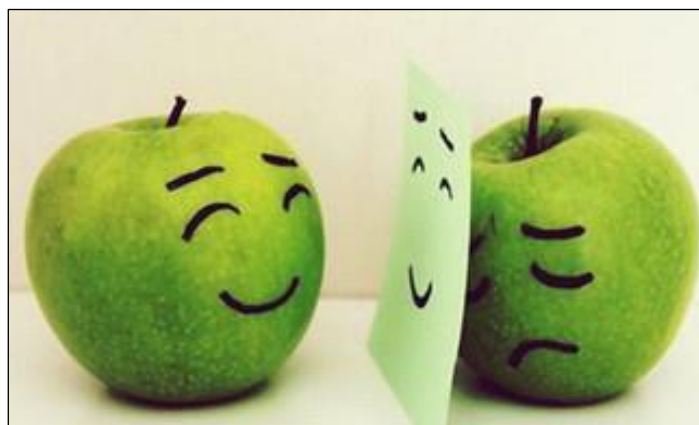


Returning to School

Parents' and Carers' Wellbeing Information June 2020

How are you feeling....?



"There is no health without mental health." (World Health Organization, 2009)

Our emotional and physical health can be severely compromised during these unsettling times. **Self-care** is very important, as we are often the last person we think about and look after.

It's particularly important at this time to enable ourselves to be as resilient as possible for our own positive mental health, but also to help us manage and alleviate our children's worries and provide them with reassurance. We all will have had a different experience during this lockdown, and it is important to recognise that not all of us - adults or children - will be feeling comfortable in ourselves or about returning to school.

We have attached some resources including a sheet on coping with **childhood anxiety**, and a **self-soothe** sheet with some very simple strategies for reducing anxiety in adults or children. Some helpful links are also detailed below:

Mental Wellbeing audio guides - from NHS Every Mind Matters

Understanding anxiety - colourful guide for parents from the Priory Group

A free app for sleep, anxiety and stress - from Insight Timer

e-learning: staying mentally well through Covid19 - from Dr Pooky Knightsmith.

With this in mind, and as we move towards school reopening, we also wanted to outline our guiding principles for how to move forward through this transition as smoothly as possible.

Consider the following imagery and acronym [credit to Dr Pooky Knightsmith from Creative Education]:



Safe

It is perfectly natural that you or your child might feel some anxiety about returning to school, after staying at home together for such a long time.

Soon, we will be making the transition back to school life again, but to begin with it will be an altogether different experience and routine from that which we're used to. It will inevitably take time for us all to grow used to the changes. For the time being, classrooms will look different, routines will change, even mealtimes will be different, and there will have to be new rules in place.

We want you and your child to feel safe, calm and reassured, and to know that it will be okay to come back to school. So we have been working on creating an environment that is and feels physically and emotionally safe for all of us. We want to build up predictability and consistency around hygiene and other safety rules which school staff will role-model noticeably, and praise your child for following accordingly. We will support any child through any misunderstandings and refer to the benefits of what we are doing, providing a listening ear to discuss any worries and making the safety of all the children our highest priority at all times.

Welcoming

When the children return, we want them to feel excited and happy coming into school. We also want them to know that we are genuinely delighted to have them back and to be able to see them again. We have sincerely missed them! They will need to know that they belong and feel a part of things, and we will do everything we can to enable this. We know your child well, and are prepared for there to be a need for flexibility on our return to school. Our school values will be ever-present and more needed now than ever.

All Togetherness

So, how can we create these warm, welcoming feelings of care and nurture when we can't touch and need to keep a safe distance? We need to create a truly inclusive environment in which the children feel surrounded by support. They need to know that they can rely on all the adults around them and that we are all reinforcing the same messages and sense of togetherness. The new routines are something that we're all going to get used to, together.

We understand that you or your child may have found it difficult to settle into a home-learning routine. Or, your child may have loved the experience of learning with you, with the regular breaks and the freedom to direct their own learning. Every family's experience will have been different, for whatever reason. Please do share these experiences with us. Perhaps we can incorporate some of these into school life. We will ensure that we are available via email or telephone to discuss any concerns with parents or carers.

