



# A is for ANXIETY

This resource has been designed by Lyn French, A Space Director, to be used with the emotional learning cards from the set entitled '**A-Z of Emotions**'. Purchase the cards online at [www.inivacreativelearning.org](http://www.inivacreativelearning.org)

## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is something we can all feel. It varies in intensity - sometimes it is very strong and may even be accompanied by physical symptoms. It can, for example, cause our hands to sweat, our heartbeat to increase and our stomach to turn. Or it can be quite mild, taking the form of low key worrying.

This worksheet explores the subject of anxiety and investigates what causes it. Questions are included to which you can give general answers or examples from your own life. You might want to start by mapping your experiences of anxiety by answering the following:

*How would you describe anxiety? What is your earliest memory of feeling anxious? What, or who, made you anxious? Were you helped to understand it or was it something you went through on your own? What makes you anxious at this stage of your life?*

As well, you can look at the **A to Z of Emotions** cards to see how anxiety is described and learn more about its opposite - feeling calm.

## UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Anxiety evolved in our earliest ancestors, making them alert to danger. Their very survival depended on being able to respond instantly to threats. If a fierce tiger was approaching, there was no time to think - anxiety gave them a strong signal and they were propelled into action.

Even though we live in a very different world, anxiety still has a purpose. Feeling anxious before an exam or an interview, for example, can push us to prepare so that we are more confident and less anxious. Anxiety about the future can motivate us to work hard so that we're better placed to get a good job. We can feel anxious about social situations too such as going to a party or going out with someone for the first time or even making new friends. Maybe this prompts us to share our feelings with our friends or family. Talking about it can make us feel closer to them and they may tell us about some of their social anxieties too. It's normal to have feelings like this and sharing them helps.

- **What do most of us get anxious about? How can we use anxiety to help us move forward?**



Too much anxiety has the opposite effect - we start to imagine the worst and feel panicked, fearful and trapped. Instead of motivating us, we may want to avoid whatever it is that is causing our anxiety.

Common negative thinking patterns could easily take over. We might:

**Catastrophise**, imagining everything that everything that could go wrong will.

Slip into '**all or nothing**' thinking, believing all will go badly and nothing we can do will stop the worst from happening.

**Jump to conclusions**, assuming that just because things went badly in the past, they will again and nothing we can do will prevent this.

## **AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOUR**

If anxiety is too strong, we'll want to escape from worry and dread. This means that anxiety won't prompt us to take action. Instead, it's more likely we'll anything to avoid it or to get away from the uncomfortable feelings.

- **What are some examples of avoidant or escapist behaviour?**

To distract ourselves and avoid or escape from anxiety, we might:

spend lots of time online / hang out with friends doing nothing much/ watch TV or films/ go shopping/ eat more/ avoid anything or anyone relating to what is causing us the anxiety

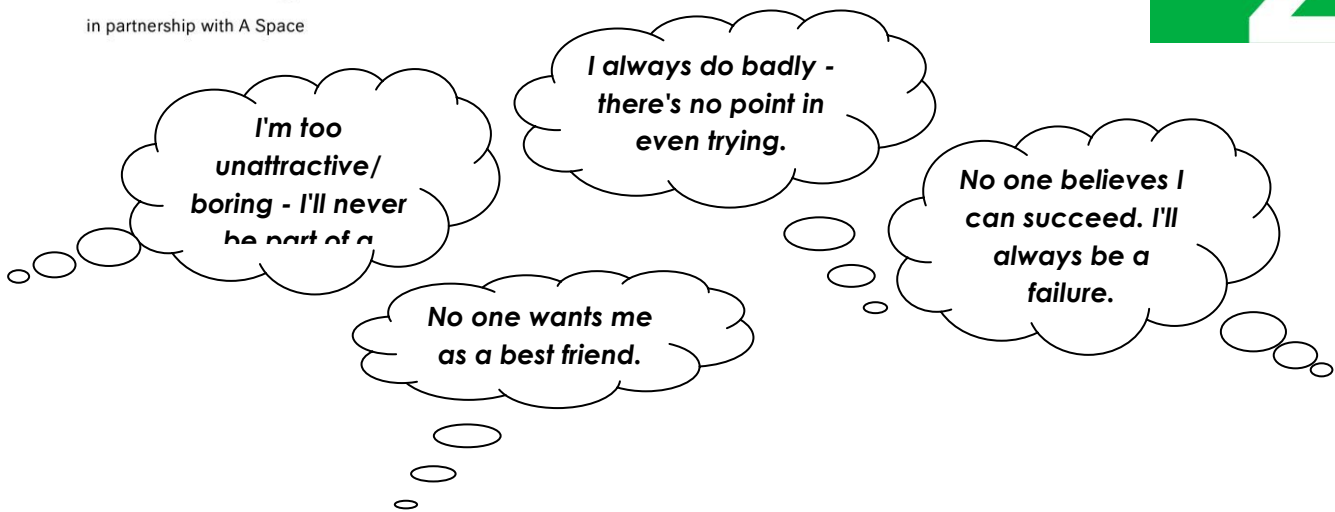
Numbing anxiety and avoiding it like this is never healthy. This kind of behaviour can lead to more extreme ways of escaping it such as drug or alcohol abuse, self-harm or eating disorders.

