Childhood anxiety

A guide for parents, carers and supporters

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Thank you for being here.
Whether this is your first step in helping a loved one with anxiety or you've been on this path for a while, you are not alone.

This guide will help give you the knowledge and resources to actively participate in your child's care.

Front cover artwork: 'Endless Journey' by Cristina from the Children's Mental Health Gallery

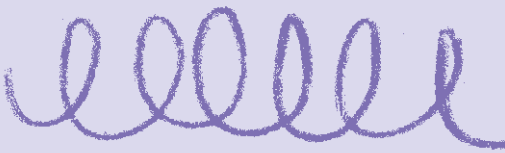
This guide is made by people who have been where you are – we are parents, siblings, and friends who have helped loved ones with anxiety, and some of us have experienced it ourselves. We understand how overwhelming anxiety can feel, not just for the anxious person but also for those supporting them. We know it's hard, but we also know it can get better.

To help us write this guide, we used scientific research, expert opinions, and lived experience. This outlines the current gold standard management for childhood anxiety. To read the evidence you can visit: **https://bit.ly/anxietyguideline**.

It's normal to feel overwhelmed, but there's light ahead. It's important to us that you know how much your support matters, on both the easy and the hard days.

This guide is proof that you are not alone, and that recovery is possible. Children and young people can cope with anxiety, and you being there for them is so important.

So, take a deep breath and let's turn the page together.



What is childhood anxiety?

Feeling anxious is a normal experience for children. For example, it's common to sometimes worry about new experiences or making friends.

However, when anxious feelings stick around, are too intense, or lead to avoiding places or people, it might be called an anxiety disorder. As a family, carer, or supporter, you can play an important role in helping your child manage and navigate anxiety together.

What are the steps in managing anxiety?

STEP 1

Identification

Recognising signs of anxiety in your child is the first step towards support. Signs of anxiety can present in many ways, like emotional or behavioral changes.

STEP 2

Assessment

Seeking help from a healthcare practitioner can help you and your child understand the causes of these signs and point you to more help.

STEP 3

Care planning

You, your child, and a practitioner will talk about options for how to manage and treat your child's anxiety.

STEP 4

Treatment

Using different techniques to help your child's symptoms, including psychological therapy and medication.

STEP 5

Review and monitoring

Finally, check in to see if everything is on track and make adjustments where needed.

STEP 1: Identification

Where to start?

The first step to managing anxiety is recognising when your child might be feeling anxious. This is called identification.

Signs of anxiety can present in many ways, most commonly:

- feeling worried or stressed
- feeling restless
- feeling annoyed
- feeling angry or lashing out
- having trouble focusing
- having trouble sleeping or feeling tired

There can also be physical signs like:

- nausea
- fatigue
- tense muscles
- tummy aches

A member of your child's support network might also approach you to discuss your child's mental health.

A support network can mean family and carers but can also include other supporters in your child's life. These can be teachers, sports coaches, and other people your child looks up to.

Your willingness to engage in a conversation about the signs of anxiety is critical to support your child's mental health.

When you or someone else notices signs of anxiety, it is important to talk with your child about how they are feeling. You might find these signs are negatively impacting your child's life. In this case, the next step is to seek help from a healthcare practitioner to do an assessment.

Your willingness to engage in a conversation about the signs of anxiety is critical to support your child's mental health.

STEP 2: Assessment

What is an assessment?

During an assessment a practitioner will ask some questions to understand what your child is experiencing and if they are caused by a physical or mental health condition.

If you or your child have any questions, feel free to ask.

An assessment can include a survey or questionnaire called an assessment tool. You should expect the practitioner to use a variety of assessment tools and have a detailed chat with your child, using age-appropriate language.

Depending on your child's age and their willingness to have you present, you may or may not be invited into the room during their assessment. Your child can choose if they want to have you there and what level of involvement you have in their care. You should respect their privacy and confidentiality either way.

The practitioner will want to talk to you or other support people about your child's symptoms. This may happen separately after your child has spoken to the practitioner alone.

What to tell the practitioner?

You should tell the practitioner anything you think is important. The practitioner will want to know about your child's symptoms, or changes in their mood or actions.

A lot of things can cause an increased risk of anxiety, which means the practitioner may ask questions about other areas of your child's life.

It is important to tell the practitioner if your child has any other medical or mental health conditions, family history of mental health conditions, or other big things happening in their life.

Your child is the expert in their experience but, as a support person, you can help advocate for them.

