



EU funds
for Malta
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Helping young people
successfully manage their

ANXIETY

An introductory information booklet
about anxiety in young people
for parents and guardians

ankrayouth.org



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a word we use to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear, and we all experience it from time to time. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something.

Most people can relate to feeling tense, uncertain and, perhaps, fearful at the thought of sitting an exam, going into hospital, attending an interview or starting a new job. In turn, these worries can affect your sleep, appetite and ability to concentrate. If everything goes well, the anxiety will go away.

This type of lower-level, short-term anxiety is a normal biological reaction and can be useful. It causes our bodies to release a quick burst of adrenalin that produces extra energy, more muscle power and speeds our brain up. That can help us in things like enhancing our performance in exams or escaping from physical danger.

When does anxiety become a problem?

Because anxiety is a normal human experience, it's hard to know when it's becoming a problem for you, and it's even harder to identify it in someone else, like your child. When feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time, they can become overwhelming and interfere with everyday life.

It is estimated that

23%
of 5-10 year-olds and

26%
of 11-16 year-olds

are likely to have
anxiety problems



What causes anxiety?

It's hard to know why some young people experience debilitating anxiety and others don't. Anxiety conditions aren't caused by a single factor but a combination of things, such as the below.

Past experiences

If something distressing happened to your child in the past, they might feel anxious about facing similar situations again in case they stir up the same feelings of distress.

Feeling anxious could also be something they learned early on in life. For example, if their family or guardians tended to see the world as hostile or dangerous, they may have learned to feel the same way.

Ongoing stressful events

Anxiety conditions may develop because of one or more stressful life events. Common triggers include:

- change in living arrangements
- work stress or job change
- family and relationship problems
- major emotional shock following a stressful or traumatic event
- verbal, sexual, physical or emotional abuse or trauma
- death or loss of a loved one
- pregnancy and giving birth

Personality factors

Children who are perfectionists, easily flustered, timid, inhibited, lack self-esteem or want to control everything, sometimes develop anxiety during childhood, adolescence or as adults.

Physical Health factors

Chronic physical illness can also contribute to anxiety conditions

or impact on the treatment of either the anxiety or the physical illness itself. Common chronic conditions associated with anxiety conditions include diabetes, asthma, hypertension and heart disease.

Genetics

Some people might inherit a genetic tendency to be more anxious than others and these conditions can sometimes run in a family. However, having a parent or close relative experience anxiety or other mental health condition doesn't mean you'll automatically develop anxiety.

Other mental health conditions

While some people may experience an anxiety condition on its own, others may experience multiple anxiety conditions, or other mental health conditions. Depression and anxiety conditions often occur together.

Substance use

Some people who experience anxiety may use alcohol or other drugs to help them manage their condition. In some cases, this may lead to people developing a substance use problem along with their anxiety condition, which can aggravate anxiety particularly as the effects of the substance wear off. It's important to check for and get assistance for any substance use conditions too.

Recognising anxiety

Parents and guardians may easily miss warning signs from a child who is experiencing anxiety. Learning about anxiety can help you understand what is happening in your child and allow you to intervene in a timely manner.

The four parts of anxiety

Anxiety can be seen as having four main parts.

The first is **the emotional part**. This may be one of overwhelming fear. When dealing with anxiety it is also common to have feelings of anger, sadness, shame or guilt.

The second is **the physical part**. This includes panic attacks, hot and cold flushes, racing heart, tightening of the chest, quick breathing, restlessness, or feeling tense, wound up and edgy.

The third is **the psychological part**: anxious thoughts. This may include detailed mental pictures of an awful event, or it may be a thought that the person cannot cope or isn't good enough.

How your child responds to these parts forms the fourth, **the behavioural part**. This includes everything from finding it difficult to speak to running away or self-harming.

The vicious circle

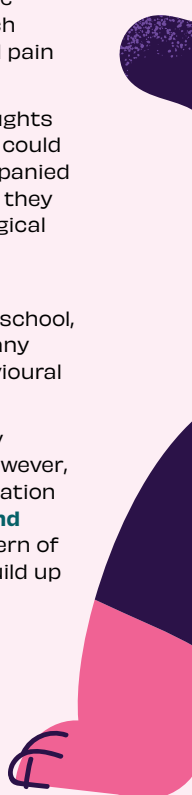
As an example to illustrate the four parts of anxiety; a child anxious at the thought of having to attend school may manifest feelings of fear and possibly anger, sadness or shame (the emotional part).

