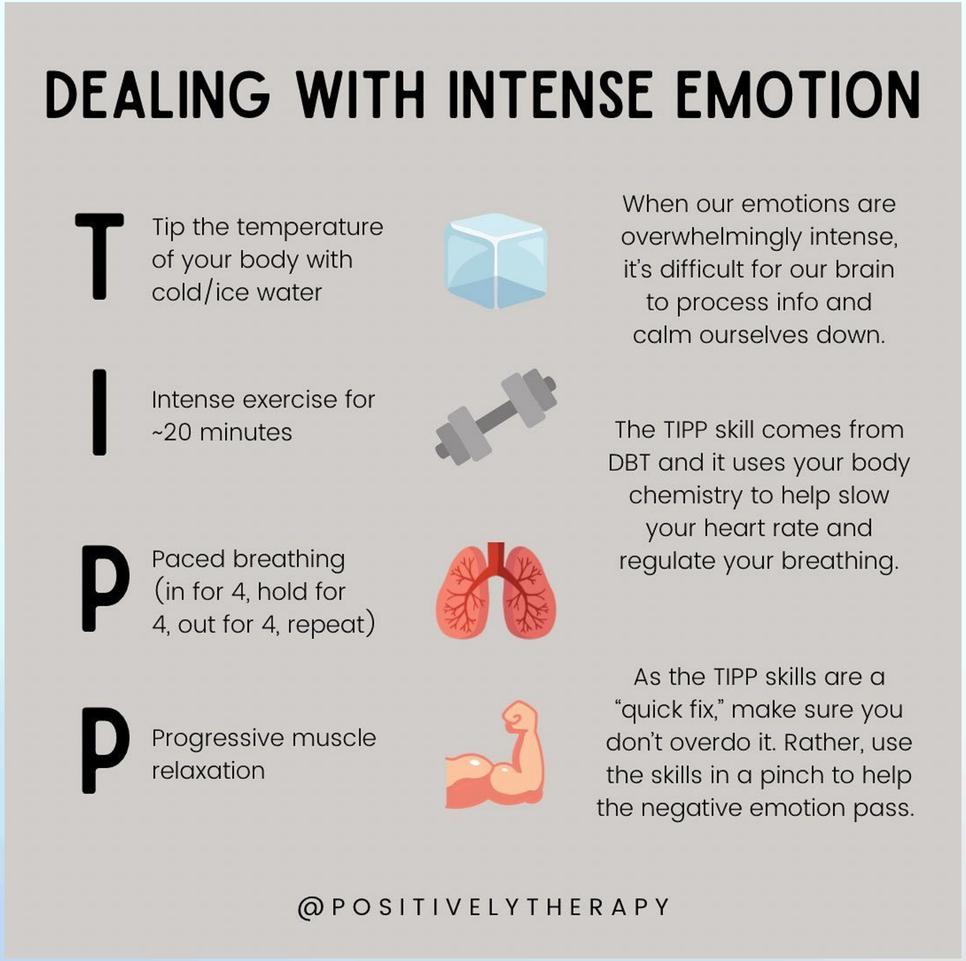


Grounding Techniques





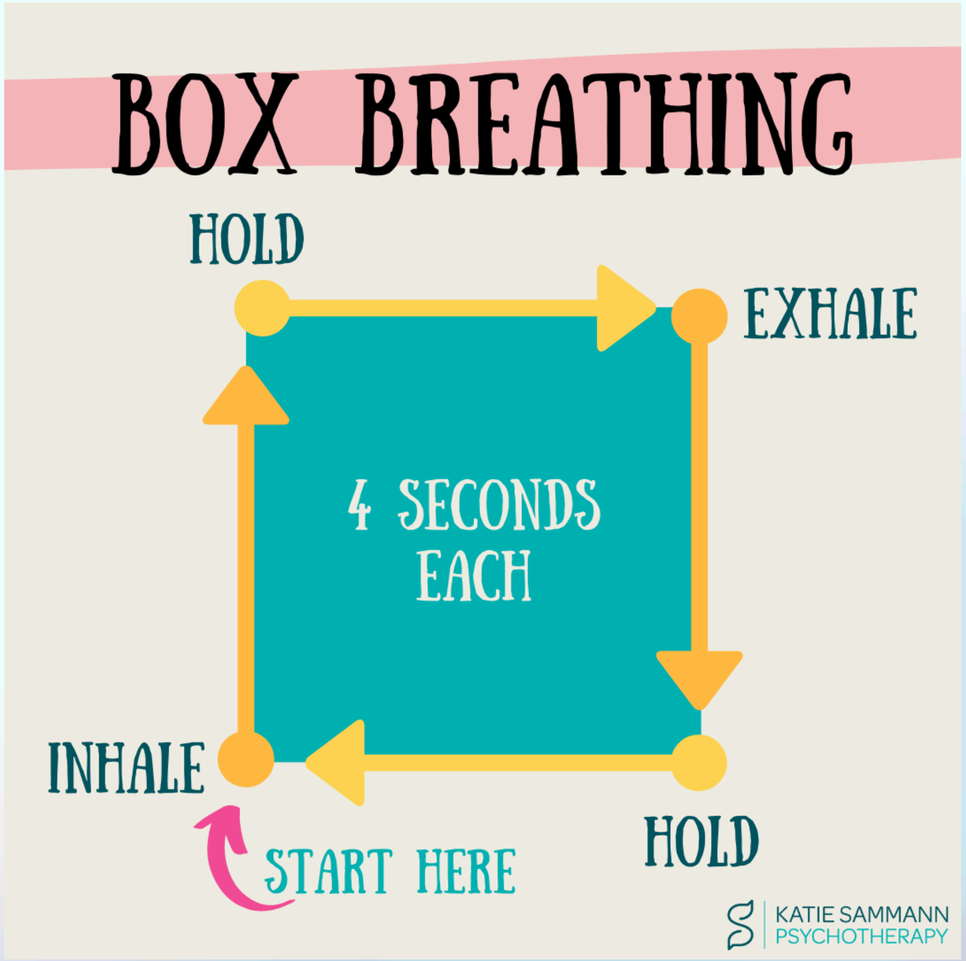
TIPP skills



- And these skills can be used to manage the **anticipatory anxiety** that comes before attempting the anxiety provoking activity
- For example: the night before, the morning of.

Regulating breathing





When to refer ….

- GP practice
  - helpful to get fuller picture, background and family history
  - check for medical issues e.g. iron deficiency
  - access primary care counselling: HIP, counsellors, psychologists
  - if > 16 yr and need medication or refer to ICAMHS for support
  - If school have tried supporting parents, young person and graded exposure —> ICAMHS
- Neurodiverse young people
  - Burnt out, depleted social battery and need specialist support
  - parents burnt out and need specialist support

Additional resources

Websites:

- www.anxietycanada.com
- https://www.melonhealth.com/manual/anxiety-toolbox/
- Anxiety Toolbox - Melon (melonhealth.com)
- https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/behaviour-and-learning/teach-stress-management-anxiety-and-or
- https://theawesomeinc.co.nz/
- Anxiety Self-Help Resources - Information Sheets, Worksheets & Workbooks (health.wa.gov.au)
- https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-after-yourself/anxiety

Counselling agencies:

- Triple P Fear less- online course for parents

Books:

- What to do when you worry too much- Dawn Huebner
- Outsmarting Worry - Dawn Heubner
- Helping your anxious child – Ronald Rapee
- Hey Warrior / Hey Awesome – Karen Young
- Aroha's Way - A Children's Guide through Emotions – Craig Philips



Case discussion /Questions?