Nurturing

Recent research highlights the importance of allowing the children time and space to play and to reconnect socially with their peers. We won't expect children to turn up on their first day and settle in to lessons straight away, adding intense academic pressure and stress to the children. We understand that how we manage the transition back to school life really matters when it comes to children's feelings and reconnecting with friends. We will give them time and opportunity to play.

We will focus primarily on settling your children in, on meeting their social and emotional needs first and foremost, and on their 'readiness to learn' skills. This Covid generation of children are going to be unique and we want to enable them to flourish, which will not be an overnight job. We have the potential to do a lot of good here, to repair the significant rupture that this virus has caused and to prepare our children to be strong adults in the future as well as happy and resilient children in their present.

Anticipating their concerns

It's important to recognise that each child is unique, and that they may have had very different experiences of Home Learning and staying at home, even within the same family. Many children will naturally have mixed feelings and attitudes about coming back to school.

A tip is to be alert and attuned to how your child is feeling as they might have a particular worry about returning to school that can be addressed. With younger children (3-7), playing together may be your best way of identifying what their concerns are. They often play and draw what they are thinking about, sometimes repeatedly. With older children, talking can be easier through a shared activity like walking the dog or baking a cake.

If your child is particularly anxious about returning to school and you'd like further support on helping you to manage these, take a look at the simple strategies attached. Do as little or as much as you need to suit you and your child, depending on their age and how they are feeling.

We have also attached some 'Simple Self-soothe Strategies', which can be used by adults or children to provide instant calm at a time of anxiety, or proactively to try to prevent anxiety.

Thank you for everything that you have been doing to support your child at home. It is appreciated. Take care.

Coping with Children's Anxiety

1. Firstly, it can really help you to empathise with your child if you can try to remember a time when you may have had anxiety, either recently or as a child. How did it make you feel emotionally, and what physical symptoms did it bring with it? How does anxiety make you feel now? Remember, it affects us all at some stage and is a perfectly normal emotion.
2. Your child, depending on their age and character, may have a number of different thoughts running through their head, especially if they have been very deeply affected by Covid 19. Thoughts such as:
 - What if my mum/dad/carer becomes ill while I'm at school?
 - What if they forget to pick me up?
 - What are they doing at home without me?
 - Will they miss me?
 - I'll miss them.
 - Do they want to be with me?
 - What if I get ill?
 - What if my best friend gets ill?
 - What if my friends don't like me any more?
 - What if I can't remember any maths/grammar?
 - I don't feel in control.
 - I don't feel safe.
3. If your child is experiencing either mild or extreme anxiety, they may be feeling:
 - Worried
 - Scared
 - Panicked
 - Overwhelmed
 - Jealous
 - Abandoned
 - Confused
 - Agitated
 - Over-excitable
 - Tearful
 - 'Weird'
 - Unable to verbalise how they feel.
4. Physically, they may have:
 - Nausea
 - Headache
 - Tummy ache
 - Shivering/shaking
 - Confusion
 - Dry mouth
 - Clammy palms
 - Fluttering heart
 - Tearfulness.
 -

5. Behaviours, depending on their age, may include:

- Sleeplessness
- Bed-wetting
- Clinging
- Irritability
- Over-compensating behaviour
- Kicking/hitting
- Running away/hiding
- Being angry
- Argumentative
- Delaying tactics
- Attention seeking
- Loud behaviour
- Becoming very quiet
- Self-isolation.