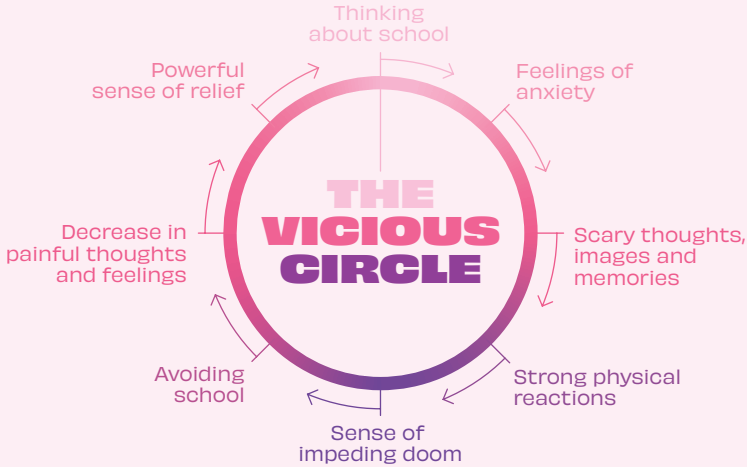
The child might then experience strong physical reactions, which could include very real physical pain (the physical part).

The child may have lots of thoughts about all the awful things that could happen in school, often accompanied by an absolute conviction that they cannot handle it (the psychological part).

This then leads to an active avoidance of the situation, e.g. school, or possibly even avoidance of any reminders of school (the behavioural part).

Avoidance of the situation may reduce anxiety at that time, however, when faced with the same situation again, **the anxiety will return and increase**. With a repeated pattern of anxiety these feelings often build up into a vicious circle.





How anxiety manifests itself

Anxiety is not dangerous. It is uncomfortable, but when managed will eventually decrease. When anxiety gets out of control, it can show itself in different ways:

- Clinging, crying and/or tantrums when you separate
- Excessive shyness/avoiding social situations
- Constant worry and negative thinking
- Feeling stressed/overwhelmed
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive sweating
- Heart pounding
- Butterflies in stomach
- Complaints of frequent stomach aches or headaches
- Difficulty with concentration
- Low mood/depression
- Unable to enjoy things
- Getting cross with loved ones often
- Panic/anxiety attacks.

How can I help my child?

As a parent or guardian, you can play a big part in managing and reducing anxiety in your child.

The first step is recognising the signs – the earlier children are given coping mechanisms, the greater the chance of them not needing medication in the future. The idea is to get to them early enough that medication is not needed because it should always be a last resort.

You can also:

Empathise with them

Try to think about how you feel when you are anxious about something yourself, and how you prefer people to help you – for example, by remaining calm and allowing some time for your anxiety to pass. Even though your child's situation might be different, this might help you better understand how they feel when they're going through a bad time.

Try not to pressure them

When your child is experiencing a problem it's understandable to want to help them face their fear, or focus on leading them towards practical solutions. But it can be very distressing for children to feel forced to face situations before they're ready – and it could even make them feel more anxious. By staying calm and listening to your child's wishes, you can support them to do what they feel comfortable with.

Learn about anxiety

You might feel more able to help your child manage their anxiety if you learn more about it yourself. The very fact you're reading this booklet is a great start. Organisations such as Richmond provide information and support through the ANKRA project for children, family members, guardians, carers and friends.

Talk to your child about anxiety

Many young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack. Talk to them about what anxiety is, what is happening in their body, and why. Understanding what is going on, what it is called, and why it happens can really help.

Helping your child to recognise their anxious feelings early on will also help them to ask for help.



Help them with techniques to manage their anxiety

There are a range of techniques you can try to manage your child's anxiety. What works is different for everyone, and it can take time to find the strategies that work best. But remember, if your child's anxiety is proving difficult to manage, seek support from a professional.

1: Slow and deep breathing. When your child is anxious, their breathing becomes faster and shallower. Help them slow down their breathing by counting to three as they breathe in slowly, then count to four as they breathe out slowly. Repeat this for around 10 times.

2: Finding a 'safe place' in their mind. Prepare a quiet location in your house. Soft lighting, such as only having a lampshade on, can help. Talk to your child about finding a 'safe place' in their mind i.e. somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be a grandparent's or friend's house or a holiday beside the sea etc. which they can picture when the negative thoughts come into their head or they are feeling anxious. Sometimes holding a memento like a seashell or pebble can help.