If you feel your child is not receiving the best care, it is okay to have a conversation with the practitioner about this.

Practitioners should be willing to partner with you and your child in making these decisions. If the practitioner is not the right fit, it's okay to change practitioners.

Who can do an assessment?

Your child could get an assessment by a:

- **General Practitioner (GP):** a doctor that is often the first point of contact for anyone who feels sick or has a health concern. They can also provide referrals to other specialist healthcare practitioners.

- **Psychologist:** someone who helps people who have mental health problems. Your child might need a referral to see a psychologist.

- **Psychiatrist:** a doctor for people who have mental health problems. These doctors are like psychologists, but they can also give medicine to help with mental health problems. Your child might need a referral to see a psychiatrist.

- **Paediatrician:** a doctor that cares for infants, children, and young people. Your child might need a referral to see a paediatrician.

If your child's practitioner cannot do an assessment, they can refer you to another type that can.

STEP 3:
Care planning

What is care planning?

Care planning is the process of discussing and planning management and treatment of your child's anxiety. It should involve education about anxiety and other mental health issues, available treatment options, and your child's personal preferences.

If your child is diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, a practitioner should answer any questions you or your child have and create a personalised care plan.

This ensures everyone involved can participate as equal partners in making decisions about what your child needs. This should happen before treatment begins.

Your child's trust is an important part of their mental health journey.

Who's involved in caring for your child's mental health?

Caring for your child is a team effort between your child, you, and their support network. Also on this team should be a practitioner you and your child trust.

Your child's team can help to set goals, clear expectations, and encourage healing.

Your child's trust is an important part of their mental health journey. Adults in their life, including you, their practitioner, and others in their support network need to respect their privacy. This means keeping whatever is shared confidential unless you are worried for their safety.

To create a partnership among the team, their practitioner should provide detailed information to you and your child. It is important to create a space where everyone feels comfortable talking about the care plan. This is an ideal time to discuss how you will all work together to respect your child's privacy and ensure that confidential information remains confidential.

What to ask the practitioner?

You can ask about anything you feel is important.

Here are some examples of questions that you may choose to ask their practitioner to support decision-making:

- what are the best treatment options available to my child?
- which treatments do you recommend and why?
- what is the evidence for the recommended treatments?
- when is my child likely to feel better?
- what is my role in supporting this treatment?
- what role can other support people play?
- how long will my child need to continue with this treatment?
- how and when will we know that the treatment is working?
- what happens if the treatment doesn't work?
- what are the risks of this treatment?
- what is the cost of this treatment?
- is there financial assistance available to help me pay for this treatment?

STEP 4: Treatment

Treatment is the management of symptoms over time and is not a quick fix. There are many strategies that are used to treat anxiety.

Treatment can be different for every child. What works for one may not work for another.

Treatment may change over time because your child's needs can change as they grow up or have different experiences. Treatment can also be stopped.

What is informed consent?

Informed consent means you agree to the treatment once you have all of the information you need. Before starting any treatment for anxiety, you and your child must give informed consent.

If your child is old enough, they might need to give informed consent on their own.

Before giving informed consent, a practitioner should talk to you and your child about:

- what treatment is being suggested and why
- what symptoms it's meant to help with
- what changes might be expected if it works
- any possible negative effects, especially in the first days and weeks
- how often or how much your child will need of a treatment
- options for changing treatment and dose to find the right fit
- options for support and monitoring

This is another good chance to discuss any questions or concerns you or your child might have with their practitioner.

Treatment can be different for every child. What works for one may not work for another.

What are the types of treatment?

Psychological therapy

Psychological therapy is when a trained mental health practitioner will help your child to understand their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Over time, this can improve symptoms and the impact they have on your child's life. Psychological therapies can also provide a safe space for your child to share their inner thoughts with a trusted practitioner.

There are many variations of psychological therapy and the one that is best for your child will depend on their age and preference.

Psychological therapy should usually be the first treatment offered as it is generally effective and low risk.

Common psychological therapies include:

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT):** therapy that focuses on how thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes affect feelings and actions.

- **Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT):** therapy that can help to focus on the present moment and accept thoughts and feelings without judgement.

Your child's practitioner may offer other forms of psychological therapy. You can ask questions to learn more about the different types available.

