

**Helping Young People Returning to School**

Some young people who worry find returning to school after a holiday difficult.

As lockdown is an unprecedented situation it is safe to predict that some young people will struggle to return to school.

This resource is to help both parents and young people to minimise their feelings of anxiety on returning to school.

**Signs a young person is anxious to return to school:**

* Unwilling to get up in the morning
* Unwilling to get ready for school
* Feeling sick/headache/stomach ache
* Displaying anger or being visibly upset
* Asking repeated questions.

**Strategies for parents to help the young person:**

* Tackle it early- do not wait until the day the young person is due back to school- it is hard but the more we give in to the anxiety, the longer term it becomes (please see The Cycle of Anxiety)
* Talk to your child about their fears and issues. Listen to their reasons and talk it through. Explain that anxiety is not the enemy and you are not there to take it away, the young person will learn to live with it
* Talk about what anxiety feels like for you and the young person. How does it make your body feel, what changes happen
* Remind the young person of a previous time where they overcame their anxious feelings
* Do not be tempted to answer the young person’s worries with ‘it will be fine’ as they may then internalise the worry. Ask them to name the specific worry (e.g. I won’t have any friends). Then consider the possibilities and use positive thoughts (e.g. Will your friends be there from before? Have I heard you talking to x on facetime/telephone? Did you make friends when you started school?)
* Make school aware as soon as they can so that they can offer support to the parent and young person
* Routines MUST be consistent- when a return date is released it is important to get the young person back into a good sleep/wake routine and one which involves completion of set work
* Make being at home boring and increase home schooling in the lead up to return to school
* Try to add before or after school activities once the young person has settled in to the normal school day and routine

**The Cycle of Anxiety (taken from TherapistAid.com)**

**Anxiety**

An anxiety-producing situation leads to uncomfortable symptoms such as worry, fear, a racing heart, sweating, or a feeling of being overwhelmed. Anxiety is also known as fear of feeling stressed or nervous.

**Avoidance**

Uncomfortable symptoms are controlled by avoiding the anxiety-producing situation. Examples of avoidance include:

* Skipping class to avoid giving a presentation
* Using drugs or alcohol to numb feelings
* Procrastinating on challenging tasks

**Short-Term Relief from Anxiety**

Avoidance of the anxiety-producing situation gives an immediate sense of relief. The symptoms of anxiety lessen, but only temporarily.

**Long-Term Anxiety Growth**

The fear that initially led to avoidance worsens, and the brain learns that when the anxiety producing situation is avoided, the symptoms go away. As a result, the symptoms of anxiety will be worse the next time, and avoidance is more likely.

**Strategies for the young person:**

* Make yourself a list of everything you need to do before you leave for school, tick these off as they are completed- it gives you a focus!
* Write yourself a letter at a point when you are not feeling anxious. Use this as a template or idea:

*Dear me,*

*Remember- it’s OK to feel anxiety and this is your body’s way of looking after you. What you need to do is be the boss- you’re the one making the decisions, not your anxiety.*

*I am Courageous, I am brave and I am strong.*

*The positive side of school for me is:*

* *I have friends who care about me*
* *The teachers are on my side, they keep me safe and want me to succeed*
* *School is strengthening my brain*
* *Today I will be doing …………… which I enjoy*
* *I can handle going to school because I am brave- I have done this before and succeeded*
* *I am one of the bravest people I know because going to school makes me anxious but I am doing it anyway*
* *I am going to take 15 minutes at a time*
* *I Can Do It*

*Love me*

* Practise some mindfulness breathing or mindfulness techniques each day. The apps Calm and Headspace are good to give you ideas around this.
* Talk to yourself as you would a friend. ‘I can do this’ ‘I’ve got this’
* Try to do daily exercise and eat a good diet.
* Make an anxiety plan which could be shared with school. Consider your triggers and distraction techniques which could help. You will find an example of a plan attached to this resource.

**Anxiety Action Plan**

This action plan aims to help children and young people recognise what may trigger their anxiety, what their warning signs are and what they need to do on a daily basis to minimise their times of worry.

**Anxiety Toolbox:**

What strategies and tools do I have to deal with my anxiety? What usually helps? (E.g. colouring, exercise, deep breathing, distraction, positive thoughts)

**My Daily Self-Care Plan:**

What can I do each day that I enjoy, to look after my emotional health? (E.g. time outside, listening to music, writing a journal)

Who do I enjoy spending time with and who is positive?

**My Triggers:**

What situations/people/emotions make me feel anxious? (E.g. being in groups, feeling embarrassed, speaking in front of others)

How can I deal with these without avoiding them completely?

**My Warning Signs:**

How do I know when I am starting to feel anxious? (E.g. are there changes in my body and do I start to do the same thing each time?)

**If I Become Overwhelmed:**

Who can I call? What do I need to avoid? How do I calm myself down? **‘This will not last forever’**

**Looking Back:**

When the situation is over- what worked well? What didn’t work as well? What other things could I try? Do I need to re-write this plan?

**Useful references**

* Open Minds Calderdale
* Youngminds.com
* Heysigmund.net
* Psycom.net
* Health.harvard.edu