3: Designate a 'worry time'. Dedicate 10 or 20 minutes in the early evening (not when your child is in bed) for your child to list their worries in a 'worry box' or 'worry diary'. This way, worries can be saved up for that time. They can post their worries every day if it helps, or leave the worries in there and take them out after a week to see if they were worth worrying about (if not they can be torn up). This will give the message that the worries are not dangerous and can be contained.

4: Promote a healthy lifestyle. Keeping active, eating and sleeping well, going out into nature, spending time with family and friends and carrying out enjoyable activities are all effective in reducing anxiety and improving your child's wellbeing.

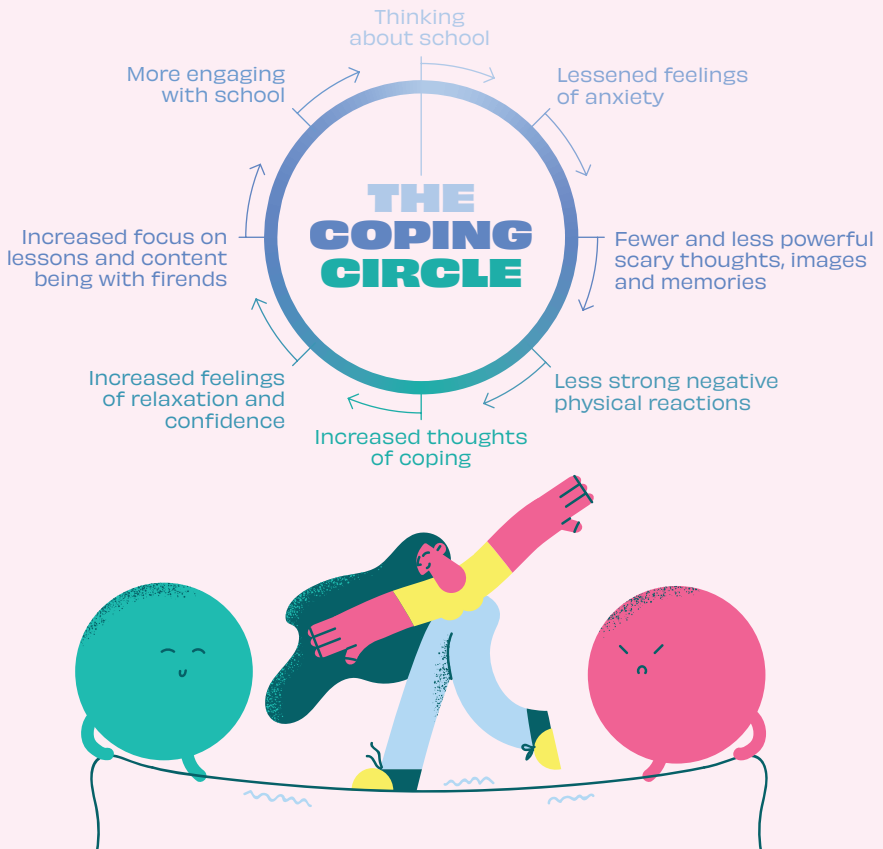
Dealing with the situation that is causing anxiety

Successful work involves you, your child, and others around them to investigate and assess the 'awfulness' of the situation. This means dealing with realistic concerns such as bullying, gently challenging fears that have grown out of proportion, and checking if your child is over estimating the likelihood of the bad things happening.

It is also important to find ways to deal with these understandable anxieties. Furthermore, it is vital to ensure that strong feelings do not

spill over into blaming your child, yourself or other parties such as your child's school for causing or maintaining the anxiety, as this will serve only to increase tensions and lead to your child feeling more anxious.

Most important of all, it is vital to teach yourself and your child effective coping strategies to deal with any feared situations. With these kinds of interventions and attitudes to anxiety, the previous vicious circle may be turned into a coping circle.



Common reactions to avoid

Feelings of anxiety in a young person can be increased by things offered to demonstrate support for them. For example:

- Displaying your own anxiety about your child's situation
- Minimising or dismissing their feelings relating to the anxiety
- Encouraging the avoidance of a challenging situation because of the short-term relief it brings (*see the Vicious Circle on pg5*).

Encourage them to seek help – have the conversation

It's important to seek support early if experiencing anxiety. The symptoms may not go away on their own and if left untreated, they can start to take over one's life.

Are you worried about a young person and not sure what to say? Do you worry that you might make things worse? You want to help them, but not sure how? It all starts with a conversation.

Even if you aren't sure quite what to say, the important thing is that you say something. Let them know that you are concerned and why. By starting a conversation and showing your concern and willingness to support them, you're giving them an opportunity to share what they are going through. This can make all the difference in ensuring they get any support they might need.