## **RECOGNISING ANXIETY**

Sometimes we don't even know we're anxious. Instead, we might feel low or depressed. Another sign of anxiety is being easily irritated and impatient. Or without being fully aware of it, we might even try to transform anxiety into excitement. We could talk ourselves up and convince ourselves we don't have anything to be worried about - 'it's no big deal'. We might feel above it all and excited by seemingly being in control. This reflects positive thinking being taken too far! It usually results in us not preparing or, if it's a social event that might naturally cause anxiety, we might start depending on alcohol or drugs to stay confident. We all need to work at recognising when we're anxious and learn to deal with it.

## **DEALING WITH ANXIETY**

Sometimes, anxiety can be too much to cope with on our own. Talking about it with someone supportive who can help us to change our negative thinking patterns can make a difference. Change often starts with working on our 'self-talk'. Self-talk is just this - our 'inner voice' which tells us what to think. If you're asking yourself, '*what inner voice?*' - that's it - that's self-talk! Replace the negative self-talk below with more balanced self-talk:



## **INTENSE ANXIETY & PANIC ATTACKS**

From time to time, we might find we're experiencing sudden and intense anxiety. This can include feeling very shaky, sweaty and even nauseous. We might become breathless and dizzy as if we're having a heart attack or going to faint or even die. This is so frightening that we panic even more.

- ***On a scale of 1 to 10, if 10 is a full panic attack, what's the most intense anxiety you've felt? What caused it?***

When in the middle of a panic attack, it can be hard to remember to tell our self that the feelings will pass and what's happening isn't a sign of something more serious. The main aim is to avoid panicking about having a panic attack!

- ***If someone found themselves overcome by a panic attack, what self-talk could they use to feel more empowered and not so controlled by their feelings?***

### **What to do**

Whenever we're feeling anxious, even if it isn't a full blown panic attack, doing a breathing exercise can bring some relief. Try this:

- Breathe in as slowly, deeply and gently as you can, through your nose.
- Breathe out slowly, deeply and gently through your mouth.
- Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five on each in-breath and each out-breath.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.

If you find this helpful, you can go on line where you'll find more breathing exercises on websites such as the 'No Panic' one which includes a confidential helpline ([www.nopanic.org](http://www.nopanic.org)).

### **Common roots of panic**

Life has ups and downs for everyone. However, some people's lives, through no fault of their own, include more distressing and even traumatising experiences. If we grow up in a family where



upsetting things are happening, or have happened, we might be 'programmed' to expect the worst and to be more anxious. Sometimes working on our self-talk helps to address this.

- **Change the following 'self-talk' so that it is more balanced. Add some positive reflections too.**

The world is a frightening place - bad things are happening all the time.

People die suddenly - I might die right now.

No one can completely control their mind - people become mentally ill. I can't control my panic so I must be going crazy.

There's something wrong with me - if people knew, no one would want to know me.

### **Disowned anger as a cause of panic**

Some of us believe it's wrong or bad to get angry so we don't allow ourselves to feel it. However, anger doesn't go away. It just gets pushed down. If we pretend we never get angry, without realising it, we might then get very anxious and not know why. We could even have a panic attack caused by unconscious worry that our anger is going to burst through and be extremely destructive.

- **What's your view on anger? For example, in your family, is anger seen as something it's wrong or bad to feel or can it be expressed and then talked about when things are calmer?**

It's important to understand anger and to be able to use it so that empowers and motivates us to work towards change. Use the worksheets '**A is for Anger**' and '**A is for Adolescent Anger**' to help you with this.

### **Separation Anxiety**

Another cause of panic attacks can be a fear of being abandoned and not being able to cope. Maybe this fear has its roots in a real situation. It could be that a close family member who played an important part in looking after us died. Perhaps we haven't been supported in working through our feelings and anxiety around any kind of separation or small 'rejection' hits hard. Or perhaps a parent or carer has threatened to leave. Maybe they've actually left and we've been in foster care. This can make us trust people less and get more anxious around relationships in general.

Or we could just get anxious about losing people without having a real reason for it - this happens. We all rely on our close attachments to feel safe and secure. If we worry a lot about how we'd cope without our loved ones, we might feel separation anxiety.

- **Who do you feel closest to? Have you ever worried about what you'd do if they were not longer around?**



## Free Floating Anxiety

We all know everyone dies and that we, too, will die. Death is a part of life but it's very hard to think about. The future is uncertain and none of us know when we'll die or when someone close to us will pass away. It's quite common to push thoughts of death out of our conscious mind. The anxiety we feel about it can then become 'free floating', as if there is no real cause for it.