What to expect if your child tries psychological therapy:

- Only certain types of practitioners are trained to provide therapy. Your child's practitioner might refer you to another person for this.
- Therapy might include you and your child's support system.
- There are options for online, in-person, or internet-based therapies.
- There might be a wait time or out-of-pocket cost associated with therapy. You can discuss options with your practitioner to help access treatment for your child.
- It might take some time to find the right kind of therapy or a practitioner that your child feels comfortable with.
- It is important to notify a practitioner of any issues associated with treatment, including negative effects or worsening symptoms. You can change or stop the treatment, or change practitioners.

Medication

It's recommended that psychological therapies be used first, however, medication may also be considered to treat anxiety. Psychological therapy and medication are often used together.

There are many medications available, and they can affect some people differently than others. It's important to find the right medication that works for your child.

Medication may be considered when:

- therapy is not working as you hoped, and medication can help
- your child's anxiety is affecting their ability to participate in their community (eg family, school, social events, sports)
- your child is at risk of self-harm or trying to hurt themselves on purpose
- your child's mental health is affecting their relationship with others

It's important to find the right medication that works for your child.

What to expect if your child tries medication:

- Only a trained doctor, paediatrician or psychiatrist can prescribe medication. Your child's practitioner might refer you to medical doctor for this.
- Usually, you will not see improvement immediately. Symptoms might get worse before they get better.
- Common negative effects include nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, dry mouth, restlessness, trouble sleeping, headaches, feeling dizzy, and sweating. Anxiety medications can also lead to an increase in agitation or risk of self-harm. Some negative effects can be short-term while they adjust to the medication, and some can last the whole time while taking it.
- It might take a few tries before finding the right medication and dose for your child. It's important to monitor negative effects while a practitioner is adjusting your child's doses, stopping, or starting a medication.
- Medication should be taken as prescribed and not stopped suddenly to prevent negative effects or withdrawal symptoms. This means taking the medication every day, regardless of how your child feels that day. Talk to your child's practitioner before changing doses or stopping altogether.
- Depending on your child's age and development, it can be helpful for you to help with medication storage and a routine for taking it. If your child self-harms or talks about suicide this is especially important.

STEP 5: Review and monitoring

When going through treatment, it's important to monitor how well it's working and watch for any negative effects or worsening symptoms.

You, your child, and their support network can help keep track of negative effects and progress by keeping a symptom diary.

This means writing down when your child has changes in their mood, actions, and energy levels. Your child's practitioner will use resources, like the questionaries used during assessment, to help check on your child's physical and mental health.

If you are concerned about worsening symptoms or your child's safety, it's important to seek immediate help.

Keep track of negative effects and progress by keeping a symptom diary.

Here are some things you can do to help monitor your child's health and progress:

- Schedule regular and frequent check-ins with your child's practitioner. The timing can differ depending on treatments or symptoms your child has.
- Encourage your child to keep track of and record their symptoms and any negative effects they experience during treatment, especially if taking medication. If helpful, you can help to keep track too.
- Talk with your child about their experience and choice for ongoing treatment. Help communicate this to their practitioner.
- Share any changes in your child's life or their health that might affect their care with their practitioner.

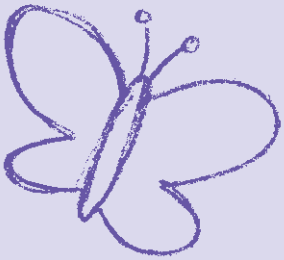
Your child's needs will change as they develop. This means their care plan might need to change too.

You can discuss different options with their practitioner or others in their support network whenever you need to.

We hope this guide is a helpful friend to you, offering guidance and support as you navigate the journey of anxiety with your loved one.

Just by being here and reading this guide, you've taken a significant step towards healing and support. Showing patience, unconditional love, and acceptance is one of the most powerful things you can do.

Remember, this guide isn't going anywhere, you can revisit it anytime you need reassurance or tips. It's okay to reach out for more help or information.
It's a sign of strength.



We also want to gently remind you that it's okay to look after yourself too. Looking after yourself isn't just good for you, it's an important part of caring for your child.

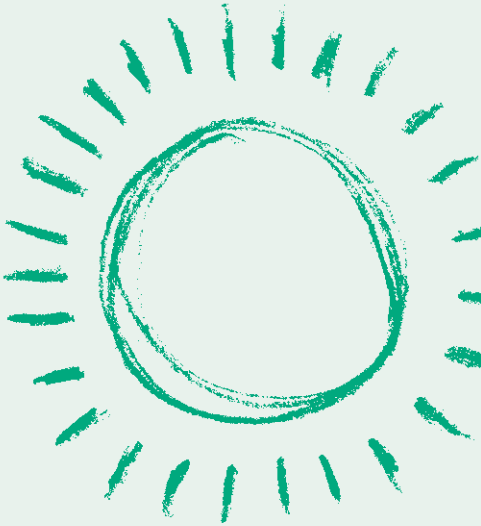
If you need to seek help, try talking with a practitioner or your support network.