If your child's anxiety is becoming a problem for them, you could talk to them about getting help. It is worth noting that, in Malta, young persons under 16 years of age need



to get consent from their parents or guardians if they wish to get help from organisations like Richmond.

If they are anxious about getting help, you could help calm their fears by offering to attend an appointment with them or to explore sources of support together.

Look after yourself

It's important for people who are supporting someone with anxiety to look after themselves, both physically and emotionally.

They need to stay strong and reliable, not only for the person they're supporting, but also for themselves. This is important because the constant, sometimes overwhelming, nature of being a support person can put a person at greater risk of developing a mental health condition themselves.

What anxiety disorders are there?

There are several types of anxiety and panic disorders, because people respond to anxiety in different ways. Some of the more common disorders are outlined below.

Phobias

A phobia is an intense fear of something, even when that thing is very unlikely to be dangerous. If your child has a phobia, their anxiety may be triggered by very specific situations or objects.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

Children may be diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder if they have felt anxious for a long time and often feel fearful, but are not anxious about anything in particular. The strength of symptoms can vary.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a diagnosis your child might be given if their anxiety leads them to experience both:

- **obsessions** – such as thoughts about being contaminated with germs or fear that they have forgotten to lock the door.
- **compulsions** – such as washing their hands or do things in a particular order or keep repeating what they are doing a certain number of times.



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

If your child develops strong feelings of anxiety after experiencing or witnessing something very traumatic, they might be given a diagnosis of PTSD. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares about the traumatic event, which can feel like they are re-living all the fear and anxiety they experienced during the actual event.

Panic disorder

Panic attacks may sometimes occur for no reason, and your child may not be able to understand why. They may feel as if their mind has gone totally out of control, leading them to experience panic disorder. Because the onset of panic seems unpredictable, they may live in fear of having another panic attack. This fear can become so intense it can trigger another panic attack.

What sort of treatments are available?

If you find that anxiety is affecting your child's ability to cope with everyday life and want help, your doctor can help you find out what options are available. The most common forms of treatment offered are talking therapies, self-help resources and medication.

Talking therapies, mainly CBT

Talking therapies (also known as talking treatments) are a process in which your child works with a trained therapist to understand the causes of their anxiety, and to find strategies to manage it. There are lots of different types of talking therapies available, but the most commonly prescribed talking therapy for anxiety is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), because there is reliable evidence that it can be effective. CBT aims to identify connections between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and help your child develop practical skills to manage these more positively.

Self-help resources and Anxiety Management Strategies

Self-help resources are tools that have been developed by health care professionals for your child to use by themselves or with the help of their parents or guardians, and can be helpful in managing anxiety. These can be in the form of self-help workbooks which can be found in various bookshops or charities such as Richmond.

Anxiety Management Strategies include helpful exercises such as Staying in the present moment and challenging negative self-talk.

Medical Treatment

There are four types of medication which can be helpful in managing anxiety: antidepressants, beta blockers, tranquillisers (benzodiazepines), and pregabalin (an anticonvulsant drug).

Antidepressants and other medications can make you feel better, but they won't change your personality or make you feel happy all the time. Like taking any other medication, some people will experience some side effects, and individuals should discuss the risks and benefits with their doctor. People should also ask for information about the medications so that they can make an informed decision.

Depending on which medication is taken, common side effects can include nausea, headaches, anxiety, sweating, dizziness, agitation, weight gain, dry mouth and sexual difficulties (e.g. difficulty becoming/staying aroused).



Be part of reducing the stigma towards mental health.

A key element in reducing stigma related to mental health is for everyone within the community to have a good understanding of it – that is, improving our mental health literacy.

There are three key elements to mental health literacy:

- **knowledge of signs and symptoms of poor mental health**
- **knowledge of prevention and management techniques**
- **knowledge of how to support others**

It is important that we all play our part in challenging any misconceptions around anxiety with the intention to bring perceptions in line with reality.

Useful support:

www.oli.chat

Richmond's free, 24/7 webchat offering emotional support and practical guidance.

kellimni.com

A free, 24/7 support service managed by SOS Malta.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh

Provides youths with a safe space to express views, needs and concerns.

Youth in Focus Service

Provides social work intervention to adolescents and young persons.

ANKRA is a project set up by Richmond for young people affected by mental health problems in Malta.

We are here to provide help, information and support.

Helpline: **1770**

Helpchat: **www.oli.chat**

info@ankrayouth.org

ankrayouth.org



**SUPPORTING
MENTAL WELLBEING
IN YOUTHS**



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