- **Talking about death is important. What are your thoughts about it?**

## Internal Conflicts

Sometimes we have to cope with being pulled in different directions and this leads to anxiety. For example, perhaps our family has particular views on how to live. We might love our parents but feel we can't live according to their traditions or norms. Here are some examples of situations which can cause us to feel unsure of what to do and even trapped in indecision or confusion which is, of course, anxiety making. Or we may choose to be true to ourselves and go against our family beliefs. However, this can also cause us anxiety as we feel we might be hurting our parents or carers. Here are some common points of difference between parents and their children. These differences can be felt throughout life. **Our family:**

- has particular religious or cultural beliefs which guide how to live
  - values traditional marriage and doesn't accept same sex relationships
  - thinks university is an absolute 'must'
  - places great emphasis on becoming a professional (eg. a doctor or a lawyer or a professional with high status)
- You may have more examples to give.*

It's hard when we feel drawn towards certain life choices but they are at odds with what our parents or carers want for us.

- **Does who you are or your lifestyle choices conflict with your parents or carers' ideas of how to live**



## HEALTHY WAYS TO CALM ANXIETY

There's no quick fix which will rid us of anxiety. However, exploring our anxiety from different perspectives can help us to understand it and contain it. We can all benefit from our own time and space to talk to someone who understands the roots of anxiety and who can help us make sense of our feelings. As well, there are tips to help manage it as outlined below. You can also go online and learn more about anxiety, panic attacks and managing feelings in general.

**Keep your focus on today** Looking into the future can cause anxiety because we don't know what will happen - anything is possible! 'What if...?' thinking can take over. Instead of worrying about the future, concentrate on what you can do today to build a better tomorrow. Give yourself small goals that you have a good chance of achieving. Learn to challenge your negative thinking and replace it with more balanced thoughts.

**Stop questioning the past so much** Looking back into the past can also lead to anxiety. We might focus on those times when things went badly and ask ourselves questions starting with 'Why did I...?' (eg. Why did I do what I did/make the decision I did, etc) or 'What if.....?' (eg. What if I'd done something else instead/ What if I'd never said or done X ... etc. ) No one gets it right all the time. We all have to learn from our past experiences instead of going over and over them, trying to find 'answers'.

**Know what you can't control** We may try to control everything in an attempt to ward off fear of what will happen tomorrow, next month, next year or when we're older. We need to recognise what we can and cannot control, focusing only on what we can do today. Our future is shaped by each day's thoughts and actions. Sometimes, the only thing we really can change is how we think about ourselves and our future.

**Be realistic** We can all have expectations of ourselves that just aren't realistic. We need to know the limits of what we can do and not tell ourselves off if we don't achieve what we think we should. Keeping our work and personal commitments realistic is an on-going goal.

**Accept the unknown** Imagining 'worst case scenarios' is bound to increase anxiety. Usually, anticipating the future is far worse than what actually happens. We have to accept that there is no certainty. None of us can predict the future. Accepting that we all face the unknown and being curious about it, instead of anxiously fretting, is another life goal.

**Learn about anxiety** Our future might make us worry but so might other, less obvious concerns such as how to make friends, what our sexual/ gender identity or sexual orientation is, whether our problems are a sign of more serious mental health issues and so on. Even people who come across as very confident and self-assured will have anxieties from time to time. It helps to know that this is a natural and normal part of life. Recognising what makes us most anxious and getting help or using online resources is always the first step. Websites which can help are:

**[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) / [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk) / [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) / [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**



## COMMON ANXIETIES

*We can all feel anxious in the following situations. Give some examples of each from your own life:*

<b>We are being tested in some way</b>	<b>We have to speak in public or perform</b>
<b>We've been through difficult or bad experiences in the past &amp; imagine they'll happen again</b>	<b>We've been left out &amp; we're not sure why</b>
<b>We've failed at something and our confidence is affected</b>	<b>We imagine we're unlikeable or even unlovable</b>
<b>We think we're a bad person</b>	<b>We've been hurt in the past &amp; believe we'll be hurt again</b>
<b>We have hateful thoughts &amp; worry we'll act on them</b>	<b>We're scared of the future</b>
<b>We are ashamed of ourselves &amp; worried that people will find out</b>	<b>We're afraid of being abandoned</b>



## ***Feeling the opposite to anxiety: CALM INSIDE***

### ***We feel calm when:***

<b>We are confident that we're doing our best</b>	<b>We trust that we can manage our feelings</b>
<b>We know that we can learn from our past experiences &amp; get help if we need it</b>	<b>We accept that, for everyone, there will be times when we're left out</b>
<b>Everyone fails from time to time but we know we can learn from this - we don't label ourselves 'a failure'</b>	<b>We accept that no one is loveable or likeable all of the time- that's okay</b>
<b>We know that no one is a 'bad' person however any of us can make bad choices</b>	<b>We've been hurt in the past but we don't make ourselves into a victim</b>
<b>We all have hateful thoughts but we can work on understanding them</b>	<b>The future is uncertain however we trust in our ability to cope</b>
<b>We know that shame is a damaging feeling &amp; we talk about it openly</b>	<b>We trust that we can cope with rejection or loss</b>