Thank you for reading this guide and being there for your loved one.

Who made this guide?

This guide was developed and co-designed by people with lived and living experience of mental ill health and recovery. The significant contribution and perspectives that they bring to this resource is invaluable. From our development team, thank you for sharing your experience and helping us gain a wider understanding of mental health care and recovery.

Lived Experience Advisors



Lisa
(she/her)
loves cooking, reading, and walking at the beach

Katie
(she/her)
loves spending her time crafting, especially cross-stitch

Jessie
(she/her)
loves animals and rainy days

Chloe
(she/her)
loves coloured glass and being in nature

Ciri
(she/they)
loves glitter, ducks, dancing, and D&D

Michelle
(she/her)
loves green and craft of all sorts

Alyce
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Cath
(she/her)
loves being around people and holidaying

Dee
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loves collecting vintage things especially from the 1940s-50s

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loves to read, crochet, and be out in nature

Lauren
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Vera
(she/they)
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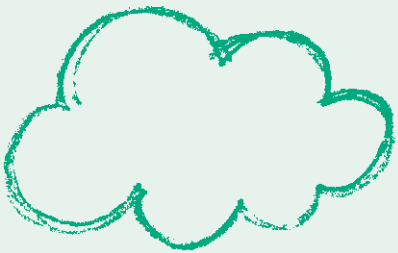
Zoe
(she/her)
enjoys being active and loves wheelchair dance

Stephanie
(she/her)
loves adventures with her kids, taking family photos and eating sweet treats

Laura
(she/they)
likes to read books and drink tea



Development team

Emily
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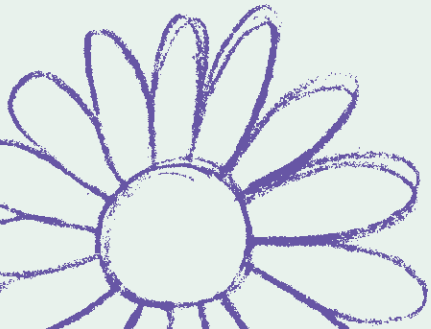
loves afternoon naps, animal pats, and hug attacks

Melissa
(she/her)
loves drinking tea and looking after her six cats

Sydney
(she/her)
loves keeping active with her dog and singing



Glossary

Word	Definition
Confidentiality	Keeping information private. Doctors protect patient information by not sharing personal details about symptoms, treatment with anyone who does not need to know that information.
Diagnosed	Using signs and symptoms to identify a disease or condition.
Evidence	The available facts or data about something tested and shown to work.
Negative effects	A health change (mental or physical) that is not the intended effect of the treatment and usually considered a problem.
Practitioner	A generic term to describe a medical professional that is trained to help.
Symptom	Something that is different in a person's body that might mean they are sick. For example, a symptom of a cold might be a cough and sore throat. Symptoms can help a doctor or nurse tell what kind of sickness it is.
Treatment	Medical care given to help an illness, injury or disorder.

Acknowledgement

This guide was developed on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the traditional custodians of Country and their connection to land, sea, and community. We also recognise the significant disparity that exists among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' mental health. As healthcare professionals, we acknowledge our responsibility to seek improvement in these inequalities.

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Developed by Melbourne Children's Camus Mental Health Strategy, in partnership with The Royal Children's Hospital, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and University of Melbourne, Department of Paediatrics.

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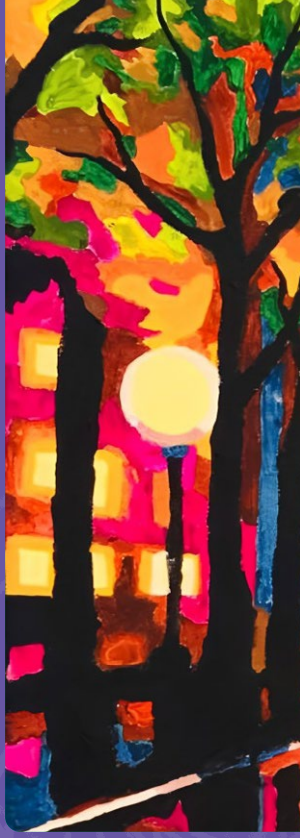

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