These are all natural feelings of anxiety. **Luckily, we can all help!**

6. Tips to support you and your child:

- Explain how it is normal to feel anxious and give some of the reasons we all experience anxiety sometimes.
- Listen to your child in a calm manner without judgement, and validate their feelings without letting them escalate. Never belittle their feelings.
- Be very patient. Be kind but firm - try not to give in!
- If they are old enough, try to encourage your child to challenge their thoughts safely. What evidence is there? Is this likely or unlikely to happen?
- Focus on positive separation with you and your child. How well they've coped so far. What exciting things they will do at school. How it will feel to reunite again. They've done it before and they can do it now.
- Don't mind the blips, sometimes there will be progress and something might make them go backwards for a day or two. That is okay!
- Remember that anxiety can be frightening, but it can be managed or controlled. There are many calming strategies and mindfulness activities available. Just ask us, or look online.
- When returning to school, agree a goodbye routine with your child, such as 3 kisses, 2 cuddles and a wave. Reinforce how you will be returning to collect them and when.
- Use a consistent approach of attentive goodbyes and happy reunions.
- Without dismissing their feelings, reassure using positive language such as, 'you are going to be fine, everyone feels a little nervous sometimes'. 'You will have a good time'.

Simple Self-soothe Strategies

The following techniques can be used by adults or children. If possible, practise each one at a time of calm so that you can then get a feel for how it goes first, and then keep it in your virtual toolbox of calming strategies! Remember - do what works for you.

Massage your hands

Hands have a lot of pressure points, and so massaging or rubbing them can feel good. Especially now, during lockdown, our hands are suffering a lot of abuse! We are washing our hands constantly, and that in itself can spike our anxiety because of the connotations and reminders it brings up about the virus.

After washing your hands, rub or massage a lotion into them. This has the dual benefit of physically looking after your hands as well as self-soothing and comforting you through your hand massage. Whilst you rub in the cream, close your eyes and focus in on your hands without thinking about anything else. You could try and 'work your worries' out of your hands, massaging your palms and then working each worry out through your fingers with self-soothing massaging.

This strategy can also be carried out by children, or you could try massaging your child's hands in the same way to calm and soothe them.

Close your eyes and look inwards

When we close our eyes we cut out a lot of the incoming information and instantly feel more relaxed. Take a deep breath and sit still. This can really help at times when you find your anxiety or anger is rising. You could also try focussing in on your other senses - sound, smell, etc. Cut out the visual stimulation, which is often all-encompassing and takes over our other senses. What can you hear?

Give yourself a hug

When we are hugged, or we hug ourselves, it sends us a message that we are safe. Hugging can create that feeling of safety and reassurance. You can give yourself that feeling by literally giving yourself a big hug. Squeeze hard and hold it for long enough for your body to send the comforting messages to your brain. Hugging can very quickly help you to feel better, calmer and more relaxed.

Box breathing

Often, when we feel anxious, our breathing becomes more rapid or shallow. For a simple strategy that can help you to take control, slow down your breathing, take a mindful moment and begin to soothe yourself. Your breathing forms the shape of a square. Breathe in for a slow count of 4, holding for the count of 4, then breathe out for the count of 4 and hold for the count of 4. Repeat.

Body scan

This technique pays close attention to every part of our body, starting with the feet. There are lots of scripts available (Google 'body scan'), or you can do this without a script. Sit on a chair and allow your back to be straight but not stiff with your feet on the ground. Close your eyes or keep them

open but not focussed. Take several long, slow deep breaths, breathing in fully and exhaling slowly. Feel your stomach expand and relax. Begin to let go of noises around you, bringing your focus back to your breathing. Bring your attention down to your feet and gradually move your attention upwards, slowly, following the script to help you focus to begin with. Move your sensations up your body through your back, stomach, hands and fingertips, then your arms up to the shoulders and neck, where we often feel most tension. As you breathe, you may feel tension rolling off your shoulders. Shift your focus to your scalp, hair and face, and the top of the head. Try and notice sensations and let go of opinions and judgements. Let your attention expand out to include the entire body as a whole. Feel the gentle rhythm of the breath. As you finish, take a full deep breath, taking in all the energy of this practice. Exhale fully. When you are ready, open your eyes and return your attention to the present.

Practise these and see if they help, thinking, too, about the best times to use these strategies. Would it be helpful to use them prior to becoming stressed, or during a time of anxiety. Do what works for you!

With credit to Dr Pooky Knightsmith from Creative Education.